

OUT OF AFRICA, SOMETHING NEW

In the midst of the Camdeboo Plains in the Great Karoo, South Africa, this family house combines local materials with well-proportioned architecture, resulting in a luxurious haven of peace and privacy

TEXT AND PHOTOGRAPHS JAMES MCDONALD



I have a farm in Africa at the foot of the Kondo hills...,' says Sarah Tompkins with a twinkling eye, serving tea in her Knightsbridge drawing room. She talks enthusiastically about the private game reserve at Samara in South Africa that she and her husband Mark established, about their conservation programme and her newly born cheetahs.

One of their most recent projects has been the new manor at Samara, rebuilt on the site of a nineteenth-century house. To reach it, after a flight via Cape Town to Port Elizabeth, you drive over a vast mountain range into the Great Karoo, and 80 miles across the sweeping plain below.

As you drive down the manor's 10-mile approach, you may see steenbok, monkeys, kudu, baboons or even a jackal. Made up of several

former farms, once grazed by cattle and sheep, the 70,000-acre reserve also stocks black wildebeest, white rhino, cheetah, eland, giraffe and rare Cape Mountain zebra, the latter a seventeenth-wedding-anniversary present for Sarah. Around a sudden bend is the manor.

Although the house is surrounded by bush, the Karoo is a different cousin to the savannah of the Kruger National Park, which is more a desert without sand that includes mountains, plateau grassland, bushland and valley thicket. Rather than a Karen Blixen-style farmstead, what you see is a clever take on a colonial home. The corrugated-metal roof and surrounding verandas are traditional, but with its clean lines and palatial entrance, the interior is sophisticated and smart.

Quick to admit that she and Mark needed help building the manor, Sarah turned to Cape Town designer John Jacob Zwiegelaar. 'When we

OPPOSITE A light-filled portico (left) decorated with giant cactuses, leading through to a hall in which stone walls are hung with giant tree roots (right), forms a dramatic entrance to the manor at Samara. THIS PAGE While the look of the drawing room is unswervingly colonial, it has been given a very modern interpretation





THIS PAGE CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT The unencumbered thoroughfare down the middle of the house creates a sense of fluidity, space and perspective. There are no sofas in the drawing room, but cosy alcoves with plenty of cushions are ideal for lounging. Pale, neutral colours throughout give off a cool vibe, even when outdoor temperatures are soaring. The manor is full of African artefacts, from zebra rugs to shelves of Zulu beer pots. The floors are all made from polished concrete inlaid with reclaimed-yellowwood floorboards. OPPOSITE The long table in the dining room stands upon a locally made sisal rug; the large pots on top of the table contain South African ?aloe vera plants

were establishing the reserve, we bought 11 farms and farmsteads,' she says. 'The grandest, Karoo Lodge, is for paying guests, but as we come here every school holiday, we needed our own place. I thought we'd patch up the dilapidated house that stood here, but it was John who persuaded us to be more visionary. John "saw" it before it was built.'

At the entrance to the manor is a wide, covered portico, decorated with cactuses in pots, a traditional Karoo reclaimed-yellowwood table, and woven-grass bowls in chunky wooden frames on the walls. Beyond, rough stone walls decorated with twisting tree roots lead you deeper into the house. 'We wanted to create something fresh and oasis-like,' John explains, to the sound of the water spouts of the 21-metre infinity pool at the back.

As you enter the house, your eye is drawn through the hall and drawing room, out to the veranda and the pool, and then beyond, to a natural



watering hole where monkeys and rhinos often linger. Traversing the hall is a corridor, which leads to four bedrooms with en-suite bathrooms, two on each side of the house. Prominent in this part of the house is a collection of botanical paintings of indigenous plants by South African artist Kurt Pio. They were commissioned by John, and Sarah loves them.

Ahead, past shelves filled with Zulu beer pots, is the drawing room, furnished with armchairs covered in cool white linen. 'We didn't use sofas, as we wanted to maintain a sense of luxury without being mumsy,' John says. 'But if you want an afternoon siesta, there are two cosy alcoves with seating. Sarah's children get lost under all the Kuba cushions.'

Above the chimneypiece hangs a bold picture of a monkey, also by Kurt Pio. 'The idea was to use art with a strong graphic appearance to give the room an air of modernity,' John explains. 'The wrought-iron chandeliers, made by local blacksmith Talla Crouse, are intended to seem like part of the architecture,' explains John. The polished-concrete floors are inlaid with reclaimed-yellowwood floorboards and covered with locally woven sisal rugs. This, and the timber-panelled ceilings, french windows, carved wooden cattle heads, Nguni cushions and zebra-skin rugs, all stylishly epitomise a new colonial style.

The architectural feel continues in the dining room, with its striking roundels framing Karoo botanical cut-outs on the walls. Three wrought-iron cage chandeliers, designed by John, hang over the yellowwood table. Beyond is a breakfast room, with Nguni cow skulls set on plinths.

The reception rooms lead out to the veranda, which overlooks the pool and has additional comfortable seating. 'Every day, we go on a game drive or picnic to the Kondoa mountains,' says Sarah. 'The views of the Tandjiesberg are staggering. But back home in the afternoon, you need a swim and some shade, so John's outside sitting room is perfect.'

The neutral palette also translates to the bedrooms. The main one has a woven-leather headboard screening a dressing area, lamps made using wood from Table Mountain, and carved Asante stools. The shower room is lined with orange sandstone gathered from the surrounding hills. 'Practically everything is locally made,' says Sarah proudly. 'Graaff Reinet, the fourth oldest town in South Africa, is full of carpenters and tradesmen. Some made us tear our hair out, but we got there in the end.'

The manor pays homage to Pliny the Elder's observation, *'Ex Africa semper aliquid novi'*, which translates loosely as 'Africa always brings [us] something new'. 'We felt a responsibility to help the local community. Samara now gives work to 80 people and, when we are in London, the house will be available to rent,' says Sarah, adding, 'I can use the funds to buy some more springbok and cheetah' □

*Samara Private Game Reserve and Manor: www.samara.co.za
John Jacob Zwiëgelaar: www.johnjacobinteriors.com*



THIS PAGE A kudu (top left) grazes on succulent young saplings planted near to the swimming pool. The Karoo mountains (top right) form an impressive backdrop to the manor. Loungers and parasols by the pool afford an ideal way to relax after a morning spent on safari. OPPOSITE FROM TOP LEFT The decoration in the bedrooms, each of which has its own sitting area, is consistent with the light, airy theme of the rest of the manor. The en-suite bathrooms are spacious and homely. The bedside lamps in the main bedroom were made using sun-bleached wood from Table Top Mountain