



Elsa Young / Perfect Hideaways

PLACES TO STAY

The South African estate where Rudyard Kipling stayed

The sprawling Prynnsberg Estate can now be taken over as your own

BY JANE BROUGHTON

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When **Johannesburg** couple Rick and Sue Melvill stumbled across Prynnsberg Estate, their ‘folly in the veld’, they had spent the best part of a year scouring the countryside for a weekend retreat that could double as a home for Rick’s polo ponies. South Africa’s rural heartland, the Free State, is characterised by flat-topped sandstone formations, rolling grasslands and cornfields that change colour with the light and seasons. It attracts artists and those who see beauty in the emptiness of the landscape.

Here, there is space to breathe.



Prynnsberg Estate Elsa Young / Perfect Hideaways

Shrouded in mystery for decades, the extensive estate and 22-room manor house were in a sad state when the Melvills bought it in 2002. ‘There was nothing here – not even a bath plug,’ recalls Rick. Bees had colonised the bedrooms (the floors were sticky with honey) and the roof leaked like a sieve during summer downpours. But the architectural detail, craftsmanship and sandstone masonry were unlike anything else he’d ever seen in [South Africa](#), and almost all of it was intact: pressed-leather panelling, gilded cornices, whimsical windows, ornately tiled fireplaces and oak parquet. The original teak front door, inset with Victorian stained-glass windows decorated with flamingos and berries, had also stood the test of time. Rick and Sue were amazed they managed to inherit an Egyptian-themed ballroom with a steel, barrel-vaulted ceiling (fantastic acoustics) and proper sprung floor for dancing in the middle of the Free State. All the woodwork, including lead-paned windows and a glassed-in staircase, has since been painstakingly repaired over time by masterly carpenter-in-residence Laurence McGillivray.



Beds on the upstairs balcony of Prynnsberg Estate Elsa Young / Perfect Hideaways

In the late 19th century, Prynnsberg was the realisation of a dream for one Charles Newberry. A carpenter by trade, he had made his money in the Kimberley diamond fields. He invested judiciously in land and amassed a fortune by the age of 35. Newberry fell in love with Elizabeth Mary Daniel, daughter of a Wesleyan missionary. Equally enamoured of the foothills of the Maloti Mountains, he bought the rambling property from his wife's grandfather, William Pryn.

When the owners bought the manor house there was nothing there, not even a bath plug. Bees colonised the rooms, floors sticky with honey

The magnificent stately mansion was modelled along the lines of the great Elizabethan country houses of **Britain**. Featuring decorative stonework, shaped and crow-stepped gables and intricate lattice-work, it's an immaculate surviving example of the Art Nouveau and Arts & Crafts movement in South Africa. Beyond its elegantly walnut-panelled and wallpapered interiors, the homestead is made up of two churches, a vicarage, gamekeeper's lodge, stable block, workshops, sandstone swimming pool and an open-air amphitheatre now used for film screenings (the screen is, in fact, a boulder cleaved by a bolt of lightning).

The core of the estate was built in 1881 and finished in 1903 with a second church for the farm labourers, St Saviour's, which has an Oregon pine scissor-beam roof and stone carvings. These days, raucous Saturday-night soirees are sometimes followed by a gathering of guests seated in the oak pews for an informal thanksgiving ceremony of readings, poems and the odd prayer. Once every month it is still used for traditional services by families in the local community.



Prynnsberg Estate Elsa Young / Perfect Hideaways

Newberry shipped in all the furnishings and fittings from the **London** firm James Shoolbred & Company of Tottenham Court Road, which was known for good-quality work in the 'Old English', 'Anglo-Japanese' and 'Moorish' styles. The inventory included hundred of square metres of parquet flooring, Persian carpets, ivory billiards balls, silk wallpapers, a grand piano, monogrammed cutlery, crystal chandeliers, Royal Doulton loos and an Aga for the kitchen. A team of English craftsmen were sent over to install and complete the decorations. The final detailed account from James Shoolbred & Company remains in the Prynnsberg archive.

