



Tea Among the Roses: Afternoon Tea at Cape Town's Mount Nelson

There is a particular hush that settles over the Mount Nelson Hotel in the late afternoon — the sort that suggests the gardens have paused to inhale, the roses holding their breath politely, and even Table Mountain itself leaning in to listen. On Orange Street, beneath the mountain's vast, unblinking silhouette, the pink "Nellie" stands gracious and unhurried, her windows glowing like a row of friendly lanterns. Step through the grand entrance, and you slip into a cooler, more genteel dimension: marble floors, ceilings loftier than most ambitions, palm ferns arranged with botanical confidence, and somewhere in the distance, a piano warming up with the kind of soft musical murmur that implies very good things are about to happen.

Afternoon tea here is not so much a ritual as a performance — a kind of edible pageant rooted in tradition but illuminated by the Cape's unfailingly generous sunlight. The air smells faintly of roses scrambling up trellises, jasmine drifting along hedges, and scones departing the oven at exactly the right moment. China clinks softly, white linen whispers, and conversation hums at that perfect, civilised volume that suggests no one is rushing anywhere, nor would they dream of it.

Heritage in Pink: A House with Stories

The Mount Nelson opened in March 1899 with the easy confidence of an establishment that intended to compete with London's finest hotels — and perhaps win. Standing on land once owned by the Dutch Baron van Oudtshoorn, it quickly became entwined with the city's cultural bloodstream. During the Anglo-Boer War, British commanders marched through its corridors, using the hotel as a strategic base and very likely improving its gossip quotient significantly.

In 1918, in a moment of postwar optimism, the hotel was painted its now-iconic soft pink — a cheerful colour that has since become a sort of architectural signature and earned it the affectionate nickname "Pink Lady."

Look closely in the Garden Room or the Lord Nelson Room, and you'll spot something rather unexpected: wooden chairs that once lounged aboard Union-Castle Line ships. They have swapped ocean spray for afternoon tea, but they still carry a quiet maritime dignity.

Strolling the corridors today is like drifting through gently layered history — the echoes of statesmen, writers, royalty, and wide-eyed travellers still resonate softly in the carpets.

The Setting: Solar Light, Greenery & Quiet Luxuries

By 3 p.m., the Lounge and verandas glow in gentle, buttery light. Inside, creams, duck-egg blues, taupes, and silver-leaf cornices conspire to soften the sun into manageable warmth. Outside, the gardens rustle thoughtfully: palm fronds gesturing lazily, hibiscus blossoms leaning forward to see who has arrived, rose bushes exuding a fragrance so confident it ought to be bottled.

Tables are arranged with polite spacing, each one set with bone china so fine it practically hums, polished silver, and crystal glasses rimmed by a slim gold band. Waiters glide through the room in crisp black and white, moving with

that unflustered choreography achieved only by people who have served tea many, many times and never once spilt a drop.

Somewhere, the pianist offers up a soft trill — perhaps a Chopin nocturne, perhaps a bit of gentle jazz, or simply the exact right notes for a golden hour.

Guests settle in: couples murmuring, a grandmother and granddaughter sharing a secret over tea, a visitor making notes to ensure they remember the way the light slants across the china. The mood is quietly celebratory, a toast to leisure and presence.

Tea Tradition & Ceremony

Afternoon tea is served Wednesday to Sunday, at noon and 3 p.m., and requires booking — naturally. The tea menu reads like a small encyclopaedia curated by Craig Cupido, Mount Nelson's tea sommelier, whose expertise in tannins and terroirs approaches the philosophical. Over 60 loose-leaf teas await: Darjeeling, Earl Grey, Assam, Yunnan, Rooibos, and often a signature blend perfumed with rose petals from the garden just outside.

A glass of L'Ormarins Cap Classique arrives with the Classic Afternoon Tea, adding a pleasant sparkle to the proceedings. Then tea unfolds in well-paced chapters:

Savoury bites: Dainty finger sandwiches of cucumber and mint, smoked salmon, egg salad, miniature quiches, seasonal pastries — the sorts of things that make you instantly more polite. Scones: Warm, fragrant, and immediate evidence that life is good. Both plain and fruited, served with clotted cream, preserves, and occasionally a Cape-inspired flourish like apricot jam or honey. Petit cakes & petits fours: Lemon macarons, chocolate éclairs, opera cakes small enough to be adorable yet substantial enough to be dangerous, cheesecakes, and of course, melktert — because this is South Africa, and melktert is non-negotiable. Pastries & desserts: Fruit tarts, mousse domes, confections so intricately crafted they seem to defy physics.

Teas may be requested again and again; time seems to expand obligingly. Craig Cupido or his staff may offer tea pairing suggestions, delivered with gentle assurance. Nothing is hurried. Everything is savoured.

