

Rocky mountain *high*

Perched atop the mountain, with uninterrupted views of the Blyde River Canyon, is the seventh and most exclusive villa at Timamoon. Little did Heather Ingarfield know, her holiday was about to be the most memorable one yet



'I wonder if they've done a tumdown service?' Ray asks as we wind along the path to our villa. Lush green trees form an arch above the square terracotta tiles, set amidst rich soil and tufts of grass. Close your eyes, breath in the thick air, let the night sounds tickle your ears and you'd swear you're standing in the middle of the Amazon forest.

'I'm sure they have,' I say, a little perplexed. I've travelled around the world with this man, from the far-flung corners of Seychelles and the whitewashed beaches of Zanzibar, to the wild frontiers of the Kruger. We've stayed in some incredibly fancy hotels and resorts, the kind of places where you're presented with 15 forks at dinner and need Google to navigate your way through the menu. And never, not even once, has he been bothered by the tumdown service.

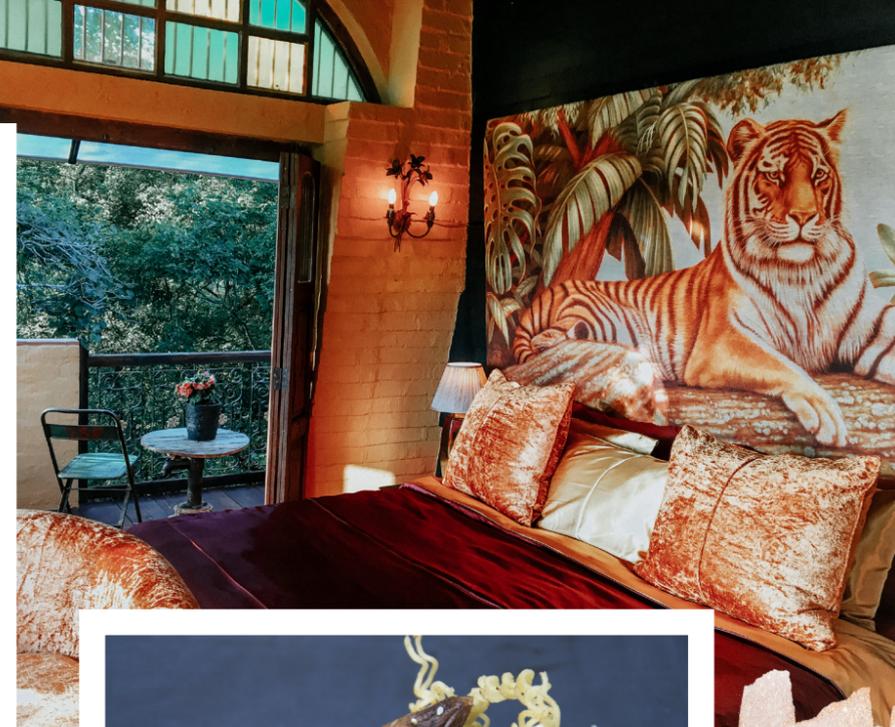
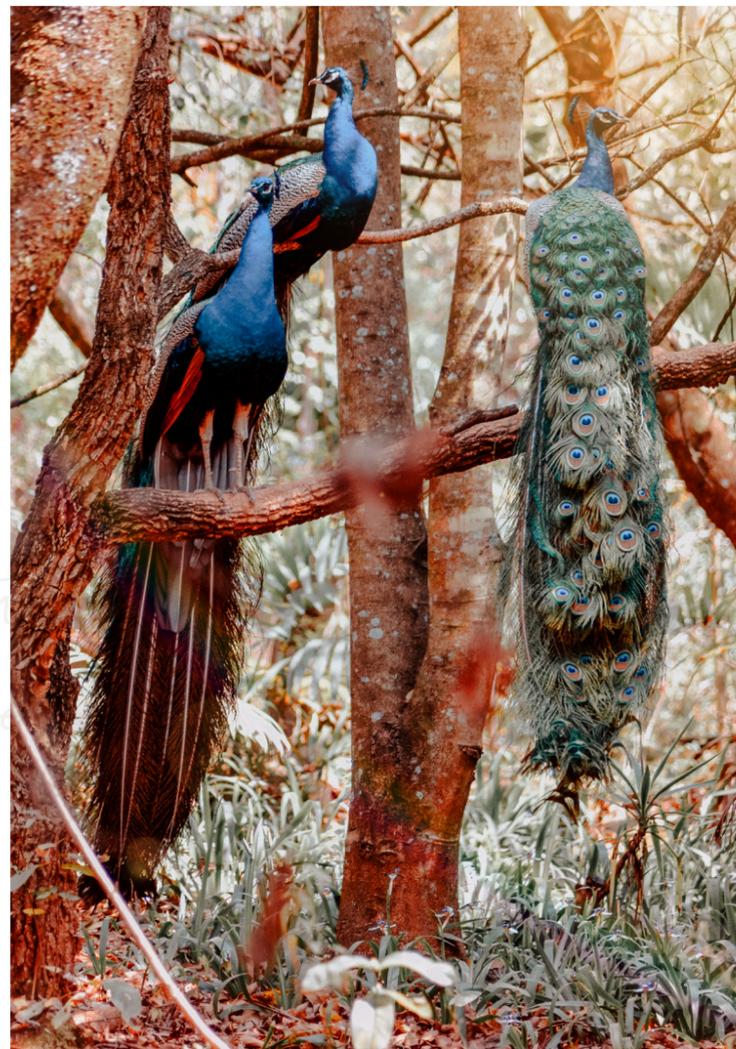
From the tropical pathway, we reach the bottom of the massive burnt-orange staircase leading to the front door of our villa. It's our second time at this exclusive five-star Mpumalanga lodge, and this time, we had to come back to experience their seventh and new villa, Secret Moon. Built on the highest point of the estate, overlooking the ravine that has the Sabie River roaring at its depths, Secret Moon is like no other villa we'd ever seen.

