

TRAVEL 📍

KwaZulu-Natal

Marvel in the Midlands: Brahman Hills' gorgeous gardens get an arty twist

Brahman Hills in Nottingham Road adds an artful twist to a country escape, with an amazing sculpture collection and gardens fit for a queen — or Zulu king

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BY GUY MARTIN



"Silence Needs a Home" by Noah Maubane is one of several works in the sculpture garden.

Image: Supplied

Nestled in the rolling hills of the KwaZulu-Natal Midlands' mist belt, Brahman Hills lies innocuously off the busy N3 highway opposite the quaint town of Nottingham Road. From the main thoroughfare down to Durban, there are few indications of the manicured gardens, grand vistas, loping zebras or any other treats Brahman Hills has to offer, bar a giant cement face on a nearby hillside that is liable to startle many a passing motorist.

This huge 6m-wide sculpture by Louis van den Heever is one of many art installations scattered across the property. A stroll through the rolling grassland hills and patches of forest reveals many surprises, such as Van den Heever's *Stargazer* statue pointing towards the heavens next to a quiet dam, or a dazzle of zebra grazing around Sandro Trapani's 4.5m-tall sculpture (titled *Hanneke*) of two women wearing roots as crowns in harmony with the environment.



Louis Van den Heever's "Stargazer" points towards the heavens next to a quiet dam.

Image: Guy Martin



"Ancient of Days" by Michele Silk.

Image: Supplied

Most artworks are concentrated in the sprawling formal gardens, which are so immaculately manicured I kept expecting the queen to appear, trailed by a couple of corgis. This regal image is probably because the exquisite Brahman Hills gardens were inspired by a resplendent country estate, The Newt in Somerset in the UK, and are only one of two in Africa recognised by the British Royal Horticultural Society (RHS), along with Babylonstoren. Last year, Brahman Hills was declared the overseas regional winner of the RHS Partner Garden of the Year Competition, shortly after Brahman Hills became an RHS Partner Garden in January 2023.

Brahman Hills' gardens span 5.5ha, comprising 26 distinct garden “rooms” designed by landscape artist Tim Steyn. He says every aspect of the garden — from the graded levels to the pathways, from the stone walls and pergolas to the water features — was meticulously planned.



Sandro Trapani's "Hanneke".

Image: Guy Martin

“Every individual plant was hand-picked,” says Steyn, “with every corner of the property intended for maximum visual interest, providing interludes for photography and opportunities to linger and stroll. We even considered the ambience down to the last detail, from the angle at which the sunlight throws shadow or illuminates the garden rooms.”



The Brahman Hills gardens are continually growing.

Image: Supplied



The dedicated Brahman Hills garden team.

Image: Supplied

The extraordinary attention to detail is evident when strolling through one section after the next, each with its own flavour, such as the herb garden, rose garden, grasslands garden and so on. The gardens are laid out with repeating geometric motifs in circles and rectangles, contrasted by the abundant flowers and plants. Interspersed throughout are fountains, ponds, formal pools and the lake beside the Lake House.

Steyn, giving guests a guided tour of Brahman Hills' horticultural wonders, says the Midlands is a tough environment to grow plants in, as the climate can be extreme. In the last winter season, Brahman Hills experienced four hailstorms and two snowfalls. Nevertheless, it is evidently flourishing and constantly expanding, with one row of trees supported by wires revealing how freshly they have been planted. During our weekend, we witnessed the extremes first-hand – beautiful sunny weather on day one, followed by cool, misty weather on day two – but this was a welcome change from the dry smokiness of a Joburg winter.

Blending art with functionality, one of the newer additions to the gardens is an apiary with 16 beehives, constructed in a circle reminiscent of royal Zulu kraals. Delicate handmade clay tiles were used to roof the hives, with winter flowering plants available for the bees. For humans, food gardens grow spinach, carrots, cabbage, lettuce and other vegetables, while the orchard is home to peaches, pears, figs and grapes.



One of the newer additions to the gardens is an apiary with 16 beehives, constructed in a circle reminiscent of royal Zulu kraals.

Image: *Supplied*

Like the plants that make them up, the Brahman Hills gardens are continually growing but their biggest growth spurt came during the Covid-

19 lockdown, when the majority of Brahman Hills staff took a 50% pay cut and stayed on to work on the gardens, regardless of previous roles: chefs found themselves digging ditches, waitresses planting vegetables and general managers laying rocks, among a host of other activities.

“Our leaders led like never before. Our people forged teams, laughed, sweated and cursed together. An incredible attitude prevailed throughout the six months and everyone demonstrated just how easy it is to ‘turn lemons into lemonade,’” reads a plaque commemorating the roughly 100 people who helped build the gardens during lockdown.

The stately formal gardens, maintained by 11 full-time gardeners, are undoubtedly one of Brahman Hills greatest assets, but the cherry on top are the beautifully curated artworks that form an integral part of them, with sculptures by Joyce Carreira, Grace da Costa, Wilma Cruise, Noah Maubane, Michael Canadas and many others decorating the well-manicured surface — below ground, carved into the hillside, a *Medusa* sculpture by Sandro Trapani offers startling reflections across a subterranean pool of water.



