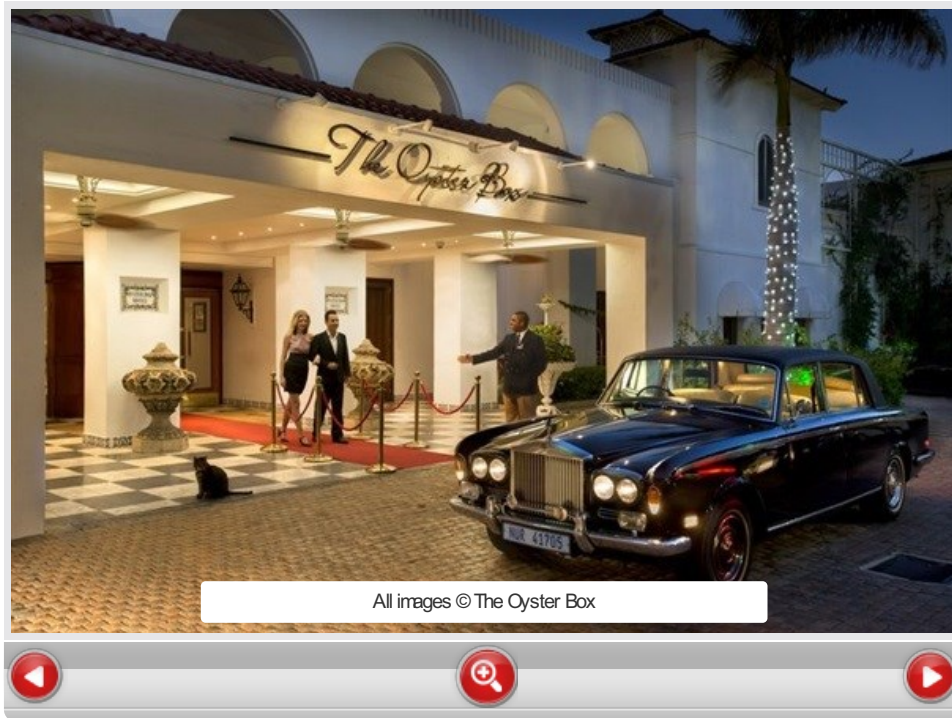


# All the opulent, old-world charm of the Oyster Box Hotel

 By Leigh Andrews

12 Sep 2018

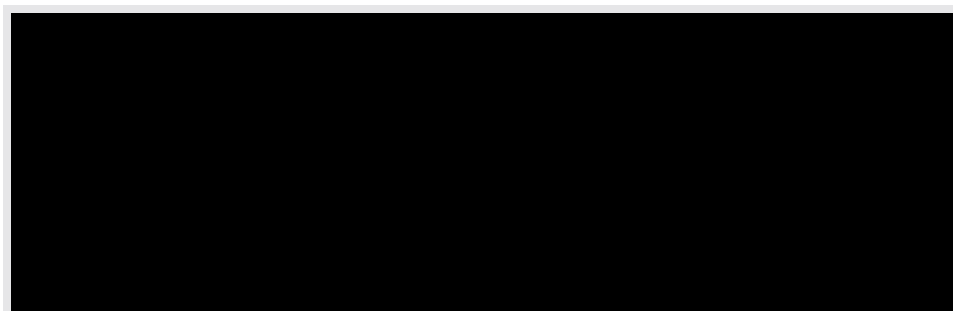
If you've ever been to the five-star Oyster Box Hotel you'll know all about the high ceilings, palm-leaf fans, and pops of lighthouse red-and-white stripes everywhere you look, with high tea a daily occurrence. Here's why you shouldn't miss this revamped KwaZulu-Natal classic based at the end of Lighthouse Road, Umhlanga Rocks.

