



# Great Houses & Gardens of South Africa

November 7-14, 2026

*Tour arrangements by* Classical Excursions



Known for its magnificent scenery the Cape of Good Hope region will open its doors to a hidden world of magnificent art, architecture and gardens to the Berkshire Botanical Garden. From the thatched and gabled manor houses of the 17<sup>th</sup> century Dutch settlers and the influence of the Dutch East India Company to the mansions of the Rand Lords this tour will encompass 250 years of colonial history.

South Africa has a long and fascinating garden history that reflects its unique botanical heritage, colonial influences and the development of horticultural practices spanning centuries. It is considered one of the Worlds Hot Spots for Bio-Diversity. Including the early gardens established by the settlers from the Dutch East India Company in 1652, reflecting European gardening traditions, to the great early 20<sup>th</sup> century Botanical Gardens such as Kirstenbosch National Botanical Garden, which celebrates the native plants of South Africa.



The group will stay four nights at the world famous Mount Nelson Hotel set below the backdrop of Table Mountain, along with three nights in the wine country of Stellenbosch on an estate surrounded by gardens. We will visit the famous botanical gardens at Kirstenbosch as well as a selection of other outstanding private gardens. The tour will take in private wine estates, homes and the gardens of some of the Cape's great families, the famous "Penguin Beach" and the Table Mountain National Park.



## Tour Highlights

### MICHAELIS COLLECTION

Donated in 1914 by Sir Max Michaelis, this world-class collection of mostly Netherlands art contains masterpieces by Frans Hals, Jan Steen, Van Dyke and Jacob van Ruisdael

### KOOPMANS DE WET HOUSE

This house museum is furnished as a home for a well-to-do Cape family during the late 18th Century. It houses some of the best pieces of Cape furniture and silver in the country, in addition to a priceless collection of ceramics. A household such as this would only have been able to function with its share of servants and slaves, and recent research has brought to light the names and professions of some who lived in the house at the time, as well as the kinds of activities they would have pursued.

### GROOT SCHUUR

The former Cape Town residence of the state president, the gabled Groote Schuur ('Big Barn') was originally built in 1667 to serve as the VOC's granary before it was bought by Cecil John Rhodes in 1893 and converted into a grand mansion and office by his chum Architect Sir Herbert Baker. Along with the building, Rhodes bought several other properties on Table Mountain's eastern slopes during the late 19th century, including the summer house of Rudyard Kipling, the Woolsack, and Mostert's Mill. On the slopes above the University of Cape Town campus you can still see the ruins of the lion enclosure known as the Groote Schuur Zoo, which replaced the original cage-like structure commissioned by Rhodes in 1897. Rhodes died in 1910 and bequeathed his estate to the nation; an elaborate neoclassical shrine was erected in his memory two years later.





## IRMA STERN MUSEUM

Irma Stern (1894-1966), was a major South African artist who achieved national and international recognition in her lifetime. The permanent collection on display shows Irma Stern's development as an artist whose subject matter included exotic figures, portraits, lush landscapes and still life's conveyed in a variety of media, ranging from oils and water colors to gouache and charcoal.

The Irma Stern Museum was established in 1971 and is the house the artist lived in for almost four decades. Several of the rooms are furnished as she arranged them while upstairs there is a commercial gallery used by contemporary South African artists.

## GROOT CONSTANTIA

In 1685, during an annual visit to the Cape, Hendrik Adriaan van Rheede tot Drakenstein granted the grounds of Groot Constantia to Simon van der Stel the VOC Governor of the Cape of Good Hope.

Van der Stel built the house and used the land to produce wine as well as other fruit and vegetables, and for cattle farming. Following Van der Stel's death in 1712 the estate was broken up and sold in three parts: Groot Constantia; Klein Constantia; and Bergvliet.

In 1779 the portion of the estate including Van der Stel's Cape Dutch-style manor house was sold to the Cloete family, who planted extensive vineyards and extended and improved the mansion by commissioning the architect Louis Michel Thibault. The wine cellar was added by Cloete in 1791. The house remained in the possession of the Cloete family until 1885, during which period the estate became famous for its production of Constantia dessert wine.