Built to feel like an exotic hideaway tucked away in the forest, Timamoon is named after Timimoun, an enchanted oasis in the Sahara, Algeria, known for its red mud-styled architecture. It's not only the best-kept secret of the region, but also an organic banana and avocado farm. Each and every villa has its own theme and character, some are more Moroccan, while others showcase beautiful Balinese-style accents and furniture. And the magical thing about Timamoon is that all of the decor elements

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have been personally sourced and shipped back to South Africa by owners and travel enthusiasts, Gaylyn and Maurice Hammond.

We make it to the front door – an impressive, giant wooden door from Tibet, complete with a brass Sri Lankan lock. It's breathtaking, the kind of curated artefact that only seasoned travellers could lay their hands on. The local couple has journeyed all over the world, each trip adding to their inspiration piggy-bank and resulting in jaw-dropping villas. As I stare at the exquisite door, all I'm thinking



JUST YOU + ME
Everything at Timamoon is centred around creating private experiences for you and your other half. The spa treatments are done in your villa, a private dining room can be arranged, and while you're in your villa, you won't ever lay your eyes on anyone else...

about now is the tumdown service. Little did I know, Ray has actually planned something magnificent inside..

We'd arrived at Timamoon earlier that day, after a lazy drive from Lanseria Airport. The closest airport is actually the Nelspruit one, but with prices rivalling a return ticket to London, we opted to touch down in Lanseria. The drive re-insured us that we'd made the right decision: The Panorama Route is a spectacular series of climbs and dips through flourishing forests, with vistas for miles, plenty of prime selfie spots and quaint, historic towns. A relaxing drive it was, but when we dropped our bags off at the villa and kicked off our shoes, the pool, glistening blue sparkles under the afternoon sun, was a welcome sight.

With never-ending views of the valley, the pool deck is perfectly positioned for unwinding, sinking into the recliners with a chilled drink and forgetting about reality. Inside the villa, too, transports you even further into a land of fantasy and mystery. An architectural marvel and the creation of Maurice's imagination, Secret Moon is perched atop colossal concrete pillars, setting it into the clouds, where the birds graze your head and the treetops rustle at your feet. The lounge area leads into the bedroom (through which you must pass the intricately carved door from Bali), where a king-sized bed dressed in purple silk basks in the beauty of the immense tiger painting. Sit on the edge of the bed and before you are antique Indian folding doors, opening up on to the valley below. The open bathroom leads off the bedroom in a pathway of black, glossy tiles, off-set by decorate basins sourced from Marrakesh. Designed in an L-shape, it ends with an indoor-outdoor shower, boxed in by floor-to-ceiling glass panels that look out into the forest. And because privacy is the priority at Timamoon, you can shower here happily and not worry about anyone seeing you. It's just you, the trees and the occasional feathered visitor.

