Is this Knysna hotel in a converted power station one of a kind?

By Brian Berkman   27 Nov 2015

When we think Knysna we also think oysters although we should probably think timber as this is the industry that really put Knysna on the map. Thesens Island, formerly called Paarden Island, takes its name from a Norwegian family that arrived in 1870. Earlier that century George Rex, rumoured to be the illegitimate son of King George III, arrived and began exporting hardwood.

Along with timber mills, the Thesens founded a turbine-driven power station fuelled by their timber off cuts. The power station site, now the fabulous Turbine Hotel and Spa, built in 1940, continued providing electricity to Knysna and Plettenberg Bay until as recently as 2001.

Redeveloped and reopened in 2010

Enter Geoff Engel and Dandre Lerm in 2007 who had a unique foresight to create a luxury hotel in the heart of what is arguably the centre of Knysna's hip scene. The hotel opened in August 2010 and today, while it feels established and comfortable, it is still fresh and looks newly built.

Buffed industrial equipment delivers energy

I loved the energy I received from being surrounded by industrial machinery which has been painted and buffed to a luxury finish. In our suite, for example, they have disembodied gauges popping out of the kitchenette counter and from the mini-bar carpentry. The bathroom is a glass enclosed cube that juts out over the lagoon's waterways and the blinds, while providing privacy, still allow you to see the view and gaze into the Knysna Heads while soaking in the tub.

Island dining

We had a small balcony with cafe-style table and chair overlooking the hotel's swimming pool and white Cape Cod-style clapperboard houses of the marina development of Thesen's Island.

There are so many great food options you won't need to leave the Island if you don't want to. The hotel's own 90-seater Island Cafe is super and they also own the Col'cacchio pizzeria directly across the street. Also within spitting distance are Sirocco, 34 Tapas & Oysters, Quay Four and others and the Knysna Waterfront development, with more foodie options an easy 20-minute walk away.

Don't miss out on taking a lagoon boat trip - The Turbine Hotel has its own operators who will arrange this for you but very nearby you can also book whale-watching trips and visits to the Featherbed Nature Reserve via other operators.

With just 24 keys, The Turbine Hotel & Spa is intimate enough to really enjoy the top-class service and facilities on offer. We were, frankly, really sorry to leave. Next time we will take advantage of the Amani African Spa and remember to bring our iPod adapter to enjoy the player in the suite. There is a fairly extensive DVD library, as well as DSTV channels, so there's also plenty to keep you in your room if that's where you want to be.

Oysters or seahorses

Oysters are no longer farmed where they once were in the Knysna Lagoon because of the environmental cost not least of which is to the Hippocampus Capensis or Knysna Seahorse. The Knysna Seahorse is one of the lagoon's threatened inhabitants and the reason I mention them is that our room 101 was themed in honour of the critter with a special aquamarine colour palette and objets to reflect this.

I'm always hesitant to use the word unique as this suggests that another doesn't exist. While I can't guarantee that, The Turbine is the only power station turned luxury hotel on an Island. I'd say the chances are pretty slim of ever seeing something else like this - for this reason alone it is highly recommended.

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