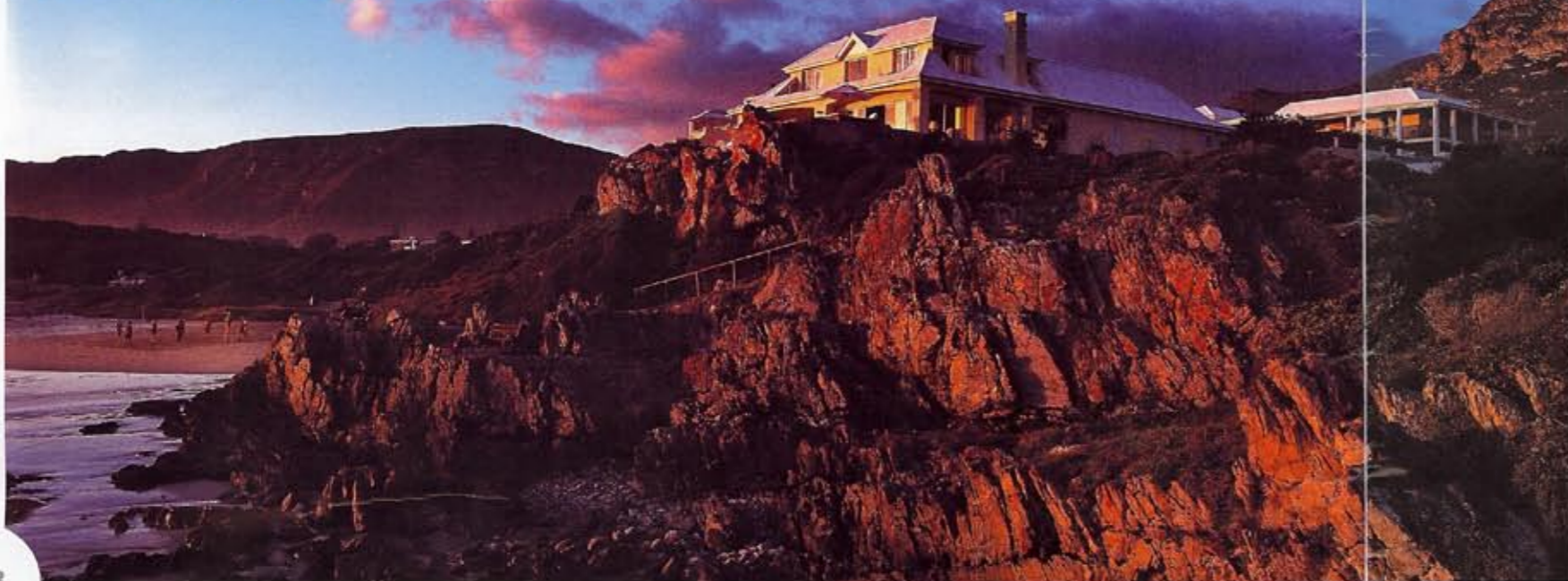


BIRKENHEAD HOUSE

Hermanus, South Africa



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If one were to imagine the dream beach house, with fantasy budget to match, it's unlikely South Africa would be the first location to leap to mind. But beyond its safari parks and sprawling cities, the so-called rainbow nation offers ruggedly beautiful coastlines with mountains all but plunging into the sea, marine attractions aplenty and, on the southern Cape Coast, a stunning inventory of cliff-top mansions. The most idle of visitors could go armchair whale-watching and there's no better place for such laziness than Birkenhead House at Hermanus, 127km southeast of Cape Town.

Hermanus is a sleepy hollow by the sea with pretty white-painted houses, cute galleries and homewares stores, and the sort of transplanted Cabot Cove vibe that suggests Jessica Fletcher of *Murder, She Wrote* might pop into view and solve the case of the missing snorkel. It's understandably popular as a weekend bolthole for Cape Town's moneyed set; for international visitors, Hermanus is agreeably close to winelands and the tiny port of Gansbaai, known as the Big Two Town for its tourism based on diving with great white sharks and cruises to spot southern right whales. But Birkenhead House effortlessly presents whales on its watery doorstep without any distasteful seasickness. Such is its opera balcony-box position, high above surf-pounded rocks, that the effect on Birkenhead House's front terrace is of being on the prow of a ship. Southern right whales, which migrate to calve in the waters of the southern Cape, can be spotted from June to December; Bryde's whales are in the vicinity year-round, as are bottlenose dolphins and Cape fur seals. Hermanus even boasts an official Whale Crier who blows a horn when whales are spotted along the central sea route.