Sadly, along with the sale of most of the farming land, the house contents were sold off in a high-profile auction in 1996 that drew a record crowd of more than 8,000

interested collectors, keen historians, furniture dealers and the purely inquisitive. At the time, a London representative of Sotheby's described the pieces as one of the finest collections of 19th-century Art Nouveau and late Victoriana to be found under one roof in South Africa. Hours before the auction began, a surviving relative had the foresight to remove the tags from all the original fireplaces, thus saving them from being sold. A remarkable feature of the old ballroom (now the billiards room) is the original painted frieze of Nilelilies and the large lunette of the Temple of Philae, attributed to Charles and Elizabeth's daughter, the artist Winifred Newberry.

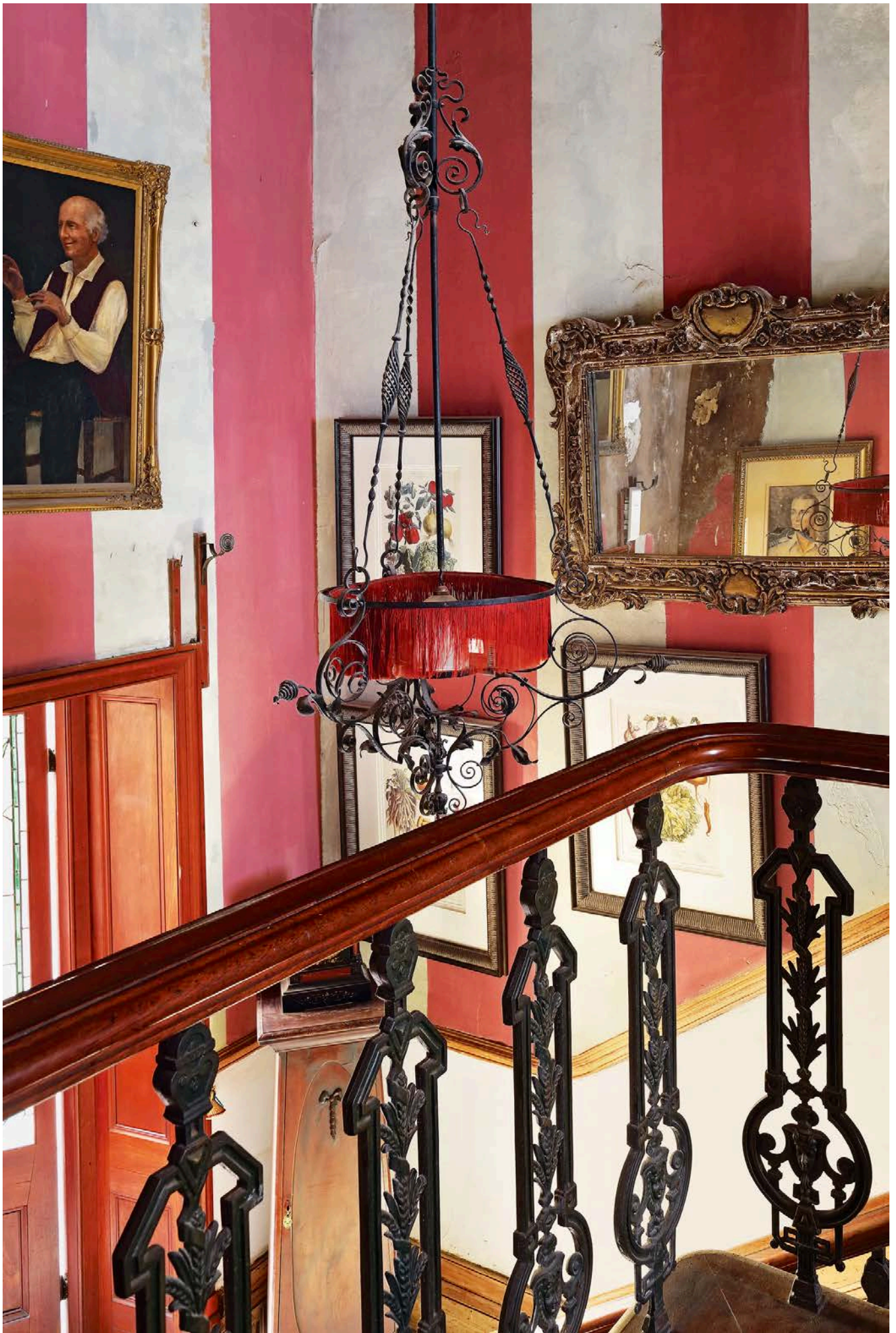


Prynnsberg enjoyed a golden era throughout the early 1900s, when it hosted grand parties and visitors including near neighbour the Duke of Westminster, the Duke of Connaught, Lord Milner and Rudyard Kipling. Kipling, who stayed one **Christmas**, allegedly painted the Noah's Ark frieze still visible in the nursery. It was also the headquarters of General Nickerson during the Anglo-Boer war of 1899 to 1902. While many of the surrounding farms were torched during the conflict, Prynnsberg remained unscathed.

The last permanent resident, before the Melvills began spending weekends here, was the reclusive Trevor Newberry, the grandson of Charles's eldest son. When Rick and Sue commenced their ambitious renovation more than five years ago, the first area they tackled was the formal garden of dressed and cut sandstone paths, walkways, terraces, staircases and ponds. Hundreds of empty **Champagne** bottles were unearthed below Trevor's bedroom window, evidently tossed out over the years.

While renovating, hundreds of empty Champagne bottles were unearthed below the bedroom window, evidently tossed out over the years

