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Steeped in history, the reception of The Royal Hotel in Durban has known the footsteps of the Queen of England, Mark Twain and HG Wells.

RIGHT No royal guests, but The Bard has settled in at the Western Cape's oldest licensed hotel, in Riebeeck Kasteel.



MEET ME AT THE ROYAL?

ROYAL FLUSH? OR FLASH IN THE PAN. RYAN ENSLIN GOES ON A REGAL QUEST



FROM LEFT TO RIGHT
The longest stoep south of the Limpopo is where Jan Smuts apparently wrote part of the UN Charter's preamble; The facade of The Royal Hotel in Riebeeck Kasteel; The entrance to the Royal Hotel in Knysna.

Since I was a fledgling 15-year-old, South Africa's royal hotels have always caught my attention. But only in a vague, peripheral sense. What was this phenomenon I kept seeing on family holidays around the country? Every second town seemed to have one, looming large and handsome, typically on a main road.

I must have suppressed my curiosity, because until 2020 I'd never set foot inside a royal hotel.

They'd remained mysterious places sparking more questions than answers. What made these hotels royal, and did their identity involve links to some or other actual royal lineage? Were these once the overnight abodes of kings and queens, had princesses woken up in beds here, complaining to housekeeping about the pea under the mattress?

South Africa has a surprisingly long list of royal hotels, both past and present, according to Tshwane local Derek Meise, who has been researching the royal hotels since 2010 as a passion project. From Alice to Tarkastad, to Roodepoort and in both Ladysmith and Ladismith, the royal hotel was there. In Ladysmith, the royal hotel is still there. Only a handful remain, many have seen better days.

There seems to be no official definition of what constitutes a royal hotel, other than possibly royalty having visited the lodgings. Even then, Derek says, this is neither here nor there. On a mission to discover what links one royal hotel to the next, I donned my explorer's

cap and embarked on a road trip from Cape Town to Johannesburg. A royal quest, if you will.

The trip would take me 3 364km across the country, stopping off at a handful of remaining royal hotels, my regal ride a Nissan Patrol.

VISCOUNT OF THE VALLEY

Built in 1862, The Royal Hotel in Riebeeck Kasteel was featured by South African Tourism on its 2006 list of the country's 50 most fabulous places to visit. It was the only hotel to make the cut, presumably because it's the Western Cape's oldest licensed hotel, famed for having the longest stoep south of the Limpopo River. Not that any royal bum has ever touched the furniture here. I had heard, however, that Jan Smuts wrote sections of the preamble to the United Nations Charter on it.

These days the stoep is the scene of the hotel's high tea, a nourishing and soothing colonial vestige that includes a blue cheese crème brûlée, savoured as the glorious African sun warmed my face and I entertained an imagined scene in which that long-gone politician penned history.

Located in the picturesque Riebeeck Valley, and just an hour's drive from Cape Town, the village of Riebeeck Kasteel is one of those visually appealing places, royal patronage or not. Ornate buildings are painted in bright shades – pink and cobalt and jade-green.

And while the old hotel never lodged anyone with a crown, it still holds court in its own way, and plays a

pivotal role in local life. Built during Lockdown as a means to support local artists, the Royal Arts Town Amphitheatre is located on the hotel's grounds. Ten productions were staged during its inaugural summer season, luring visitors from as far as Cape Town to watch shows that didn't involve their screens. The second season is under way and continues into May.

The Royal Hotel Riebeeck Kasteel

R1 990 per room per night,
includes breakfast.
022 448 1378, royalinriebeek.com

LORD OF THE LAGOON

Leaving the Riebeeck Valley, I set my Patrol's navigation system for the first of only two remaining royal hotels in South Africa to have actually hosted royalty.

The Royal Hotel Knysna started life in 1856 as a small, thatched hostel named the St George's Tavern, owned by Captain Thomas Horn.

Here comes the Royal part: in 1867, Prince Alfred, Duke of Edinburgh and second son to Queen Victoria, visited Knysna on a hunting trip, lodging at the St George's Tavern. After his stay, the hotel was granted royal status, by decree from the prince, and was renamed the Royal Hotel Knysna. The current structure was built in 1939.

On entering, I immediately noticed that all-too-familiar old-building aroma, that musty, earthy

fragrance that's frequently found in buildings of a certain age. I took comfort in this sensory experience as I was transported back to childhood days spent with my grandparents in their old home.

Owner Greg Dwyer explained that royal hotels had generally fallen out of fashion with contemporary travellers. For the Royal Hotel Knysna, that includes not being located within the town's popular marina section. He said being only two storeys high also counted against the building.

But Greg has made a plan. The top floor has been repurposed as office space, and a gym and indoor swimming pool built at the back of the property, both of which have given the grand dame a new lease on life.