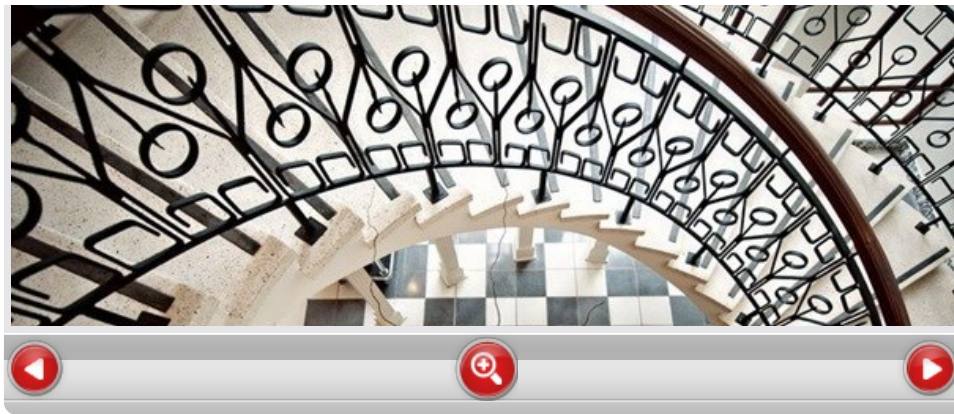


Swiftly sent through the original grand revolving door, we were offered a choice of water, litchi juice or sparkling wine on check-in, as staff reassured us it would be just a short wait for our room to be ready and eagerly offered directions for us to explore the grounds as we waited.

We took in the impressive foyer with its periodically intact, original black-and-white terrazzo chequerboard floor, sweeping staircase and inlaid hand-painted tiles and friezes from the hotel's opening; admired the clock bought at auction from Christie's; and even spent some quality time with Skabenga, the resident Oyster Box tabby cat as he napped on his favourite couch. But I digress, more on him later.

Heavy bags safely stowed away, we went into full 'explore mode', which found us everywhere from the almost-hidden cigar- and whisky-heavy Chukka Bar – one of the few places guests can smoke on the property; up the wrought-iron balustrade to the new top-floor Lighthouse Bar, with a view of the Indian Ocean and Umhlanga lighthouse below; and to the glass-ceilinged wine cellar, below the Oyster Bar.





Next, it was time for a quick scout of the reflection pond and Victorian garden gazebo, leading to the new secluded spa area.

It offers relaxing treatments in six treatment rooms, as well as an enormous Turkish *hammam* sauna room, and even a private tranquillity lounge where you can cocoon yourself off from the world to read or nap with a cup of soothing tea.

## Nostalgia and the new

But then, everything we saw was fresh, despite the Oyster Box having first opened in 1947.

That's largely thanks to a two-year renovation almost a decade ago, completed with a re-opening in November 2009 that saw the hotel revamped to keep the best of that old-world charm while sticking to the modern traditions that enhanced the appeal of its early years.

This includes being more environmentally-friendly than before through reflective paint and bamboo, as well as their 'Last Straw' campaign, which saw the hotel doing away with plastic straws completely and replacing them with biodegradable paper straws – red-and-white striped, of course.

The new gardens are landscaped yet lush and tropical, filled with indigenous flora like aloes, frangipani and hibiscus and yes, fauna in the form of animals too. But we'll get to that...

