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# CAPE TOWN COOL

THE VIBRANT CITY ON THE  
TIP OF SOUTHERN  
AFRICA BECKONS WITH  
FOOD, DESIGN, ART,  
AND BREATHTAKING  
SURROUNDINGS.





LEFT: The Mount Nelson Hotel, with Table Mountain as a backdrop. BELOW, LEFT TO RIGHT: A bakery stand at the Biscuit Mill. Minimalist goods on display at LIM. The dining room at the Test Kitchen. OPENING PAGE: Babel, the restaurant at Babylonstoren, a farm hotel in the Cape Winelands, east of the city.

**b**racketed by the Indian and Atlantic Oceans and nestled at the foot of rugged Table Mountain, Cape Town is a city in which geography is destiny. “There’s tremendous physical beauty here,” says the stylish Helet Merkling, a human rights lawyer and design aficionado who’s been a Capetonian since childhood. “People feel a kinship with the land.” The city is blessed by the kind of golden weather that has more in common with Nice or Los Angeles than it does with the rest of Africa, and its residents

are constantly outdoors: hiking Lion’s Head, splashing around Muizenberg beach, strolling amid blooming protea bushes at the Kirstenbosch botanical garden.

Tucked into all that natural glory is a metropolis at the confluence of several cultures—African, Dutch, British, Southeast Asian—boasting a mix unlike any other in the world. This distinctive background gives natives an anything-goes sensibility that has made Cape Town fertile ground for a vibrant design scene, a thriving arts community, and the kind of stel-

PRECEDING PAGE & THIS PAGE: MARK SERREA





lar restaurants you'd sooner expect from capitals like Paris or London. "Here, slow food never disappeared," says Merkle.

"We're just coming of age from a creative perspective, and in that sense the country is completely open," she continues. "At the same time, because of our diverse heritage, what we create is utterly unique." And, she says, increasingly influential, citing as proof a recent Burberry resort collection that featured tribal beading and prints and the huge popularity, in places like New York, of *vellies*—simple desert boots that have

long been a South African wardrobe staple.

In this town, the citizenry blazes trails in venues such as the Hemelhuijs cafe, where waiters deliver black-tea-and-bergamot lattes garnished with dulce de leche and sea salt. Rooms at the Hotel Alphen, a whitewashed colonial manor, have Pop Art–scaled still lifes, gilt-edged mirrors, and sexy tufted headboards. At the edgy Test Kitchen, dishes such as foie gras with rabbit ham and vanilla-poached quince steal the show. "The energy here," says Merkle, "is intoxicating."



LEFT: 5 Rooms, a restaurant at the Alphen Hotel. ABOVE, LEFT TO RIGHT: Housewares at L'Orangerie. Kirstenbosch National Botanical Garden. A storefront in De Waterkant Village, a historic district near the harbor.



A view of Camps Bay and the Twelve Apostles mountains from the terrace at the Roundhouse Restaurant.

## HELET MERKLING'S CAPE TOWN



### HOTELS

- Locals call the *Mount Nelson Hotel*, with its rosy façade trimmed in lacy white fretwork, “the Nellie.” It’s a Victorian-era property with beautiful gardens. Interiors by Graham Viney are classically English, and so is the very proper afternoon tea. 76 Orange St., Gardens, 011-27-21/483-1000; doubles from \$677.
- The *Alphen Hotel* was originally a 16th-century farmstead, and the architecture combines the Cape Dutch and Georgian styles. The rooms have a modern boudoir feel and the café is especially sweet. Alphen Dr., Constantia, 011-27-21/795-6300; doubles from \$325.

### RESTAURANTS

- I celebrated my last birthday with

lunch at the *Test Kitchen*, an intimate, friendly space. The inventive chef, Luke Dale-Roberts, is one of the best in the country—he can transform something as simple as a tomato into an extraordinary event. 375 Albert Rd., Shop 105A, Woodstock, 011-27-21/447-2337.

- The *Roundhouse Restaurant* is in a stupendous location, on a promontory with views of both the Atlantic and Indian Oceans. The decor is elegant and understated—white tablecloths, candlesticks—but the food matches the locale. Even an ordinary vegetable salad with pickled mushrooms is stunning to look at and amazing to taste. Round House Rd., The Glen, Camps Bay, 011-27-21/438-4347.
- *Hemelhuijs* is Dutch for “heavenly



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Venetian-inspired interiors at Casa Labia.

home,” and the café is an incredibly chic jewel box: sunny, with glinting oak-and-metal tables, staghorn ferns, orchids. Don’t miss the basalt pottery on which they serve the fresh, uncomplicated food—it’s also for sale. *71 Waterkant St., De Waterkant, 011-27-21/418-2042.*

- **Casa Labia** is one of the grande dames of Cape Town cuisine, with an Italian-leaning menu that’s delicious. In warm weather they set up tables on the veranda and you can watch dolphins and whales leaping in False Bay. *192 Main Rd., Muizenberg, 011-27-21/788-6062.*

### SHOPS

- An indoor market where vendors sell food, design objects, and fashion, the **Old Biscuit Mill** is a little hub that attracts all walks of life. You can find everything from French pastries to handmade shoes there. My favorite thing: mushroom skewers from the Funki Fungi stall. *373-375 Albert Rd., Woodstock, 011-27-21/447-8194.*

- Whenever I’m in a rush and need a nice gift I pop into **LIM**, which stands for “less is more.” It’s a design store with objects that are pared down to the essentials: ivory-colored stoneware plates, hand-cast raku vessels, sleek lighting. *86 Kloof St., Gardens, 011-27-21/423-1200.*