In 1885 Groot Constantia was purchased by the government of the Cape of Good Hope and was used as an experimental wine and agricultural estate.

In 1969 the manor house became part of the South African Cultural History Museum, and in 1993 the estate passed into the ownership of the Groot Constantia Trust. The exhibition in the house is managed by Iziko South African Museum, and is particularly focused on rural slavery and the life of slaves during the early Cape colonial period.



## FRESH WOODS

Fresh Woods is the private garden of Peter and Barbara Knox-Shaw. It contains a remarkable rose collection of both species and old and new hybrids, many raised from seed from the wild or cuttings of wild-collected species. Begun in the 1950's, roses are planted informally. They cover old apple trees, climb along fences and are mixed with other shrubs and herbaceous perennials.

This garden is particularly valuable for the conservation of old roses from the Cape and for preserving collections of wild roses. Although a private garden, it is open regularly. It is known throughout the world and is a source of propagation material and a center for the exchange of rare and valuable varieties.



## KIRSTENBOSCH

Kirstenbosch is the name of a famous botanical garden nestled at the foot of Table Mountain in Cape Town. The garden is one of nine National Botanical Gardens covering five of South Africa's six different biomes. The most beautiful garden in Africa, **Kirstenbosch** National Botanical Garden is acclaimed as one of the great botanic gardens of the world.

## BABYLONSTOREN

Babylonstoren is one of the best preserved *werfs* (farm yards) in the Cape Dutch tradition. Not only the manor house from 1777, but pioneer structures all the way back to the founding of the farm in 1690. The Koornhuis (for storing wheat and hay) and the old cellar are exceptionally fine. An ornate fowl house, pigeon loft, leaning bell tower and historic gates embellish a traditional courtyard surrounded by a low, whitewashed wall.

The Babylonstoren garden is at the heart of the farm. It was inspired by the Company Gardens of the Cape, where for centuries ships would replenish with sweet water, vegetables and fruit at the halfway station between Europe and Asia. It also hails back to the mythical garden of Babylon.

Spanning eight acres, the Babylonstoren garden is formal in structure. Every one of over 300 varieties of plants in the garden is edible. The garden is divided into fifteen clusters spanning vegetable areas, berries, bees, indigenous plants, ducks and chickens and includes a prickly pear maze. Gravity feeds water into waterways from a stream into the garden as it was done for 300 years. Following the bell tower axis, the old cellar axis or the Babylonstoren hill axis, walks span over three kilometers in the garden. During spring, 7000 clivias bloom down by the stream, where a secluded path runs in the shade of wild olives and oaks.



### **MORGENSTER**

For 300 years Morgenster has attracted and inspired people through its blend of beautiful surroundings, excellent interior and a manor house recognized as one of the great houses and gardens of the Western Cape. It is refreshing to look back on the people and periods of history that created this marvelous place and to appreciate their contribution.

### **RUSTENBERG**

The garden is situated next to the Cape Dutch homestead Schoongezicht, which dates back to 1814. In 2001, Rozanne Barlow, wife of the current owner of the Rustenberg Estate, undertook to regenerate and restore the garden. Walls were constructed, and the site where the old tennis court stood has been transformed into an eleven-circuit Chartres-style labyrinth, laid out in half brick and river stone. The twenty-five meter long swimming pool was converted into a lily pond and is now home to many Koi fish. The charming pergola, originally built by John X Merriman, supports climbing roses, clematis and other fragrant climbers.

The garden is essentially laid out in a formal style with four distinct areas accessed by pathways; the hard landscaping has pulled the sizeable site of one hectare comfortably together.

The planting can be described as English, with roses, foxgloves, salvias, agapanthus, sedum, anemones, day lilies and much more – really a plants lover's dream. The changing of the seasons brings interesting and beautiful changes – there is always something to catch the eye. The 'borrowed' surrounding landscape of vineyards, green pastures and the majestic Simonsberg mountain backdrop make a magical place.