The boutique hotel is named after the royal navy ship HMS Birkenhead, which sank when it struck treacherous rocks off Hermanus's well-named Danger Point in 1852. One hundred years later, a hotel opened on the present Birkenhead House site and became the toast of the coast with its rolling lawns, big-band dance nights and wide, salty vistas. That property was demolished in 1989 and Birkenhead House owners Phil and Liz Biden bought the land and built a holiday house, developing it as a hotel over a trio of terraces in 2007.

There is a mix of rooms with individual decor and various configurations in the three connected "houses" that spill towards the sea; the cheapest are in the back house, with mountain or limited sea views and one room (number five in the middle house) has its own plunge pool. The pick, however, is number one in the front house, which comes with unobstructed 180-degree sea views and the thrum of waves to lull you to sleep.

There are three pools (one perched on the cliff), white plantation shutters and a palette of soft shell tones and pale blues throughout Birkenhead House. Liz Biden has overseen

the eclectic decor, with what one could call the occasional "brave" choice, such as a sideboard encrusted with shells, white-feathered lampshades and Louis XV flocked chairs and chaises longues beside the clawfoot baths. Works of South African artists take pride of position, there are curved wooden Indian pieces, gilded mirrors and madly ornate chandeliers, and the effect is of well-cushioned country-house meets the beach.

Dining Guests are seated at tables for two in the sea-facing dining room or on the terrace in warm weather. Breakfasts are decadently robust and, for dinner, there are entrees such as baby beetroot with local chevin goat's cheese and yellow pepper sauce, and mains of the ilk of slow-braised springbok shank on herb mash. If, like me, you are not inclined to eat members of the Bambi family, request local line-caught fish such as succulent red steenbras.

Hot tip If self-driving from Cape Town, take the alternative coastal route via Betty's Bay and stop at the Stony Point Nature Reserve to visit an enclave of African penguins happily ensconced on a protected peninsula.

Stepping out In summer, bathing is fun at Voelklip Beach (which can be seen from the hotel terrace) with a picnic hamper and towels from the hotel. Or, it's a 10-minute stroll to Grotto Beach, the largest and longest in Hermanus. Easy walking paths thread the township's cliff tops; the trails are fringed with fynbos vegetation and circled by seabirds (also look for tortoises and duiker, one of the smallest species of deer). Nearby is Fernkloof Nature Reserve, a wonderful domain of more than 1100 plant species.

Everyone's talking about The sense of style and the attention to small details, from rose petals scattered on the bed for new arrivals and the cellophane bags of jelly babies with turn-down service brought to the bowls of fresh fruit in guestrooms, monogrammed linen and full-sized Molton Brown toiletries.

Essentials Birkenhead House is a member of the Bidens' Royal Portfolio, which includes Elton John's safari lodge of choice for his annual hols, Royal Malewane in the Greater Kruger national park. All meals, snacks (each room has a stocked mini-bar), soft drinks, non-imported alcoholic beverages and (excellent) house wines are included in the tariff. There's no charge for laundry or local transfers (beaches, shopping and attractions in Hermanus). Extra are spa treatments (massages, facials, scrubs or a divine enzymatic sea mud body pack) and transfers to or from Cape Town. Low-season rooms from Rand 4,000 (\$683) per double room per night. More details: +27 28 314 8000; birkenheadhouse.com or theroyalportfolio.com.

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Go whale-watching without leaving your armchair in this country home meets beach-house hotel. There are plenty of scenic walks to be had along the spectacular cliffs and a choice of three pools to lounge or swim in. Bedrooms vary in style and decor, but the attention to detail is unwavering.