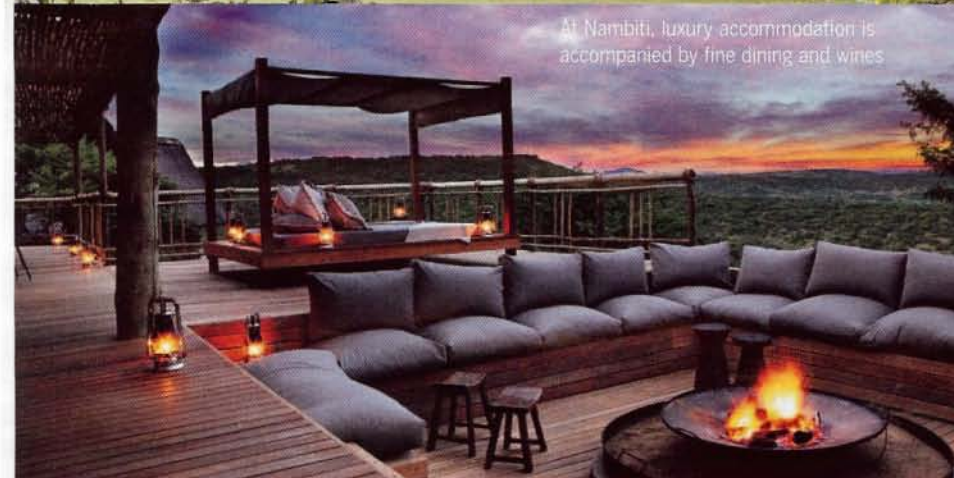




Hartford House

At Nambiti, luxury accommodation is accompanied by fine dining and wines



Czar

Gracious and inviting, The Oyster Box is popular with locals and tourists

DURBAN & MIDLANDS

NAMBITI HILLS

Deep in the KwaZulu-Natal bushveld, 23km east of Ladysmith and almost perfectly midway between Johannesburg and Durban lies Nambiti Hills Private Game Reserve and Lodge, which offers intimate and luxurious accommodation in the midst of spectacular big-five South African bushveld.

A discreet haven of tranquillity, sustainability and sophistication with only eight luxury suites and one honeymoon suite, Nambiti Hills is a respite from the wasteful abundance of over-pampering, air-brushed bush breaks. Private viewing decks and lofty glass-enclosed dining and lounge areas provide panoramic views of rolling hills and savannah by day, as well as a canopy of stars in the night sky.

To complement and enhance the "bush" experience, Nambiti has focused on defining itself as a destination for connoisseurs of fine dining and wine. Four indoor wood fires and two outdoor boma fires on their expansive deck offer warmth, intimacy and a variety of places to dine. The resident chef has built up quite a following but the highlight is the opportunity to experience their guest chefs such as Chris Black and wine expert Mark Muncer during Nambiti's Wild Gourmet Safari Weekends. There are also several other special weekends options, including the Birding Weekend with Tony Roberts and Battlefield Tours with Ken Gillings.

Nambiti Hills, near Ladysmith, (031) 818 0340, www.nambitihills.com

HARTFORD HOUSE

Hartford House is one of those rare places that hoteliers nowadays can only hope to emulate — a Midlands institution that began as a gracious home and grew into an award-winning hotel that is synonymous

with colonial charm, elegance and grace, yet innocent of pretence.

Jackie Cameron, Hartford's award-winning executive chef, is one of the top reasons to visit. Her obsession with locally sourced ingredients and her passion for a cuisine that is appropriate to both its place and ethnicity is clearly evident. And authenticity and originality are hallmarks of everything Hartford represents. Jackie waxes lyrical about the availability, quality and range of the fine local produce. "There is little value in living in one of the world's most bounteous environs without taking advantage of all that it offers," she says. "We have yet to taste lovelier chicken than Stonehaven's; the beef, lamb and game ranks with the best anywhere; you'll spend an age finding finer cheese; our vegetables and herbs are superb, we have renowned producers of pork and Parma ham. Local is lekker."

Dinners are spectacular five-course affairs, served in candlelit splendour either in the historic dining room or on the rambling colonial verandah in the temperate Midlands evening air. For eight consecutive years, Hartford House has also had "Platinum" emblazoned on its wine list.

So if you are in the mood for something that delivers in every way, take a drive up Hlatikulu Road and spend a little time in this exceptional place. Dining is open to the public,



Hartford House sources local produce for its menu

but for non-residents booking is essential. *Hartford House, Hlatikulu Road, Mooi River, (033) 263 2713, www.hartford.co.za*

THE OYSTER BOX HOTEL

Whether you are relishing fresh east-coast oysters washed down with a few glasses of ice-cold Cap Classique on the Ocean Terrace sinking into a comfortable leather armchair and swapping fishing tales over a cold beer in the Chukka Bar or partaking of some very fine dining in the lush formality of The Grill Room, the Oyster Box celebrates the palate with a unique sense of place.

The recently renovated Oyster Box, with its direct beach access and a sparkling pool just a few metres from the warm Indian ocean, undoubtedly occupies one of the most prestigious beachfront sites in the world. Spiritually and historically, the hotel commands a special place in the social history and fabric of Durban and its community. The ebb and flow of locals in the Oyster Box matches the tide, and to spend a Sunday afternoon on the terrace, lounging on the red and white candy-striped lounge and snacking on those oysters, is to take your place in history. The Oyster Bar, with its white marble bar and glass ceiling, the Lighthouse Bar and, for smokers, the cosy, hazy Chukka Bar are all a non-resident's playground. And if you're not a drinker, take high tea and listen to afternoon piano in the Palm Court.

Gracious and inviting, refined and yet casual, The Oyster Box occupies a special place in the hearts of countless guests and the local community. Get a weather report; call her up, go and have a drink and you're bound to end up staying for dinner.

The Oyster Box Hotel, 2 Lighthouse Road, Umhlanga Rocks, (031) 514 5000, www.oysterboxhotel.com