The house now sleeps 16 in eight bedrooms, with space for another six guests on the upstairs covered veranda, where a row of single beds swathed in mosquito nets conjures images of midnight feasts and hushed giggles in school dormitories. Needless to say, these are often the first to be snapped up by house guests – there's no better place to experience the drama of a Free State thunderstorm. The most ambitious aspect of the renovation was the addition of the eight en-suite **bathrooms**, six of them with fireplaces. Behind the kitchen, a Victorian-style bathhouse with four baths in a row was also added for good measure.



Staircase at Prynnsberg Estate Elsa Young / Perfect Hideaways

Activities on the 1,200-hectare estate include horse riding, bicycle polo, clay-pigeon shooting and hot-air ballooning. There are well-marked routes for trail running and mountain biking, and the polo field is easily adapted for village cricket games. The Golden Gate Highlands National Park is about 100km away, and Lesotho's rugged four-wheel-drive trails are 8km across the border.

Not far from the manor house, an *Out of Africa*-style tented safari camp swells the number of beds on the estate for larger gatherings. It can also be taken independently of the house. Set beneath a spectacular rocky overhang, decorated with the faded remains of Bushman art, the canvas rooms are filled with campaign furniture from Rick and Sue's company, Melvill & Moon, and signature Roorkhee chairs. A traditional donkey boiler heats water for showers in 19th-century bathing huts that have uninterrupted valley views. Prynnsberg is a place for parties. The hedonistic spirit of its owners past and present is perhaps best summed up in the hand-painted frieze in the old ballroom, which reads, 'Away dull care: today we will be merry.'

Prynnsberg is available to rent via perfecthideaways.co.za. The manor sleeps up to 22; the camp sleeps up to 28. Price on request.

Scroll down for a gallery of images of Prynnsberg Estate, South Africa.

For more features on [Cape Town](#), click here.



