



# ULTIMATE STAY

IN SEARCH OF TRUE LUXURY? SA'S OFFERING OF BOUTIQUE HOTELS OFFER  
UNRIVALED LOCATIONS AND GUEST EXPERIENCES

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## Babylonstoren

THERE I WAS, CROUCHED LOW, HARVESTING WHAT were arguably the finest fountains of spinach on terra firma. To my right, a heavily laden bushel of deep purple brinjals, and to my left, a kryptonite green broccoli. When I stood up with my harvest of what was to become a fine *baingan bharta* and *palak paneer*, I came face to face with a nilgai, a protected species of large and feisty Indian antelope, staring me down as though I was stealing its dinner, which of course I was. I clearly wasn't in the garden at Babylonstoren, but rather in an equally expansive vegetable garden in the picturesque Aravalli Hills of Rajasthan, in what is described as the smallest boutique hotel in the world.

Envisaged and developed by Philippe de Villegas, the former honorary consul to Belgium in Marrakech, Anopura was, and is, to my mind, definitively boutique. Consisting of only two en suite rooms and a luxury tent set amongst the rice and mustard fields, with all the colours, sounds and smells of rural Rajasthan, and waited on by a team of personal butlers serving perfectly cold pink gins and the finest north Indian and French cuisine, it truly is an exclusive experience.

Similarly, Babylonstoren here at home easily compares. Not as diminutive but equally as authentic, with its vegetable garden based on the VOC's Company Gardens and its well-appointed, beautifully decorated Cape Dutch cottages and manor houses located in fine wine growing terroir, its concept, design and guest experience takes you back in time, yet places you in the abundant present.

So what then, aside from an outstanding hand-picked, organically grown brinjal is the common thread between Anopura on the hot, dusty plains of Rajasthan and the white-

washed cottages of Babylonstoren? Both are boutique hotels: comparatively small destination properties that offer exclusive, personalised service in an authentic luxury setting, attracting a certain type of guest who not only pursues, but is happy to pay for such an experience.

The term 'boutique' has become ambiguous and over used, so what then defines and determines a boutique hotel? Is it size, service, experience or rates for that matter? Standard definitions refer to boutique as hotels that have between five and 50 rooms and often contain luxury facilities in glorious locations. But surely it can't only be about size.

Typically, boutique hotels are designed around the guest experience, to serve the needs and satisfy the desires of luxury travellers, whether business or leisure. They come highly decorated, often originally, and are focused on offering services in a comfortable, intimate setting. What is certain, however, is that boutique hotels are rare properties operated by private individuals or companies with a custom collection. This positioning and success has prompted multinational global hotel companies such as Marriott, Starwood Hotels & Resorts' W Hotels and a raft of others to establish their own brands in order to capture a share of this sought-after sector.

Ian Schrager, the godfather of boutique hotels and former nightclub owner (of Studio 54 and Palladium, a hangout of Mick Jagger, Truman Capote and Andy Warhol), had the ability to form top creative teams with the likes of Philippe Starck and Julian Schnabel. He pioneered the original boutique properties, such as Morgans, Delano in Miami, Mondrian in Hollywood and Gramercy Park Hotel in New