

Nieu-Bethesda's Historic Owl House



Located at the foot of the Sneeuberge in the Eastern Cape Province of South Africa, the small town of Nieu-Bethesda was founded in 1875 and, as was the case with most Karoo towns at the time, it developed around the Dutch Reformed Church.

It was designated as a municipality in 1886, and today falls under the jurisdiction of the Camdeboo Local Municipality. The pure air and natural beauty of the area, along with the untouched-by-time atmosphere of the town, have made Nieu-Bethesda an increasingly popular getaway spot for a day trip from Port Elizabeth, or as a longer term destination. But the main attraction of Nieu-Bethesda is undoubtedly the Owl House – a unique and fascinating memorial to the artist Helen Martins.

Born in Nieu-Bethesda in 1897, Helen Martins received her education in nearby Graaf-Reinet and qualified as a teacher. She spent some time in what was then the Transvaal, and met and married a colleague. The marriage did not last and after divorcing her husband, Helen returned to the town of her birth to care for her elderly parents. Following the death of her mother in 1941, and her father in 1945, Helen started to create sculptures and other works of art, mainly using concrete and ground glass. She also started decorating the interior of her home, named Owl House, with ground glass and mirrors that reflected the sunlight. She reportedly arranged lanterns and candles in a way that would reflect the light of the coloured glass, creating a kaleidoscope of colour.

The sculptures in the garden include figures of camels and 'wise men' all facing a metal sign marked 'East/0os', inspiring the title of South African novelist and playwright Athol Fugard's play *The Road to Mecca*, based on the life of Helen Martins. Other sculptures around the house include mythical-type creatures, such as a four-legged, winged animal with the head of an owl and a human figure standing on its back, arms raised to the sky. A narrow building and clock tower, an archway with birds on top, people with clothing decorated in colored glass, and numerous owls are also to be seen among the sculptures of Helen's Owl House.

Helen Martins crushed her own glass for her artworks, and the ground glass eventually damaged her health and her eyesight. She committed suicide shortly before her 79th birthday. Much of this eccentric artist's life is a mystery, but her art has been preserved and is certainly worth viewing when visiting the charming Karoo town of Nieu-Bethesda.