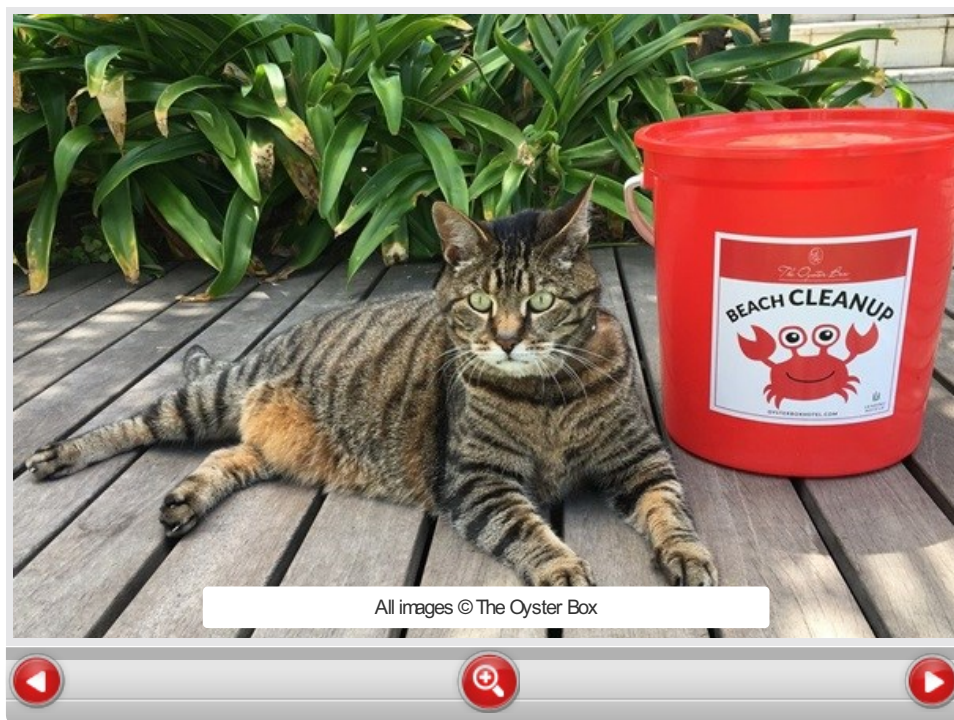


The main infinity pool – there are a handful of pools on the grounds, so we need to be specific here – is perfectly placed for posing against the iconic red-and-white lighthouse below, as well as the crashing sea, golden sands and red-and-white striped loungers all around. Instagram perfection!

## Rich red-and-white lighthouse luxury

The Oyster Box' remarkable interiors are the work of Toni Tollman and her mother Bea, president and founder of the Red Carnation Hotel Collection. When they took over the property in 2006, they felt the Oyster Box was 'past her prime', so set about the daunting task of restoration with an authentic touch, to still reflect the nostalgia and charm of the Oyster Box' former heyday.

I'd say they've succeeded, with a mix of the 1940s' elegance seen in the original arches and the nostalgia-rich Durban July and Union Castle rooms, antique clock-filled Clock Library and those Venetian crystal chandeliers in the Pearl Room, mixed with modern, colourful artworks by Durban artist Rene Rutgers and Jane du Rand's ceramic and mosaic murals.



Then there's the bonus of private access to the beach below, where you're encouraged to fill a bucket with rubbish to qualify for a free milkshake or cocktail. This has clearly proven an effective strategy as we didn't spot a single sweet wrapper in sight over our stay.

There's also conference, business and meeting facilities if you're not just there for pleasure – we checked in for our flights

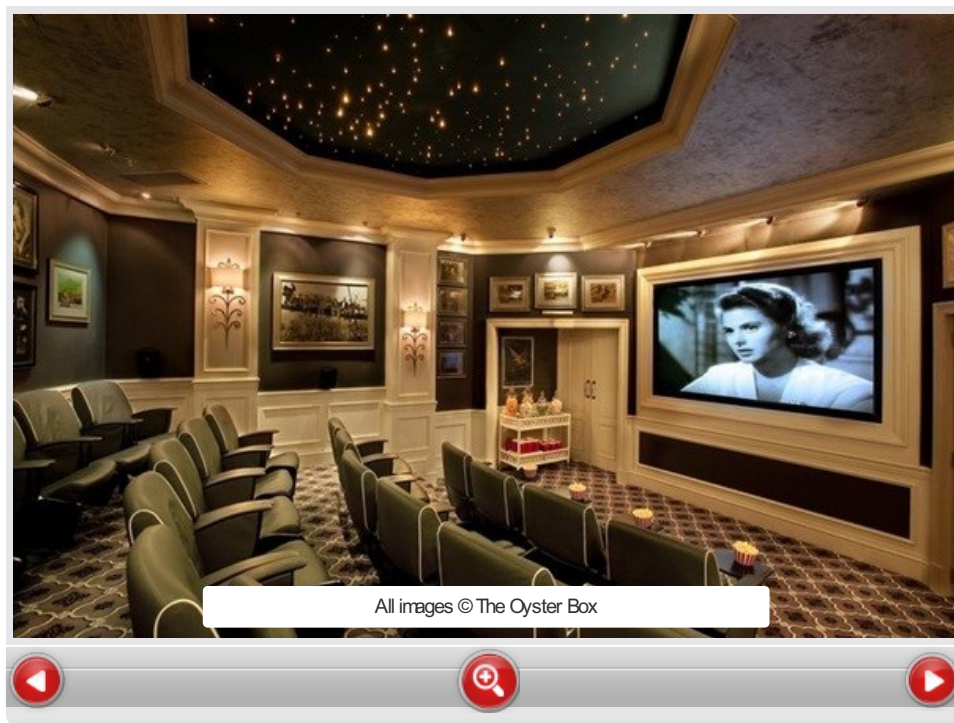


the next day and printed boarding passes with ease.

