



HISTORY & PHILOSOPHY OF THE ALPHEN

Buried secrets, spies, pistol duels, cross-dressers and fiddlers are just a few elements that make for the fascinating, colourful stories in the history of The Alphen.

THE ESTATE

Set at the foot of Wynberg Hill in Constantia, the tale of The Alphen is a constantly evolving one that started in the late 17th century when the property was first granted as an 11-acre free-burgher loan farm. Declared a National Monument in 1973, The Alphen was originally part of the Groot Constantia Estate and apportioned off after the death of its owner, Simon Van Der Stel. Over the centuries it has been converted from a ramshackle farm to a manicured estate with every feature aligned in a succession of botanical vistas. In 1753 Abraham Leeveer - known as the 'Monsieur from Amsterdam' - built the present homestead and a century and many proprietors later, the Alphen estate became the property of the Cloete family, owners for the past 150 years. Today each of the outbuildings dates from a different era, with the slave quarters being the oldest and the Mill House the latest addition. The modern estate comprises of residential, hotel and commercial components.

THE PEOPLE

Passed down to a succession of Hendrik Cloetes, the first considered himself a Renaissance man who employed a fiddler to wake him up every morning, the second established the Constantia wines which found their ways into the cellars of kings of France and England and the third adopted the British way of life, changing his name to Henry. Ironically, he chose a feisty Afrikaner girl, Deliana Van Warmelow, as his bride. She became a spy for the Boers during the Anglo-Boer War and would eavesdrop while Henry entertained British officers such as Lords Kitchener and Roberts. Secret, uncensored documents were smuggled between The Alphen and the Transvaal Boers in false suitcase bottoms and homemade dolls. A hollow oak on the estate served as a post box and when the Boers were defeated, Deliana buried a tin containing all the incriminating letters. This still lies undiscovered on the grounds of The Alphen.

An important player in Cape Hospitality since the 18th century, The Alphen has hosted parties and entertained guests for the past 300 years and though the times and the property have changed considerably, the tradition of fine cuisine, wine and hospitality remains. Always attracting men and women of influence, wealth and celebrity, The Alphen has played host to Mark Twain, Captain Cook, Cecil John Rhodes, Lord Charles Somerset, George Bernard Shaw, Jan Smuts, Sir Thomas Cullinan, royalty and international ambassadors.

The most enigmatic guest, however, must have been Doctor James Barry who was a regular visitor and often accompanied Lord Somerset to partake in the Constantia Hunt, which started at the Alphen. Doctor Barry was the first to perform a Caesarian section in South Africa and partook in an armed duel against good friend Josias Cloete, for the affections of the daughter of the house. Neither one was injured as it probably was a ruse to end rumours about a romantic involvement between Barry and Somerset. On Barry's death at age 71, it was discovered that she was a woman who spent her entire adult life masquerading as a man!

THE DISCOVERIES

A valuable archeological site, 19th century refined earthenware, oriental porcelain and glass, a dense bone lens, a cannonball and cutlass handle – probably dumped there by a soldier from the 1795 Battle of Muizenberg – have been discovered. The location of the 17th and 18th century middens lay untouched, most likely covered by later buildings.

The Alphen is also home to the oldest surviving mill (circa 1772) on the Cape Peninsula. An 18th century pond existed where the sunken garden is today, while the Diepriver flowing entirely on Alphen ground.

THE WINE

In true Cape Dutch culture, Alphen was a working farm that produced export fruit. It was the first estate in South Africa to grow grapes, make and bottle wine and sell it to the public. Together with two other farms – Groot Constantia and High Constantia – it became the biggest wine-producer in the area. Well-known for its sweet dessert wines, some British soldiers broke into Alphen's cellar and sampled the contents during their advancement on Wynberg in 1795. In 1886 every vine at Alphen was destroyed after the ravaging disease, phylloxera, was discovered in Constantia. In later years Louis Cloete studied viticulture in France and revitalised the family's interest in the wine trade, which resulted in a successful business venture.

THE HOTEL

When Sandy Bairnsfather-Cloete inherited the land in 1962 he decided to convert The Alphen into a hotel with 29 rooms and 47 beds. This would allow for visitors from all over the world to again experience this tradition of exceptional hospitality.

Now, 50 years later, a new era has arrived with the revamping of the Hotel to a 5-star chic, contemporary, classy and vibrant venue with a Café & Bakery, Restaurant, Spa, Conference & Business Centre and Bars.

Through the centuries The Alphen has witnessed and withstood many challenges – changing ownership and structures, wars, torrential rains and possible closure. Yet the renaissance of The Alphen continues under the watchful guard of its symbol, the Salamander – a mythical beast whom endures fire without itself being burnt...