

Set in a lush park in the Stellenbosch winelands, this luxury family retreat promises adventure at every turn

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It is said that some of the most evocative memories of our lives are spawned in the gardens of our childhood. It was this that prompted Sue and Bernard Fontannaz to buy Le Grand Jardin in the Stellenbosch winelands more than 20 years ago, when their son Arnaud was just a few months old. "For both of us, our best memories growing up were wrapped up in the freedom of big, rambling outdoor spaces," explains Sue, who hails from a small farming community in the Eastern Cape, while Swiss-born Bernard comes from a winemaking family in Valais. Of course, as a winemaker, it made sense for Bernard to buy here not long after launching Origin Wine, a one-stop specialist supplier of South African wines to offshore markets. In time, he would come to buy Le Grand Domaine winery up the road too. And yet, the passing of time has done little to dim their excitement at finding giant deodar cedar trees, ancient oaks, a magnolia tree with blooms the colour of clotted cream, hundreds of rose specimens, countless fruit and nut trees, and an overgrown pathway leading to a dam at the bottom of the garden.

Located in the backcountry of Stellenbosch behind the fantastically named Papegaaiberg (Parrot Mountain), Devon Valley is lush and scenic and yet not a place you're likely to pass through en route elsewhere, a singular fate that keeps its off-the-beaten-track status intact. When Sue and Bernard bought the property, the Cape-Dutch-style manor house — designed by a student of Sir Herbert Baker in 1934 with views out across the valley — was in need of love and modernisation. And so, their immediate task was to restore the house and reinstate its traditional H-shaped structure. Spurred on by the potential of the house and garden, it wasn't long before they found themselves adding a wine cellar and a summer room, followed by the pool pavilion, an outdoor conservatory, and even an eco-pool set in the dam.



Our idea of creating a magical place filled with wonder and a sense of adventure took on a life of its own from there on," says Sue of their adding an original 1940s fairground carousel, a showman's caravan, a rickshaw, a giant tepee, a tree house, a trampoline, and an outdoor sauna and jacuzzi. Massive outdoor mud chandeliers and a themed Alice in Wonderland treasure hunt, as well as a pirates' lookout on the pizza deck, a zip line over the water, a water slide into the dam, and a rope bridge, conspire to create a place of magical exploration for adults and children alike. Future plans include a floral chapel to be built near the dam in the same style as the glass house. "The idea is to have both sides open but with the entire structure covered in wisteria, so that it feels as though you're getting married in the flowers," chuckles Sue.

But then, Sue and Bernard are nothing if not adventurous — in many ways the property is an extension of their personalities. "I have a much-loved T-shirt imprinted with the words 'Stay young, stay foolish' that has become my mantra," says Sue. "I don't think being childlike is foolish at all but rather a way in which to stay alive and in love with life." This from someone who has climbed Mount Kilimanjaro, rowed across Scotland's Loch Ness, and sailed from Rio to Cape Town. Bernard has done the Patrouille des Glaciers, a legendary ski event organised by the Swiss Army that is considered the toughest of its kind in the world. Next year, the couple plan to drive from Cairo to Cape Town in a Land Rover.

When the family emigrated to the UK 10 years ago, their decision to keep the house as a base meant they could share its wonders with other families looking for a villa experience in the winelands. And it's only one of several experiences they offer through their hospitality company Wonderland Escapes. In addition to Le Grand Domaine and Bungalow 52 (a beach house on the famous Clifton 4th Beach), they've added Finca La Anita in the Mendoza region of Argentina and Refuge du Lac de Derborence, a hiking shelter in Switzerland, to their property portfolio. Their latest addition, Lince Lodge in the UK, is set in Blenheim Palace Park in the Cotswolds.

But Le Grand Jardin remains their flagship property and the place to which they return as often as possible. "For us it's still very much our home and a reminder of some of our happiest times as a family," says Sue.

Here, all six en-suite bedrooms (three in the main house and three in the pool pavilion) embrace their themes in a riot of colour and pattern. In the main bedroom, jungle