My personal favourite?

The private cinema, filled with soft blankets and jars of sweet treats like toffees and liquorice-tailed marshmallow mice (yes, I tried one to be sure).

So even if we weren't blessed with perfect beach weather during our stay, we would have had ample to fill our time. In fact, that's just where the clever reception staff found us, to let us know our room was ready. All this, and I haven't even begun the review yet!

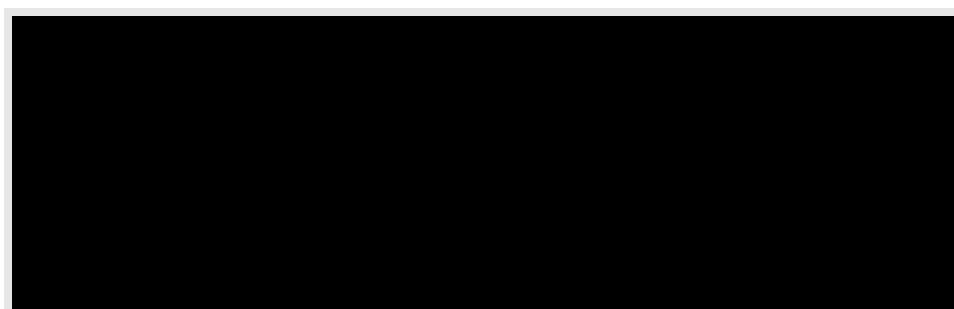


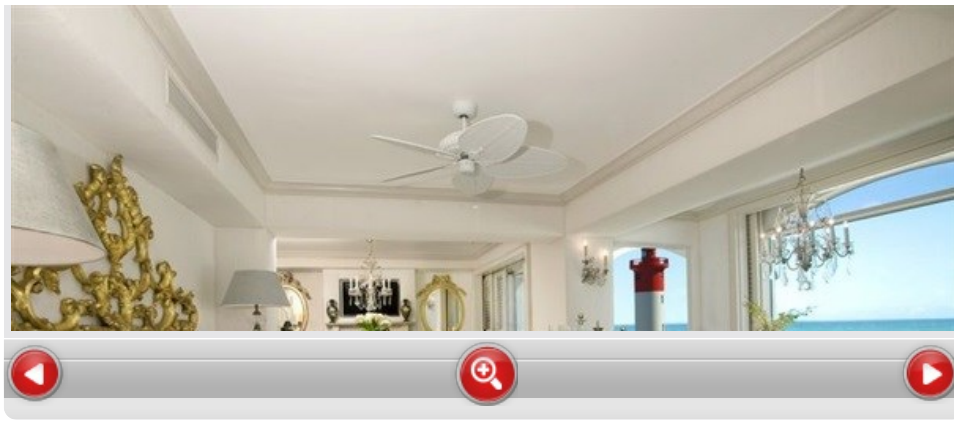
And so, basic 'grounds explore' done, we were finally back on track indoors, and on retrieving our bags from where they'd been stored, we were pleased to find that our room was just the relaxation haven I needed, after ticking off one of the most stressful annual work weeks of the year (hi, Loeries).

One of 86 rooms, suites and villas dotted around the property – there's a presidential suite split over two levels, with its own private lift, heated infinity pool and 24-hour butler service if you're so inclined. There's also a paraplegic cabana on the ground floor, with specially lower king-size bed.

The walls of our luxury sea-facing suite were salmon pink, with touches of pearly shell white and coral everywhere we looked – even the padded headboard was pink.

Sustainable bamboo is used in all the wardrobes, energy-efficient lights and sensors on bedroom sliding-doors to switch off the air-conditioning immediately once they're open to access the natural light on the balconies and terraces.





The best part? Our own private balcony, which let in the roaring sounds of the sea.

## High tea or evening indulgence, the choice is yours

There's complimentary tea, coffee and hot chocolate in the room, as well as snacks like crisp green apples, a box of the Oyster Box's own pink macarons, and enough Angels nougat biscuits to accompany every cuppa. There's also all manner of wine glasses, and even a selection of coasters so that you drink in style.