A Moment Between Worlds

Tea at the Nellie places you perfectly between afternoon and evening, between city bustle and garden stillness. Through the windows, you see the last rays of sun slip across rose bushes; shadows lengthen politely across the lawns. The piano softens. A camellia petal drifts through the air like a tiny, fragrant parachute.

At one table, quiet laughter drifts like birdsong as two women trade stories over their scones. A solitary traveller studies the blank half of a page, as if the light itself might suggest the next word. Jasmine coils through the air, and the pastries blush in the fading sun.

This is not a scene designed for social media — though it would certainly perform well. It is a lived moment: tactile, quiet, generous. When you rise to leave, the roses seem to sigh, and the tea leaves cool in your cup with a faint whispering of thanks.

You carry away something difficult to name — part stillness, part elegance, part reminder that sometimes the world still knows exactly how to be lovely.

A Wonderful Bit of Cape Town Lore

When Winston Churchill first laid eyes on the Mount Nelson, he was just 25 — a war correspondent for the Morning Post, armed with a cream suit, a cigar, and an astonishing amount of confidence. He arrived in October 1899 aboard the Union-Castle Line steamer Dunottar Castle, stepping onto the docks to find the newly opened Mount Nelson gleaming across the road.

For British officers arriving from England, the hotel must have seemed like high colonial fantasy: palm trees, verandas, electric lighting, marble bathrooms — the whole enterprise shimmering with improbable comfort. One early guest described it as “a perfect outpost of empire with a view of paradise.” Churchill checked in and promptly pronounced it “a most excellent and comfortable establishment,” a phrase that has since been repeated with affectionate frequency. The Nellie became his Cape Town base before he ventured toward the frontlines.

Over the decades that followed, Churchill’s presence became part of the hotel’s mythology, joining a glittering roster of guests that includes John Lennon, Nelson Mandela, the Dalai Lama, and Queen Elizabeth II.

There is even a rumour that the bar and cigar terrace once kept a seat informally reserved for Churchill — a nod to the restless young man who stalked its verandas long before he stalked the halls of power.

Today, the Planet Bar still radiates Churchillian charm: leather armchairs, low lamplight, the faint scent of cognac and tobacco — easy to imagine him there, notebook and brandy in hand.

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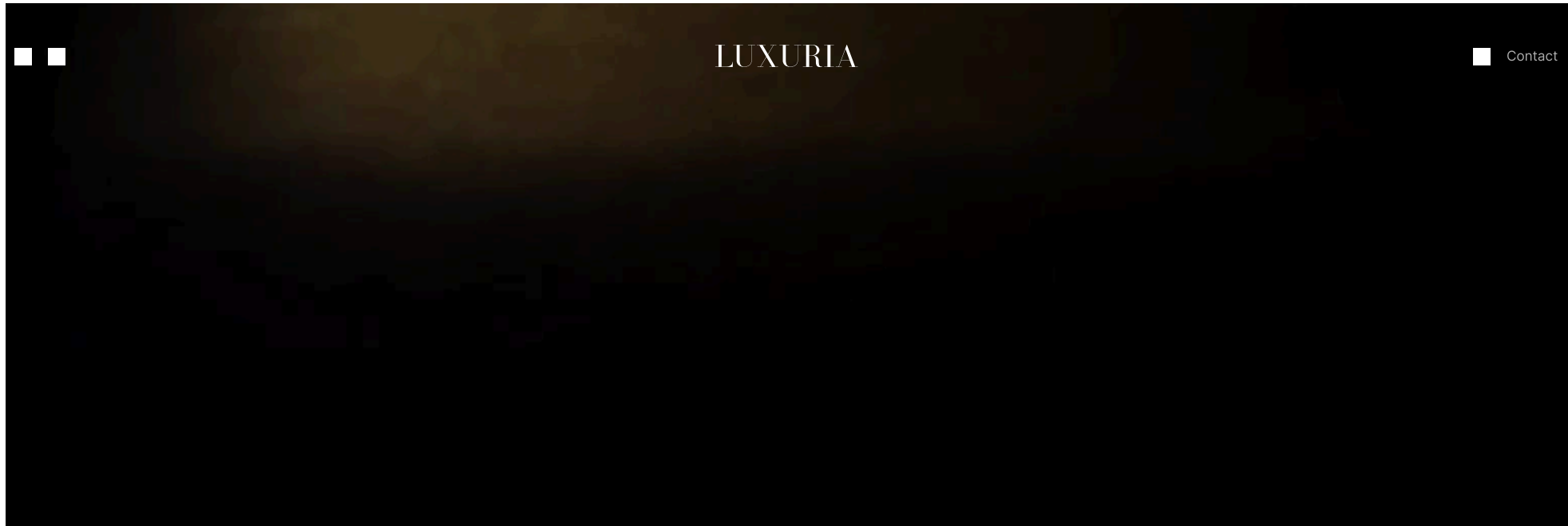
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