



# Great Houses & Gardens of South Africa

November 7-14, 2026

*Tour arrangements by* Classical Excursions in collaboration with Gary Searle



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 Vineyard Hotel in Capetown, 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 and public gardens such as: Le Marais, Coniston Garden, De Oude Nektar, The Company Gardens & Dylan Lewis Sculpture Garden. 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



#### **SHEILA BOARDMAN'S PRIVATE GARDEN SOETVIEL**

Inspired by French garden design this is a garden containing both indigenous and exotic plants in both a formal and a naturalistic style.

#### **CONISTON GARDEN**

John Venn's award winning garden, nestled beneath the slopes of Muizenberg.

#### **FLEURBAIX FARM**

A nine hectare garden designed by Henk Scholtz, one of South Africa's most known landscape designers. This privately owned estate has an old farm house dating back to 1752. Henk will personally lead the group around his gardens.

#### **OLD NECTAR**

This private garden has greatly influenced South African gardening traditions. In 1941 it became the home of Kenneth and Una Van der Spuy. Una is considered the Doyenne of gardening in South Africa and has published 15 books on nearly every aspect of gardening. Una founded a nursery and was still actively gardening when she died just short of her 100<sup>th</sup> birthday. The property is still owned by the family.

#### **VERGENNOEG**

A house designed by the noted British architect Herbert Baker in 1915, for the American born Alpheus Gardener Williams. This house is thought to have influenced the great popularity of Cape Dutch architecture in America.

## GROOT CONSTANTIA

In 1685, during an annual visit to the Cape, Hendrik Adriaan van Rheeede 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.



## 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 *merfs* (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.

## DYLAN LEWIS SCULPTURE GARDEN

A garden located in Stellenbosch which is a rugged outdoor art gallery featuring over 60 sculptures by the renowned South African Artist Dylan Lewis set within a 7 hectare landscape of indigenous fynbos and dramatic mountain backdrops. A perfect blend of art and nature.



### **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.

### Tour Co-Host **Gary Searle**

Well-known in the design industry, Gary Searle has shared his passion for design for many years through curated tours which highlight architecture, design and craft.

Gary grew up in South Africa and has gardened since childhood. His passion for blending natural beauty and historical elements with modern aesthetics has earned him a mention in books such as Jerry Harpur's "Gardens in perspective" and Graham Viney's "Colonial Houses of South Africa". His work has also been featured in Conde Nast House and Garden (South Africa and UK) and several other design publications.

The gardening tradition in South Africa dates to the establishment of a garden to replenish the ships that sailed around the Cape in 1652. It gained momentum under British rule, and the benign climate and fertile conditions have fostered passionate gardeners in every generation but perhaps never more so than in contemporary times.

Gary's creative vision encompasses gardens that are grand and humble but always with a strong sense of place, offering guests an inspiring and insightful tour of remarkable outdoor spaces both public and private.

#### **OPTIONAL JOHANNESBURG PRE-TOUR EXTENSION**

**NOVEMBER 2-7, 2026**

The Johannesburg extension offers visits to a selection of rarely seen private houses & gardens.

**St. Christopher Garden** with the **Johannesburg Garden Club**, **Colette Ball's Garden**, **Ailsa Barrow's garden**, **Everard Read Gallery**, **River Lodge Farm**, **Shangri La** ( the extensive gardens of John O Meara. Exclusive dinners and lunches in several private homes.

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Please contact the Office of Classical Excursions to register:  
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