My tip? Take those cups and saucers out to your private balcony and let your eyes adjust to 'relax mode'.

We didn't wait to miss a thing so decided it was time for another quick explore, this time doing a lap around the various eating areas. We couldn't help but notice the afternoon high tea in full swing in the double-volume Palm Court atrium, with the resident pianist setting the tone – this is now seen as the 'heart of the hotel'.



### Tea by the sea

Jessica Taylor 18 Sep 2014



This always gets booked up fast, but if you stay after the nightly curry buffet, you can try the 'evening indulgence' version, which offers such tasty delights as chocolate cake, marvellous Oyster Box macarons and mini eclairs.

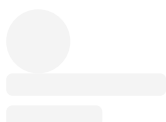
We only know this as we had a quick taste preview, with the macarons we munched on our balcony earlier in the day – unfortunately, we were just too full from the curry buffet to sample any sweet treats.

## The famous Skabenga, monkeys and other animal business

Speaking of sweet treats, Skabenga the cat receives his own fan mail and is almost as famous as the hotel, which marks his birthday on 5 October each year with a sold-out event – last year, there were more adults than children in attendance!

We commented that Skabenga deserves his own spot in the Wall of Fame, filled with snaps of the famous who have frequented the Oyster Box over the years – everyone from Charlize Theron and Sean Penn to Gerard Depardieu and Khloe Kardashian.

“





[View this post on Instagram](#)



Sneak peek - My Birthday Party at The Pearl Room!

*A post shared by [The Oyster Box Hotel](#) (@theoysterbox) on Oct 7, 2014 at 12:15am PDT*



And Skabenga's not the only non-human to enjoy scurrying around the grounds. The Oyster Box caters to pet-loving guests as Bea Tollman herself loves travelling with her own dogs, so your own small- to medium-size dogs and cats can stay with you in the Garden Suites or Villas, for free. Actress Hillary Swank has stayed here before with her dog.

There are special pet menus available from the Ocean Terrace Restaurant – think steak with gravy, fresh salmon and cream, or sausage-topped waffles – as well as linens and sleeping baskets and litter boxes, as well as the option of pet sitters, dog-walkers and collection and delivery to the parlour.

Seagulls and mynah birds prove a nuisance on occasion, so do keep your blinds closed and your wits about you when lying poolside or walking along the beach.

There are signs all over to watch for monkeys trying to snatch food off your table, or to sneak into the rooms and steal food – no empty threat, singer Josh Groban had a monkey steal an apple right from his hand last year!

Keeping things environmentally-sustainable and rounding out the fauna count, there are two bee colonies on the Oyster Box roof, with harvested honey used in the kitchen.

## **Cor! Authentic Durban curry, buffet-style**

Little wonder nature keeps trying to get in, as the food on offer at Oyster Box really is top-notch. It was finally time to take our seats for the curry buffet, served in the Ocean Terrace restaurant, filled with brass lanterns, views of the ocean beyond and hand-painted Turkish tiles on the roof and walls. That's a direct link to the original owner, Kay Hill, who collected the tiles and murals during her global travels and brought them back to the hotel.

The setting got our appetites going, as between us, we sampled five of the 11 meat, fish and vegetarian curry dishes on offer that night, with a chocolate shake for me (yes, the Milkshake Queen strikes again) and a glass of red for the husband. We didn't even think of asking for a taste of the tandoori chicken, despite there being two tandoori ovens on the go.





The chicken-prawn curry made it to the top of my husband's list, followed by the meaty lamb *dhal ghos* and fish curry. He's a lover of chilli and spice, so we thought the lamb vindaloo would take pride of place, but instead, he said "that sh!t is evil" – the delights of authentic Durban curry!

My favourite was the smooth and flavourful butter chicken with cashews, but it was only on his second portion of the chicken-and-prawn that we realised there was coconut to sprinkle on top, with all sorts of naan breads, popadums, sambals, chutneys, relishes, raita and lime pickle to add subtle substance to the dish.

