

## The Sourceress

It takes daring and smarts to step away from neutral zones and break out in colours that only nature has the courage to do. The result is Africa House.

Words LES AUPIAIS

Many luxury lodges echo the colours of the bush but in the hands of the bold... Africa House at Royal Malewane takes on the outrageous plumage of indigenous bush birds, combined with an exotic mix of bright silks, satins and gilded wood

IN THE DUN AND KHAKI of the greater Kruger National Park, the gorgeous bush shrike is an outrageous little bird. Olive- and forest green, black with a scarlet breast, with brown eyes and blue-grey legs, he (for 'she' is, of course, more subdued) is an avian dandy. As if to offset this flamboyance, the female lays eggs a delicate shade of blue with dark speckles.

The six grand suites of Liz Biden's Africa House, a private and free-standing villa on the Royal Malewane property in the Thornybush Private Game Reserve, has not only been populated with furniture sourced from her wide travels, she has also introduced a riot of accent colour that would fail in hands not quite as skilled and savvy. Here, against a North African architectural framework, she plays with a palette of turquoise against lime, cerise against gold, acid yellow against cobalt blue. And there is gorgeous bush shrike scarlet against olive in artwork, raw silk, enamelling, glass and ceramics. Biden hunter-gathers as she travels, and where anyone less observant might see sun-blistered paint and oddity, she sees potential.

'Wherever I am in the world I always look for what's interesting. The unusual catches my eye. We were on holiday in Lamu some time back, where I found a lot of the articles that have found their way into Africa House: the antique day beds on the front patio as well as the dark tables on the covered patio...'

She filled a container that sailed from Mombasa and then travelled by road; immense pieces arrived on trucks. Somehow, the pieces all work as a collection and create an exotic panorama.

On the walls of several rooms are giant reproductions of paintings by South African artists in the style of 19th-century French artist Henri Rousseau. Amid the myriad jungle greens, wild animals – monkeys, birds, tigers and other cats – leap from the canvas. It's an exuberance that creates a special atmosphere at the villa.

'I originally did Africa House for our family,' says Biden, 'so I chose what appealed to me personally and not what one would expect in a bush lodge. The guests who have stayed there have loved it and many families have returned time and again, calling it their home in the bush. They find that all the colour makes it a happy and fun place to be.'

Biden confesses that her exuberance might have overstepped the mark once or twice. 'The beds in Rooms 1, 2, 3 and 4 were hand-carved in teak in Mombasa, but when I unpacked them, they looked so dull that I painted them – one in blue, one in red, one green and the fourth yellow. That annoyed Phil enormously!'

In all other respects, the formidable partnership between Phil and Liz Biden has executed a flawless collection of properties: La Residence in Franschoek, Birkenhead House hotel and villa in Hermanus, and Royal Malewane.

Liz is, if nothing else, a skilled 'sourceress'. While she bemoans the rising prices in popular markets in the south of France and how tricky it is to source fine linen, she has refocused on Nice for china, linen and silver, and Cortona, Italy, for photo frames, trinket boxes, and silver- and gold-rimmed glasses. The trick, she



says, is to buy something good and then place it with a peer in its class – a tip from a decorator friend.

It's heartening, though, to discover that even the mistress of eclectic style can make the odd slip. 'It recently happened to me in a room at Birkenhead House when I couldn't replace the couch fabric. The new fabric looked so wrong that I ended up buying a new armoire, a carpet, two paintings and numerous cushions to make it look right. In hindsight, I rather should have recovered the couch a second time, as everything was fine until I changed that fabric the first time.'

Of course, no guest would ever know what happens behind the scenes. They'd be too preoccupied with the real reason to stay at Africa House in particular: a group of highly experienced guides and one of only two master trackers working in Africa. The villa is serviced by a private chef, butler, ranger and tracker, and a designated vehicle. The true draw card is a staggering line-up in the 13 000ha reserve – including a formidable lion pride presided over by enormous matriarchs, more than 300 bird species, and more than 130 tree species. Some guides are also highly skilled photographers and will help you improve your wildlife portfolio.

The Rousseau-inspired reproductions are a subtle and poignant reminder that the French artist who became known for his exotic landscapes teeming with wildlife never left the shores of France. Zoos and botanical gardens were his sole source of reference and the images he painted were not always understood. It was only later that he was recognised in the eyes of broader-thinking artists and writers, and lauded for his vision of new possibilities... a new future. How he would have loved a stay at Africa House in the real heart of the wild. □

*To find out more about Africa House at Royal Malewane, call 015 793 0150 or visit [royalmalewane.com](http://royalmalewane.com). For more information about The Royal Portfolio Hotels, call central reservations at 021 671 5502 or email [reservations@trp.travel](mailto:reservations@trp.travel).*