In its public spaces, though, reminders of its royal lineage endure. There's the word "Royal" engraved above the entrance; and of course the creak of wooden flooring as you enter, announcing your presence to reception, no need for a bell. The elegant main staircase, the rich, grainy wood-panelling in the old dining room.

Still, there were livelier distractions elsewhere. An afternoon with the Ocean Odyssey crew meant an adventuresome boat ride through the Knysna Heads and a chance to gawk at whales – marine monarchs, surely?

Royal Hotel Knysna

R960 per room per night,
excludes breakfast.
044 382 1144, rch.co.za



ABOVE In Bethulie, The Royal Hotel is a repository for a vast collection of books and vinyls.

OPPOSITE Today's ho-hum entrance and the once super-stately dining room of Durban's Royal Hotel.



BARON OF BOOKS

Colloquially known as South Africa's Book Hotel, The Royal Hotel in Bethulie is owned by Anthony Hocking, a legend in his own time.

A wordsmith with a penchant for history, Anthony's knowledge is both extensive and intriguing. Captivated by his vast knowledge, our dinners together often continued long into the night.

Founded in the 1880s and the recipient of an extensive upgrade in 2008, the hotel is a repository for an impressive collection of books and LP records, extending to more than 250 000 items. These treasures line every available wall, nook and, in a few instances, long-disused doorways, spread throughout the property.

The hotel is believed to have been renamed The Royal Hotel Bethulie in 1897 upon the celebration of Queen Victoria's Diamond Jubilee and during its chequered past has had an interesting assortment of owners. Notable among these was a retired police colonel who owned the hotel during the mid-1990s and kicked off his tenure by banning all smoking throughout the building.

Trade effectively died and the erstwhile colonel battled to sell the property. He was eventually reduced to operating a bottle store from the ladies bar to make ends meet.

Ongoing financial frustrations led to him advertising the bottle store for sale in the *Junk Mail*, with the hotel

thrown in for free. After some time, a Moooinooi local bought the hotel, allowing her legacy to continue.

And while The Royal Hotel Bethulie has never wittingly hosted aristocracy, bibliophiles and history buffs will have a royal time.

The Royal Hotel Bethulie

R540 pp pn

071 683 7767,

facebook.com/TheRoyalHotelBethulie

EMPEROR OF ETHEKWENI

Another hotel where genuine British bluebloods have in fact stayed, Durban's noble lady has stood proudly in the city centre since 12 December 1845, when it opened as the McDonald's Commercial Hotel. It was granted royal status in 1860 by Royal Decree from Prince Alfred (remember him from Knysna?), following a luncheon at the establishment in 1859. Alfred sure got around back in the day.

Many notable guests have stayed at The Royal Hotel Durban, including HG Wells, Mark Twain, Queen Elizabeth II and Nelson Mandela. And I was able to connect with a small fragment of my own heritage, too.

Before my parents were married, my dad's parents treated the happy couple to dinner there, in those days a monumental event. And so, it felt like a moment – 50 years later – to have dinner in the same stately dining

room in which my folks had once eaten while staring lovingly across the table at one another.

Dining in that dignified room on my first night, I admired her pristine vaulted ceilings; the chequered black and white marble floor tiles, worn in places from years of foot traffic; the luxuriant red velvet upholstery of my dining chair.

Still, the grand old lady's location is no longer on the fashionable side of Durban. The faded carpets and yesterday decor may hint at bygone opulence but I doubt Elizabeth II would stay at The Royal Hotel Durban today.

The Royal Hotel by Coastlands Hotels & Resorts, Durban

From R900 per room per night excluding breakfast; from R1 200 per room per night including breakfast. 031 333 6000, coastlands.co.za

MARQUIS OF THE MIDLANDS

Final stop: Ladysmith, once the stopover destination of choice for travellers between Johannesburg and Durban. Until the N3 highway changed things.

In the heart of KwaZulu-Natal's Battlefields area, both the countryside and the hotel are steeped in history. Ladysmith's Royal Hotel famously operated throughout the 118-day siege of Ladysmith and specifically attracted the attention of the opposing Boers.

On 3 November 1899, the Boers sent a shell through

the hotel's newly opened dining room. No injuries were recorded.

A Dr Arthur Stark was less lucky a few days later when, while standing on the hotel's veranda, he was struck by another Boer shell. He died while undergoing surgery, but the indentation made by the shell in the pavement can still be seen.

Inside the hotel, there's still plenty of dark-wood furniture harking back to a bygone era. But any regal pretences have long been subsumed by melamine counter-tops, terracotta tiles, prefab shower cubicles and the mix 'n' match, make-a-plan decor.

Still, you can't fault them for trying.

Royal Hotel Ladysmith

R1 665 per room per night, includes breakfast 036 637 2176, royalhotel.co.za



Concealing battle scars: Ladysmith's Royal Hotel.