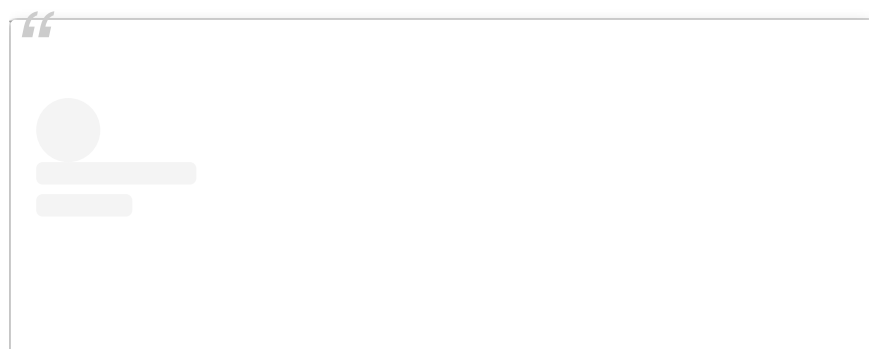
Dessert is included in the buffet – that's probably why we had no space for the evening indulgence, as we went for the nutty *kulfi* ice cream and a whisky Don Pedro respectively.

Feeling brave, we also popped into the state-of-the-art private fitness centre in the spa building, to try work off some of that curry – there's a Power Plate, and you can log into your YouTube or Netflix account while you step, pound and cycle away those calories. By then, we were well and truly ready for bed, but first...

## Blossoms and bath-time bliss

With no water restrictions in this province, the bathroom was the ultimate luxury for us water-thirsty Capetonians. We'd mentioned how much we were looking forward to this on check in, only to find that while we were out filling our bellies, the attentive turn-down service had surrounded the tub with rose petals and scented candles. What bliss!

So we poured a steamy bath, adding the complimentary bath milk and soaked away. The shower is also just right, offering a super-strong pressured shower head and handheld hose. Having given it a brisk go earlier, my husband said standing in the shower was akin to standing beneath the Victoria Falls. That's quite something.





[View this post on Instagram](#)



Enjoy sensational sunsets from our standalone bathtub #Sunset #bathtub  
#Durban

*A post shared by [The Oyster Box Hotel \(@theoysterbox\)](#) on Mar 17, 2017 at 8:10am PDT*



That's not to say that the hotel doesn't have water best practice at heart, as grey water is harvested from showers, baths and hand basins, then filtered and pumped to holding tanks for flushing toilets. Rain water is also directed off the roofs to a large storage tank for use in the gardens.

Even the dressing gowns are red-and-white patterned, with a light summer version or a thicker plush red version, with white flannel lining. No matter the season, you'll feel luxuriously comfortable in your suite as you pad around in complimentary slippers.

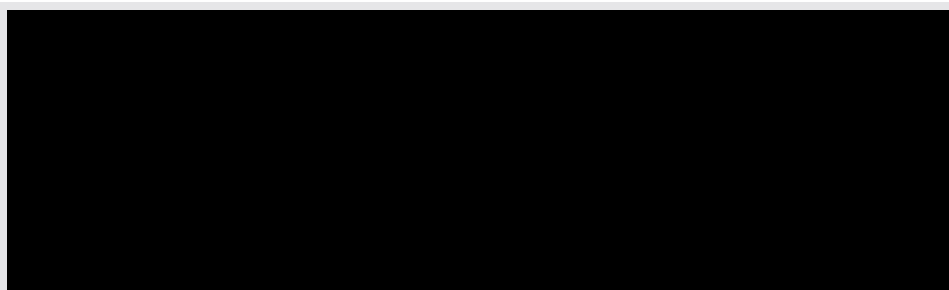
It's no surprise we slept amazingly well, and when we opened the blinds – shut overnight to dissuade any marauding monkeys – we woke to a pretty pastel sunrise over the sea.

We dressed quickly, then made our way downstairs for breakfast.

## Don't all breakfast buffets offer oysters?

Already packed with other smiling guests, there was a selection of continental options at the high-tea buffet table, from nutty and fruited mueslis and cereals with all manner of other nuts and stewed fruits to sprinkle on top, to tiny doughnuts and warm, syrupy pastries.

On the savoury side, I took pics of some of the largest wheels of cheese I've ever seen, accompanied by thinly sliced charcuterie and even oysters with lemon and Tabasco sauce – this is the Oyster Box Hotel, after all, they have their own oyster beds!





