

Somewhere Over The Rainbow

Guided motorcycle tours are an unusual but nevertheless charming way to explore Western Cape's Architecture.

On a motorcycle tour along the now infamous Garden Route organised by Karoo Biking, a specialist motorcycle tour and rentals company, there is one thing that every group very quickly realises: there is no such thing as a singular South African architectural style. Well that's not entirely true, if the truth be told.

Architecture in the European manner started in South Africa with the construction of Cape Town by the Dutch in the 17th century and was influenced by the British, who colonised South Africa's Mother City at the turn of the 19th century. Let us not forget the subtle impact the French Huguenots, Germans, Portuguese, Scandinavians and settlers from Indonesia have had, all seeking a place in paradise on Africa's southern-most tip.

The Birth of Cape Dutch Architecture

Starting in Cape Town, this band of early adventurers began settling in the region today referred to as the Western Cape, developing homesteads and farms as they went. Motivated to survive on an agriculturally driven existence farming cattle and produce, homes were needed for the farmers and merchants. With only minimal technology available, these homes were initially very basic with roofs of wild reeds and grasses, frames and support beams created with indigenous timber while walls were constructed using thick river clay or simply created burnt bricks and crushed sea shells to create a basic lime-mortar. Floors were more often than not made from compacted peach stones set with a mixture of cow dung and earth and then left to dry before being polished to a smooth shine or left bare. Needless to say, these humble structures were exceedingly small, approximately six metres wide with a 45-degree roof pitch.

As families and homesteads grew and settlers began to prosper, buildings were extended in the then preferred Northern European longhouse style. It was during this time that an architectural style distinct to the Western Cape emerged. Although these Cape Dutch houses are distinctly reminiscent of townhouses in Amsterdam at the time, with their ornately rounded gables, this architectural style does in fact owe its existence to about 200 French Huguenot settlers who brought contemporary European design ideas with them,





coupled with the conflicting design styles of the Malay slaves. These artisans, imported for their construction prowess, impressively designed many of the structures and built them without so much as a single blueprint or plan. Although every Cape Dutch building has a slightly different, personalised gable, they generally have consistent features, including prominent central placement, date of construction and decorative mouldings. Gables quickly became a status symbol the more ornate they got – representing the financial wealth and social standing of the settler. At the same time, homeowners began to add wings onto both ends of their basic structures resulting in a U-shaped plan. The T-plan evolved almost simultaneously in rural areas. This model had a single wing, with the kitchen at the end, and was attached like a tail to the centre of the basic building. Later, another wing was added at right angles to the T and parallel to the original building, creating the ultimate design in country houses, the H-plan.

During this architectural transformation, materials changed as well. Floors were covered in Robben Island slate, shutters were crafted to protect windows, and stronger wood such as ironwood was used in construction. Later still, outbuildings began to appear. These included a *JONKERSHUIS* (house for the eldest son), stables, a coach-house, slaves' quarters and a wine cellar. A wall typically encircled the whole farmyard.

After the British took over the Cape in 1806, buildings in the British colonial style modified the Western Cape architectural style. From colonial India, British merchants and administrators brought the curved metal ornamental roofs and slender lace-work pillars affectionately referred to 'Brookie Lace' by the locals, that still typify the verandas of cottages in towns and cities throughout the Western Cape today. Ostrich feathers were all the rage in the 1820s clothing fashion world-wide, and were worth ten times their weight in gold. Ostrich farmers quickly amassed fortunes. During this period the ostrich feather industry became a significant factor in the South African economy. After gold, diamonds and wool, it was the country's fourth largest export.

During this time, local farmers updated their Cape Dutch homes by removing gables, replacing thatch with wooden roof tiles, extending verandas and using the finishes popularised by the British. Alternatively, they used their fortunes to create palatial double-fronted homes of dramatic proportions including three and half meter high ceilings, walls a metre thick with stately sash windows, encased in a grand veranda – an outside living area that surrounds the entire home. Many of these Feather Palaces are now tourist destinations and places of hospitality.

For motorcycle tours to the architectural highlights of the Western Cape see: www.karoo-biking.com (The only provider in South Africa endorsed by BMW Motorcycles).