Brahman Hills' art curator Tyrone Selmon-Butler with "Silence Needs a Home" by Noah Maubane.

Image: Guy Martin



A Medusa sculpture by Sandro Trapani offers startling reflections across a subterranean pool of water.

Image: Guy Martin

Brahman Hills' art curator Tyrone Selmon-Butler (from Art Eye Gallery in Johannesburg) says, "Don't buy art for the money. Buy it because you can't live without it." Judging by the admiring glances guests shoot at the carefully chosen works, this ethos is paying off. The famous "Shark Boy" (*Blood in the Water* by Louis van den Heever) is a particularly popular attraction.

Art and garden tours by some of South Africa's most talented experts were just one component of the May launch of a new phase of Brahman

Hills. There were helicopter flips (weather permitting, as we found out the hard way when the mist rolled in), spa treatments, fine dining, yoga, park runs, five-star accommodation and more.

“This isn't just your average getaway,” says Onwaba Gonyora, the executive director at Brahman Hills. “It's something truly special. An opportunity to escape the ordinary and embrace the extraordinary. For us, it's all about making sure every guest leaves feeling relaxed, rejuvenated and with memories that last a lifetime.”



Duiker Cottage.

Image: Supplied

Though we had an action-packed schedule over the weekend, after a 90-minute treatment at the Healing Earth Spa, followed by some hydrotherapy in the heated pool overlooking a valley, we certainly felt relaxed and rejuvenated. We were so carried away by the hot-stone massage on Saturday morning that we were a tad late for the buffet lunch, which had unfortunately cooled down too much to be fully appreciated.

Celebrated chef Pete Goffe-Wood — who was a judge on *Master Chef SA* and *Ultimate Braai Master* — made up somewhat for this by delivering a six-course dinner for 150 guests for the official launch party.

At the dinner, owner Iain Buchan described the journey of Brahman Hills from grimy hotel to award-winning venue. When he bought The Windmills hotel along the N3 in 2010, he told his guests, people were “paying for rooms by the hour” and there was talk of turning it into a truck stop.



"I See Everything" by Lee Scott Hempson.

Image: Supplied

During our all-too-brief stay, we were able to sample the food, find our zen with yoga and massages, wander the grounds and gardens, and take in the fresh air and wildlife (eland, blesbok, zebras, antelope and other game reside on the property along with cattle, while trout, bass, grass carp and blue gill fish are stocked in the property's various dams).

What sets Brahman Hills apart are its gardens, its clean and tranquil environment and its award-winning spa.

BRAHMAN BITS

A VERY COSTLY 'TREE': Aside from having the requisite deep pockets, acquiring and installing sculptures, statues and other installations is not an easy task. Dealing with temperamental artists is one challenge, and then there's moving heaven and (literally) earth to get some artworks in. It took 20 people to install one steel tree sculpture — *I See Everything* by Lee Scott Hempson — with the help of a crane. The sculpture is anchored 3m into the ground with cement. But during the installation, a welder ignited a fire by accident, burning down a million rand's worth of cherry trees.

ECO-EFFICIENCIES: Brahman Hills has worked hard to get the premises somewhat off-grid. Its solar farm has over 1,400 panels producing 625

kilowatts of power every hour. On a sunny day, the system produces over 5 megawatts. Brahman Hills is 65-85% off the grid, and can go for four to five days without Eskom power thanks to a megawatt of battery storage. All drinking water comes from two boreholes on the property, which is also supplies the Esiphethwini Sendiza Primary School. All greywater is reused for irrigation, while food scraps go to bokashi composters for the gardens.

GETAWAY AT A GLANCE



A bath with a view.

Image: Supplied

WHERE IT IS: Brahman Hills is in Nottingham Road, KwaZulu-Natal, about a 4.5-hour drive from Johannesburg and 100 minutes from Durban.

ACCOMMODATION:

Hotel: The 20 hotel rooms provide easy access to all dining and bar facilities. A standard room (max two adults, one child) is R2,340 per room per night, including breakfast. A luxe garden hotel room is R2,795.

Cottages: The self-catering cottages are located on the adjoining Blue Crane Nature Reserve. These are available in one-, two-, three- and four-bedroom options, and include a full kitchen, open lounge, casual dining area and bathroom facilities. They start from R4,125 per night.



The Skyfall casual dining restaurant.

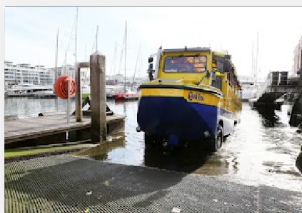
Image: Supplied

WHAT ELSE IT HAS: Skyfall, a “premium dining restaurant”; a casual dining restaurant; and a bar, the Garden Room. There is also a wedding venue, a spa, sculpture garden and conference facilities.

For more information on special packages and for the spa, click [here](#).

- *Martin was a guest of Brahman Hills.*

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