



While relaxing with a picnic in La Rochelle's tranquil wooded dell it's easy to imagine being greeted by Sir Stephen on arrival at their magnificent home. Lady Virginia is working with her ladies on their home industries' projects. The scents of the beautiful garden fill the afternoon air while soft melodies drift from the house as musicians warm up their instruments for the evening's entertainment...

A picnic in The Dell is just one activity on offer at the re-opened La Rochelle Country House and Spa. This gracious and unique country house, an oasis of tranquillity and charm on 108 hectares, is one of the best known of the National Trust of Zimbabwe's (NTZ) properties, situated in the lush Imbeza Valley in the eastern border town of Penhalonga near Mutare.

Renowned in the 1950s and '60s for Sir Stephen and Lady Virginia Courtauld's lavish and warm hospitality, La Rochelle has long been recognised as one of the most celebrated botanical gardens in Zimbabwe. Zimbabwean journalist Dusty Miller described La Rochelle as "cross twixt fairy-tale castle and French chateau, surrounded by manicured grounds on the edge of verdant forest-cloaked mountains"; an apt description for a heritage now enjoyed in perpetuity by the nation of Zimbabwe and its visitors.

An icon of the Art Deco movement, La Rochelle evokes images of a time when this generous couple adopted this country and its people and took both to their hearts. Architects were invited to design the most ambitious home ever considered in the country, intended for entertainment on a grand scale.

Construction commenced in 1951

on the French-style tower and house, with Welsh slate roof tiles, intended as a retirement home for Lord and Lady Courtauld. In April 1953 construction was completed, and the Courtauld's collection of furniture, paintings and other art from their home in Eltham Palace in London was placed in La Rochelle, forming the finest private collection in sub-Saharan Africa.

A leading professor of architecture described it as follows:

"La Rochelle is a rare example in Africa of a major early Modern Movement (in architectural terms) private house, and almost unique in Zimbabwe, given the quality of its architectural detailing and of its interior decoration, especially in the Fantasia room and the Peacock cottage."

Grand black tie dinner parties were held every week at La Rochelle. Formal dinners were supplemented with displays of orchids, chamber music, party games or lectures. The interior of the house bears all the signs of a much-loved home, filled with fresh flowers, art deco furniture and highlights of the history of the Courtauld family.

The world-renowned "signature panels" bear the autographs of royalty, politicians, artists, writers, academics, famous actors and other personalities. Signatures etched on the glass panels with a diamond tipped stylus include: "Rab" and Molly Butler (conservative British politician and his wife), Sybil Thorndike (English actress), Julian Amery (Lord Amery of Lustleigh and British politician), Julian Huxley (British scientist), Laurens van der Post (South African author, philosopher and



FACING PAGE: Aerial view of La Rochelle.