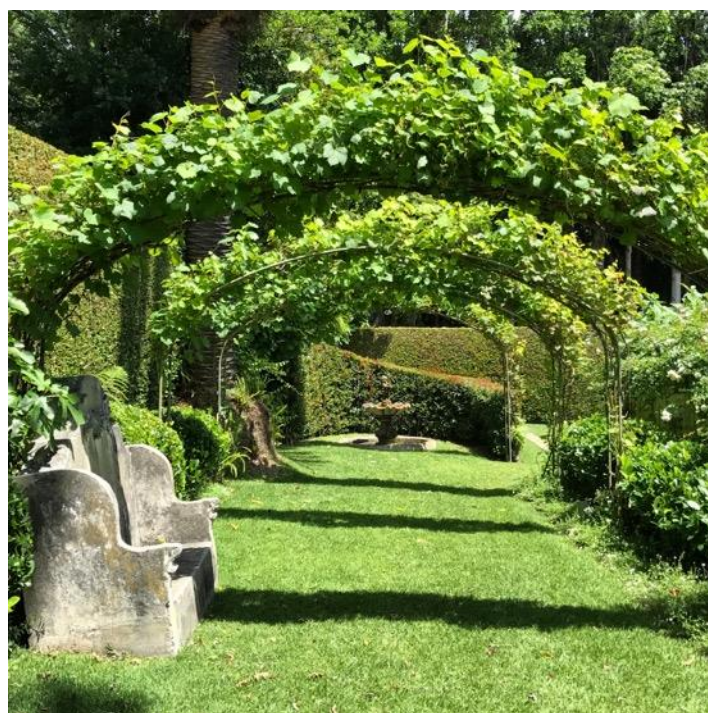
### **STELLENBERG**

In upper Kenilworth stands the beautiful Stellenberg, a Cape Dutch property dating back to original Van Der Stel ownership. Fortunately it has been blessed with sensible and caring owners – starting with the Felthams, who required Stellenberg in 1878, who did not succumb to the fashion of the times by removing gables, replacing thatch with corrugated iron or to tamper with the Cape Dutch windows and shutters. Finally the Ovenstones acquired Stellenberg in the 1950s and today, nearly 60 years later, Stellenberg remains one of the most beautiful Cape Dutch houses in the Cape Peninsula.

The garden, as it is now, commenced in 1987 with the Herb Garden. Graham Viney and Gary Searle were inspirational in the planning and planting of this garden as in other areas of the garden too. In 1989 the Walled Garden, designed by David Hicks was begun. The Rose Garden, which was executed in 1989 has been removed and a new parterre has been designed in its place (2001) by Franchesca Watson. The feel that the link between house and this new garden relates better to the house and provides a better balance to the rest of the garden. New ideas and inspiration have taken place from year to year and planting schemes have changed reflecting old and looking towards the contemporary and the future of gardening.

### **VERGELEGEN**

When Willem Adriaan succeeded his father, Simon van der Stel, as governor of the Cape in 1700, it didn't take long before he claimed a modest 30,000 hector piece of land for himself just as his father had done in his time at Constantia. It took three days by oxwagon to reach Willem Adriaan's farm on the slopes of the Hottentots Holland mountain range overlooking the Atlantic Ocean; hence its name 'Vergelegen', meaning 'situated faraway'. Six years after he started planting vines, Willem Adriaan had half a million vine stocks. He laid out fruit orchards and orange groves, planted camphor and oak trees, and established eighteen cattle stations with 1000 cattle



and 1800 sheep. Willem Adriaan also built reservoirs and dug irrigation canals. He built himself a beautiful Cape Dutch homestead, added a corn mill and many other subsidiary buildings.

When, in November 1705, reverent Francois Valentijn visited Vergelegen he uttered the now well-known words: "I saw this Estate with exceptional pleasure, since everything was laid out wonderfully finely."

The younger van der Stel was a man of divergent interests, but his enthusiasm to turn this barren land into an agricultural paradise got the better of him and after only six years in office, Willem Adriaan was found guilty of corrupt practices and was ordered to return to the Netherlands in October 1706. Nevertheless, Willem Adriaan was considered a genius for his knowledge of farming and his visionary mind contributed greatly to the agricultural development of the Cape.

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Please contact the Office of Classical Excursions to register:

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