- **L’Orangerie** is a small shop, but you’ll want to buy everything in it. It stocks a great selection of locally made things, including a basic African version of a hurricane lamp that I just love. *7 Wolfe St., Wynberg, 011-27-21/761-8355.*

- **Nap Living** carries locally woven

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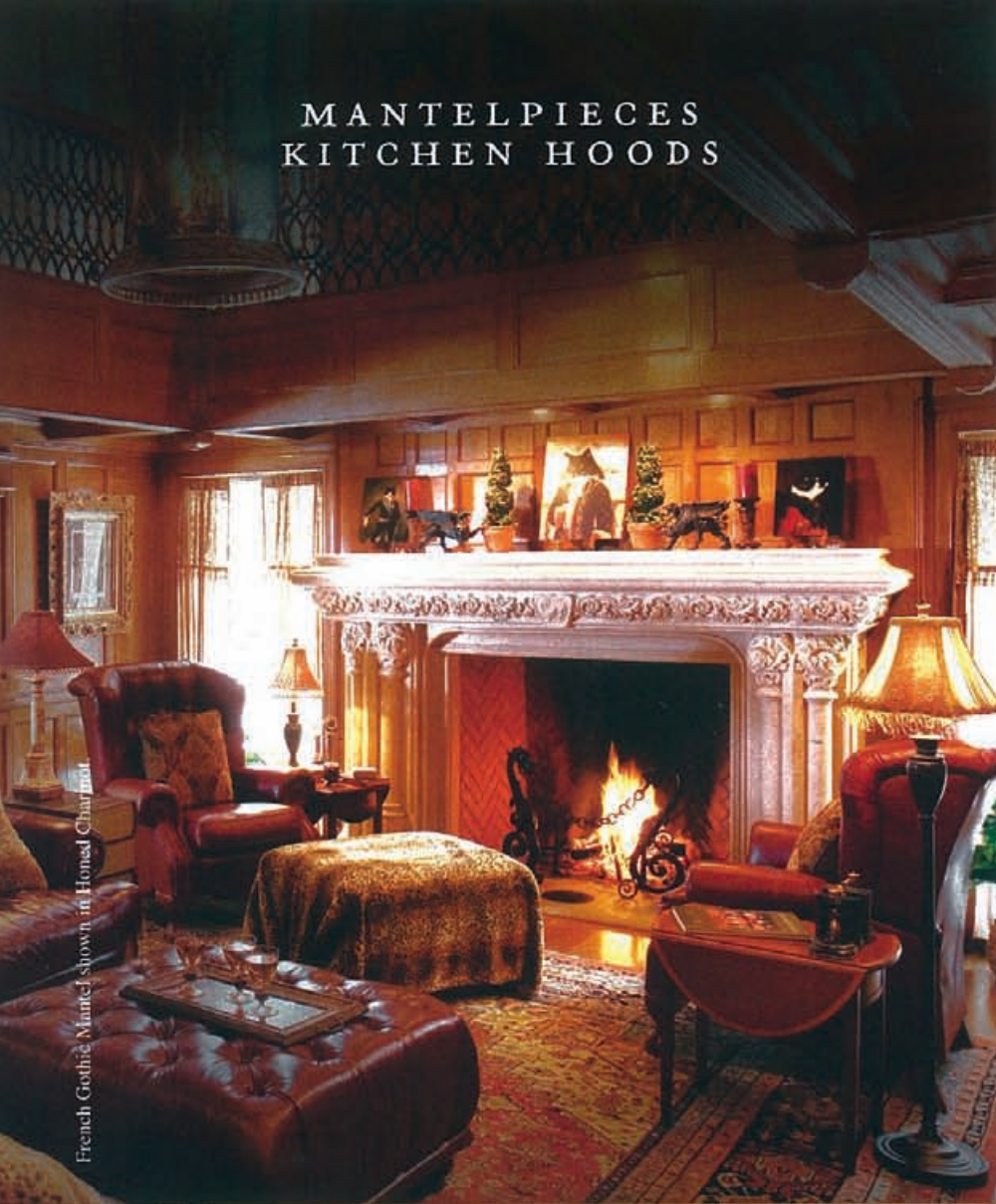
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Hemelhuijs café.

linens in beautiful, understated shades. I like the gorgeous tablecloths in driftwood hues and the moody gray mohair blankets. Shop 001, Cape Quarter, De Waterkant, 011-27-21/421-6482.

- Just one key piece from *Africa Nova* can really make a room pop. They carry colorful Ardmore pottery and fabulous pieces by Nic Bladen, who dips indigenous plants in precious metals to create incredible jewelry and *objets*. 72 Waterkant St., De Waterkant, 011-27-21/425-5123.

- Located in a lofty, airy, and atmospheric space in a historic building, the *Bronze Age* foundry casts work by some of South Africa's most accomplished sculptors. It is also a gallery, showcasing work by artists who sculpt in other mediums, such as Friday Jibu, who carves smooth, amazingly lifelike skulls of baboons, giraffes, and dolphins in jacaranda wood. 160 Albert Rd., Woodstock, 011-27-21/447-3914.

- *Tribal Trends* sells exotic woven-leather-and-silver jewelry by Dawn Smorenburg and artificial bone cutlery by Diana Carmichael, whose pieces are like functional works of art. 72-74 Long St., City Center, 011-27-21/423-8008.

- Though he lacks a storefront, *Felix Chikanya* creates marvelous lion and rhinoceros busts from straw; they are the most beautiful kind of animal trophy. 011-27-84/880-6745.

ATTRACTIONS

- Art doyenne *Rose Korber* keeps a lovely salon in Camps Bay where she

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