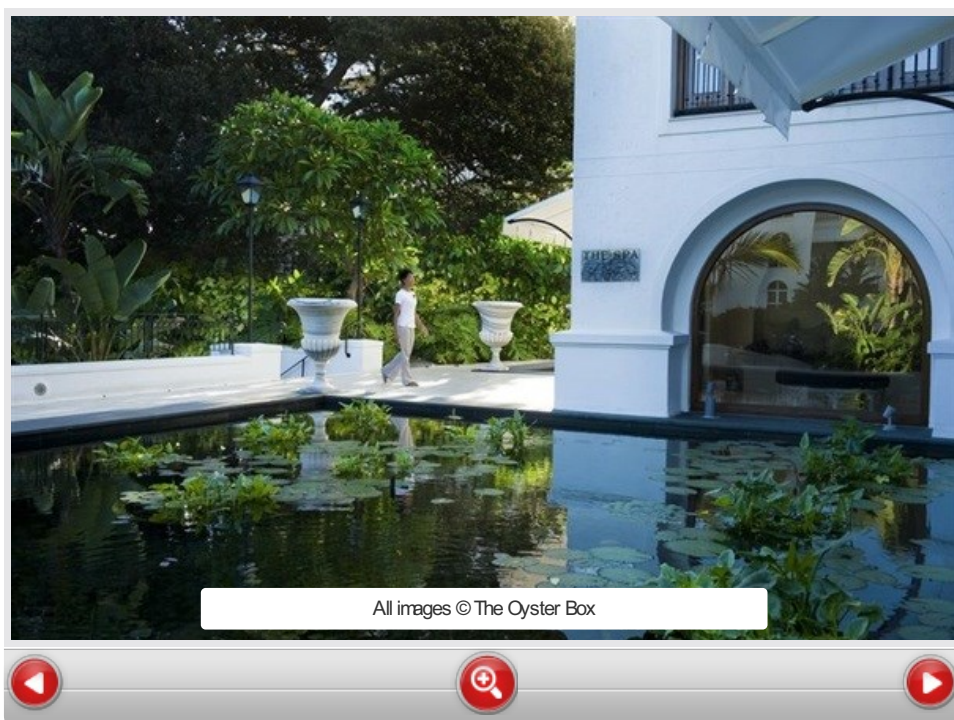


All that's before you even reach the hot buffet options: Eggs any way you like them, back or streaky bacon, milk-poached haddock, mushrooms, baked beans, little waffles of butter, hot oats and eggs benedict, all listed on the 'relic from the past' table top paper cloths.

There's also a pancake and waffle station set up at the pizza oven outside, which you can top with various sauces and mini Astros, cream, and banana slices. Delicious, especially washed down with cappuccinos.

## Attention to finest detail

Left to our own devices for a few hours until checkout, we made the most of the steamy *hammam* and mist shower being open to guests until 10am and also spent time relaxing in the spa's solar-heated, Jacuzzi-like plunge pool and hydrotherapy bath.



It's the small things that really made our stay. When you venture out to the main pool, you can pick up a little keyring containing sunblock or step up to the big bottles of sunblock to squirt away. You can also pick up a beach bag and stock it with towels for your beach venture.

There's even a selection of holiday must-read books to choose from, and large jugs of chilled water. There's also complimentary covered and valet parking, shuttles to Gateway Shopping Centre, a concierge service and, of course, free Wi-Fi.

After a speedy check-out, we were pleased to find there were also bottles of water, mobile phone chargers and sweeties in the Red Carnation shuttle back to the airport – they really do think of everything. It's old-world charm with a modern, opulent twist.

Thank you, Oyster Box! Click through to [my blog](#) for the pics we took during our stay.

*\*Leigh Andrews was a guest of the Oyster Box Hotel. The Curry Buffet costs R450 per person and is available for both lunch and dinner. Contact the Oyster Box Hotel on +27 31 514 5000 or click through to their [page](#) for rates and availability. You can also follow the Oyster Box [on Twitter](#) and [Skabenga on Facebook](#).*

## ABOUT LEIGH ANDREWS

Leigh Andrews AKA the #MilkshakeQueen, is former Editor-in-Chief: Marketing & Media at Bizcommunity.com, with a passion for issues of diversity, inclusion and equality, and of course, gourmet food and drinks! She can be reached on Twitter at @Leigh\_Andrews.

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