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This Farm Animal Sanctuary Is Also a Hotel — and Its Resident Pig Is a World-famous Artist

The rooms at Farm Sanctuary SA are affordable, but a custom painting by "Pigcasso" will set you back thousands of dollars.

By [Katie Jackson](#) | Published on May 13, 2023



PHOTO: COURTESY OF WWW.JOANNELEFSON.COM, PIGCASSO.ORG

Most hotels have bacon in their breakfast buffets. But [Farm Sanctuary SA](#), a boutique hotel in South Africa's bucolic winelands, doesn't serve bacon; it saves pigs from becoming bacon. In fact, it's home to the world's only oinker artist.

"Pig-cassooooooooo!" sings Joanne Lefson in a playful, high-pitched voice when she slides open the doors to the big wooden barn that doubles as the hotel's lobby. At the sound of her name, Pigcasso, a 1,500-pound sow asleep in a pile of straw, slowly comes to life.



PHOTO: WERNER KRUISE/COURTESY OF FARM SANCTUARY SA

She knows it's time for two things: apples and art. "You can give anyone a paintbrush, and they'll know what to do with it," Lefson, Farm Sanctuary SA's founder, tells me as we follow Pigcasso, who clearly knows where she's going, out the barn doors to her studio. "But there's only one pig in the world you can give a paintbrush to that will know what to do with it."

Of course, Pigcasso, whose paintings sell for thousands of dollars to buyers all over the world, wasn't born with a silver brush in her mouth. In 2016 she was destined to be someone's dinner. Fortunately, at the 11th hour, Lefson, a passionate animal rights activist, rescued Pigcasso from a slaughterhouse. At the time, Lefson was building Farm Sanctuary SA, and her new rescue was intent on destroying everything laying around in the process.

"I noticed that the only thing she didn't devour were the paintbrushes," says Lefson. So, with the help of apples — which she uses as a reward — she taught the mischievous little pig how to hold a brush in her mouth and apply paint to a canvas. Naming the aspiring artist Pigcasso was a no-brainer. Lefson, a former professional golfer now in her 50s, has been "saving" animals ever since she was a kid. She even wrote a book, ["Abound the World,"](#) which chronicles her travels to dozens of countries with Oscar, a Mr. Congeniality award-winning mutt she rescued from the pound.

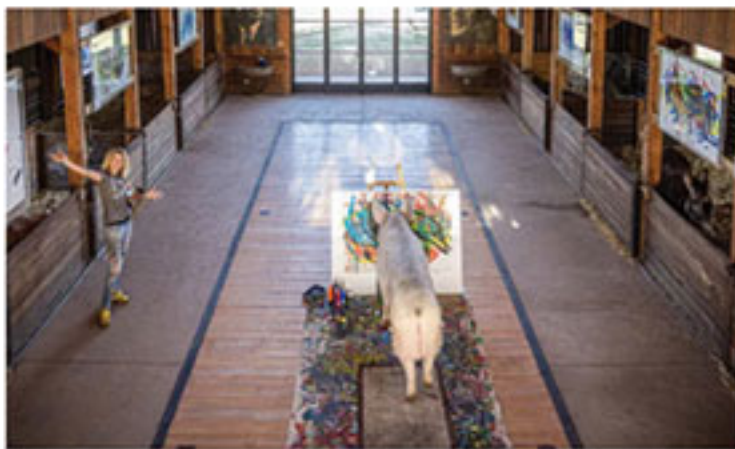


PHOTO: WERNER KRUISE/COURTESY OF FARM SANCTUARY SA

My room at Farm Sanctuary SA is the stone chapel cottage (\$100 per night). It's covered in photos of the late Oscar: cheezing for the camera with monks in Thailand, meeting with Maasai warriors in Kenya, and posing in front of the Golden Gate Bridge in San Francisco. Meanwhile the barn, which in addition to the hotel's lobby houses rescued pigs, sheep, goats, and chickens, is plastered with Pigcasso paintings and articles about the world's only painting pig. A laminated letter from Jane Goodall, who has one of Pigcasso's paintings, reads, "I was so thrilled when I heard about your painting pig. And the videos are fantastic. Is it OK if I use one in my lectures?"

The barn is also where the hotel's kitchen is. Farm Sanctuary SA only serves vegetarian food — its mission is to "inspire a more compassionate and sustainable world" — and because it's an open layout, I can see a little lamb weaving its way between the chef's legs. A couple in their 20s from Austria is staying in the master suite (from \$125 per night), accessible via the spiral staircase leading to the barn's loft. They show me photos on their phones of them feeding the orphaned lamb a bottle of milk during the middle of the night. I ask if they were annoyed that their room came with Old MacDonald's entourage. "Not at all," they laugh. "It's why we booked the loft!"

Even though it's a working farm with animals, Farm Sanctuary SA is within walking distance of downtown Franschhoek, a picturesque South African community about 90 minutes east of [Cape Town](#) with a population of 1,000.

I ask the Austrian couple how they learned about Farm Sanctuary SA. I discovered it, randomly, on Airbnb, and because I grew up on a farm in Montana, I figured I had to check it out. "We already knew about Pigcasso," says the woman. "So we wanted to meet her while we were visiting South Africa."

Pigcasso, who has been featured on *Saturday Night Live*, the BBC, and CNN, just to name a few, is somewhat of a celebrity in Europe. She's especially popular among art collectors.

While the Austrian couple originally just planned on seeing Pigcasso, while on site they decide to commission a painting. "Who knows?" says the man. "One day it could be worth millions." While it's normally a private experience between the guests, Pigcasso, and Lefson, the couple is happy to let me observe.

I watch as Lefson dips the paintbrush in the color of the couple's choosing before handing it to Pigcasso. The pig takes it in her mouth and makes a beeline for the canvas. She can paint lines, dots, and circles, and she signs every piece with her snout. After just 30 minutes, Pigcasso has painted three canvases for the couple, who get to choose their favorite to take home. After nearly an hour of analyzing each canvas, they choose a red, white, and blue number they name "The Peeps."

I'm amazed: Pigcasso's work really does resemble the work of Pablo Picasso. There's even a game in the barn where you have to decide if the paintings on display were done by Picasso or Pigcasso. I get half of them wrong. I wish I could blame it on all the wine I've been drinking — the Franschhoek Valley is full of vineyards, and Pigcasso even has [her own line of wine](#) — but it's only 11 a.m. I'm as sober as the little lamb is drunk on milk. In fact, I haven't even had breakfast yet.

Now that the painting session is over, I'm going to hit up Farm Sanctuary SA's kitchen. I'm not sure what they're serving at this hour, but I know one thing: it's not ham and eggs.