HONEYMOON



ALL THE DETAILS

WHEN YOU'RE THERE: Timamoon has seven suites only, so you know you're in the land of the exclusive when you're there. Included in your rate is a delicious breakfast (which starts with home-made yoghurt, granola and fresh fruit, and ends with fresh pastries and cooked egg-and-bacon option) and a four-course dinner. For lunch, there's an extensive menu to choose from, which can either be brought to your villa, or you can stroll down to the waterfall and enjoy the most incredible waterside picnic. Other than that, the mini bar is stocked with enough beer, cider and wine for you to sip on while you laze around the pool or curl up next to the fireplace.

GETTING THERE: Timamoon is located 4 km outside of the town Hazyview in Mpumalanga. There's a pretty rough dirt road getting up to the lodge, so if you're deciding between your sports car and regular hatchback, you might want to take the latter. Our VW Polo just did fine.

THE WEATHER: You're up the mountains, so the weather can be unpredictable. During summer, it can get very toasty – don't forget your swimming costume, because you and that private pool will be inseparable. Winter months are mostly pleasant, but it can get chilly, so for late afternoon and dinner, make sure you have something warm packed.

GOOD TO KNOW: There's no shortage of activities in the area, from visiting the Blyde River Canyon and rafting down the river, to horse-riding, micro-lighting, quad-biking and elephant experiences. Activities are offered by companies located in Hazyview, which is a 15-minute drive from Timamoon.

For more information, contact Timamoon on info@timamoonlodge.co.za, or visit timamoonlodge.co.za.



TAKE IT OUTSIDE

When you feel like giving the private pool a break, jump into the outdoor bath. Tucked away in Secret Moon's lush garden is a stunning mosaic bath tub, surrounded by nothing but trees and birds.



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It's just you, the trees and the
occasional feathered visitor*



From our quickly appointed spot on the deck, cold beer in hand, we could hear the cacophony of avian sounds surrounding us. We'd been told upon arrival to keep an eye out for the Long Crested Eagles who have been known to soar the thermals next to Secret Moon, but didn't see as much as we could hear. It didn't matter though – the setting was enough. We spent our first afternoon splashing in the crystal-clear water, drinking way too much beer and talking about food – more specifically, the menu for that evening.

Chef Kelly, Gaylyn and Maurice's youngest daughter, is the creator behind the mouthwatering four-course menus whipped up and cooked up every night at the lodge. The food is a point of pride for the family, and they focus on seasonal, sustainable dishes, most of the ingredients are sourced for their grounds. For the sake of planning, we'd been given the menu and had to select our courses earlier that day, giving us plenty of time to salivate and prime our taste buds.

Cleaned up and ready for dinner, we made the journey along the farm road to the restaurant. No matter where you are at Timamoon, you're singing with the birds in the treetops – and the restaurant is no different. The large wicker chairs, eclectic African tablecloths and traditional candleholders adorn the seven tables, with large open windows letting in the sounds of the nocturnal bushbabies. Wine ordered and amuse bouche devoured, we greedily awaited the three courses: home-made gnocchi with red-wine infused dates, Malay chicken ballotine served with a creamy coconut tikka sauce and basmati rice, all finished off with bunyols de vent (mini cinnamon doughnuts with a chocolatey centre) and a Frangelico milkshake. It was a meal I'll never forget – well, that's what I thought, until I had the slow-cooked springbok shank with a spicy Shiraz sauce and sticky peach chutney. And the calamari kebab and gazpacho shooter. And the black pepper and lemon semifreddo, laced with white chocolate and a smothered in a raspberry vodka syrup.

'Oh wow, they did do something,' Ray says as he pushes open the heavy wooden door. Surrounded by a carpet of bright red rose petals, is a chilled bottle of Champagne. We shuffle among the petals to find the bath overflowing with bubbles, glistening in the soft light bouncing off the dozens of candles surrounding it. We open the door to the deck, deciding to enjoy the bubbles under the stars.

I barely manage a sip before Ray is next to me, down on one knee.

'Babe, will you marry me?' ♥