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The kitchen Aga at Prynnsberg Estate



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Billiards room at Prynnsberg Estate



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The tack room at Prynnsberg Estate



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The cliffside bathhouse at Prynnsberg Estate



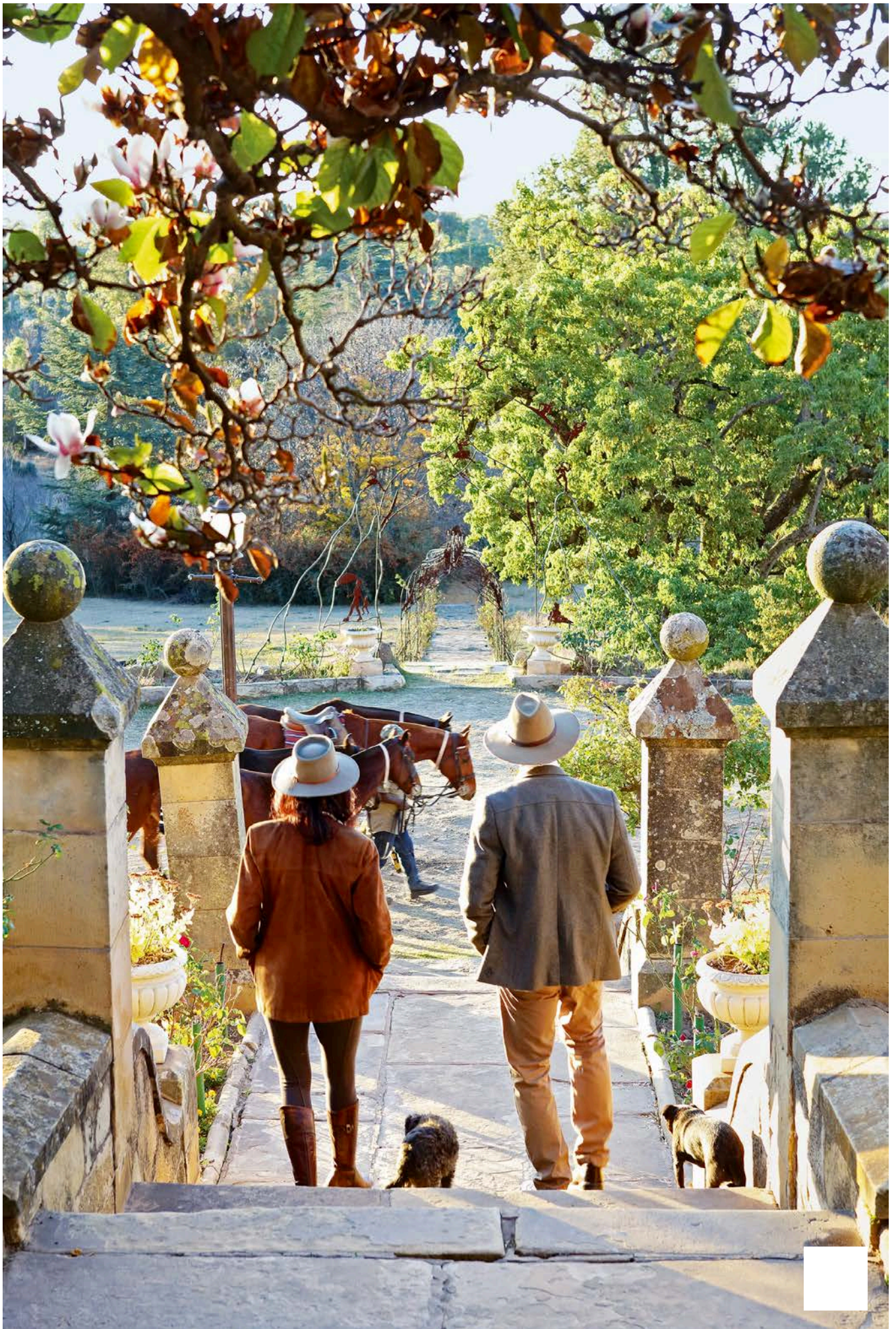
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The dining room at Prynnsberg Estate



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Polo ponies at Prynnsberg Estate



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Owners Rick and Sue Melvill at the Prynnsberg Estate



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The dining room at Prynnsberg Estate

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