



RISE OF THE PRIVATE PLAYGROUND

Le Jardin private villa boasts a French carousel, a Victorian glasshouse, the Blue Room (with a trolley of gins) and an art-deco pool. Picture: Supplied

Exclusive-use properties are trending as people seek 'Covid-bubble holidays'. Emma Jordan tried out one near Stellenbosch

According to the Business Council of SA, an average R748m in daily tourism revenue has been lost during the Covid pandemic. We all know the reasons: health scares, pleasure bans, border closures. Additionally, as the economy crumbles, cash to splash on rest and respite is no longer so readily available.

Nevertheless, people still hanker after a change of scenery and a connection with family and friends, and those who have the means have been buying personal time in private havens. According to Helen Untiedt of private-villa rental company Perfect Hideaways, such properties have never been more popular with local travellers. Everyone who would be skiing over this time has opted to stay in SA instead.

"We have never been so busy," she says. "Although it is at times a logistical and administrative nightmare, with people deferring stays for travel and health reasons, we have seen that more and more people want to take private villas. They want their own staff. They want to be secluded, but not too isolated, and most importantly they want to feel like they're connecting with what matters most – their family."

SECRET GARDEN

An ideal hideaway for this is Le Jardin in Stellenbosch, a six-bedroom retreat unlike anything else in SA. There's an element that is entirely "granny's house" – the soft blue walls of the studies, the rambling gardens and the gamboling great Dane, Chase. But there are also completely indulgent elements, including a bar with walls of Nappa leather and an authentic Parisian carousel in the garden.

"Le Jardin is really about providing an escape for the whole family," says Ilynea Le Roux, the villa host.

Built in 1934 by a student of Sir Herbert Baker, its nod to the Cape Dutch style – with fronted gables and deep stoeps – sets the tone for an old-world, elegant hideaway.

Lovingly restored over decades, the villa was originally used as a family home by the



Picture: Colin Blatcher



Picture: Colin Blatcher



Picture: Supplied

current owners, who have a portfolio of rentals with their company Wonderland Escapes. While there are lavish touches, the love that has gone into it over time is tangible. Family books spill out of antique cases, there's a gigantic teddy bear in one of the salons and in the entrance hall the hatstand brims with easy-to-grab floppy and straw headgear.

All six bedrooms are en-suite – two with freestanding copper tubs, and the main suite with a gigantic marble bath from India. Filled with the salts thoughtfully placed at the side, it's the perfect way to unwind after an easy day swimming in the art-deco pool or sipping gins in the adjoining summer room.

The walls in the main bedroom have been hand-painted in a Rousseau-style jungle scene, while the entrance hall is covered in de Gournay "Amazonia" wallpaper. Each of the other bedrooms has a floral or botanical theme dictated by its

wall coverings.

Outside, acres of ground ensure kids and adults have dozens of nooks and crannies in which to hide and seek, read or retreat.

"The last family we had here, we didn't see the kids for five days," says Le Roux. "They were either on the zipline, in the pool or boating on the lake."

Yes, there is a lake, complete with eco-pool, jungle slide and zipline. There's also a steam room, pizza deck and outdoor jacuzzi.

Privacy, of course, is key. As Untiedt says, clients are looking to limit exposure and don't want to engage with myriad staff. The villa therefore runs with a very small team – a housekeeper, host and caretaker. Guests who wish to be welcome to bring their au pairs and cooks.

"We can be as hands-on or as invisible as directed by guests," says Le Roux. "We can organise pizza evenings, movie nights, local wine tasting ... whatever our guests require,

3 MORE EXCLUSIVE RETREATS

WITKLIPFONTEIN ECO LODGE: One of the original farms of The Vrededorf Dome, a Unesco World Heritage site about 90 minutes from Joburg, this lodge offers self-catering on a 215ha game farm. The two en-suite family bedrooms can accommodate up to eight guests. From R9,300 per night for six people (30% discount on all stays until the end of February). witklipfontein.co.za.

CARACAL MOUNTAIN VILLA: Newly opened at Cabine du Cap, this is a four-bedroom cabin in the hills outside Montagu, Western Cape. Just over two-and-a-half hours from Cape Town, it is fully off-grid with reverse-osmosis purified water, solar and gas power. It's fully serviced, and the manager's cottage is 100m down the road, ensuring supported privacy. Sleeps up to 12. From R6,500 per night for two, including breakfast. cabineducap.com/caracal.

ROCKWOOD FARMHOUSE: On the border of the Karkloof Nature Reserve in Kwazulu-Natal, this four-bedroomed farmhouse (sleeps up to eight) has a deep stoep overlooking a tranquil dam. For the kids, there is a jungle gym and trampoline, plus swimming and tubing on the lake. From R4,110 per night. perfecthideaways.co.za.

but we can also slip into the background, providing support for whomever they bring.

"So many people need a reset right now and what we've seen is family groups – either immediate or inter-generational, coming for short and sometimes extended stays. We're lucky enough to not be so remote that home-schooling or home-working is not impossible, while still offering guests a playful, safe sanctuary."

Though divinely comfortable and totally decadent, Le Jardin is foremost a home – one full of treasures and experiences; the perfect backdrop against which to make lasting memories and meaningful connections, especially in this extraordinary time.

● Exclusive use of the estate (six en-suite rooms for up to 15 guests) is R27,750 per night. Certain areas can also be booked separately. See lejardin.co.za.

Jordan was a guest of Wonderland Escapes.

© Emma Jordan