

Extract from
Essence of A Land: South Africa and its World Heritage Sites.
Editor: Max du Preez, Photography: Tim Hauf.
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ISBN-10 0-9720743-8-4
ISBN-13 978-0-9720743-8-4
www.greenvisionfoundation.com

Robben Island

Quest for Freedom

By Amanda Gouws

Seen from the air, it looks like a small kidney bean in the middle of Table Bay. Small it may be, but Robben Island is the most powerful symbol of South Africa's long history of repression and resistance – indeed, of humanity's persisting quest for freedom.

During the last four centuries, the island served as a refreshment station for seafarers, a prison, a colony for the sick and insane and an influential political “university” where the first rulers of a democratic South Africa were trained.

When one sets foot on the island and looks back to the mainland, Table Mountain rises in all its majestic beauty across the water with the city of Cape Town nestled at its foot. For five centuries, seafarers saw these two landmarks first when they arrived at the Cape of Good Hope: the mountain, standing guard over the island.

Autshomato is the name on the side of the ferry taking visitors to and from Robben (Seal) Island. Autshomato was the leader of a small group of Khoikhoi people, the Goringhaicona or Strandlopers (Beachrangers), who lived at the Cape Peninsula at the time the first Europeans arrived. Harry, as the Dutch

settlers called him, asked an English ship to take him and some of his people to the island in 1632. He lived there for a number of years, earning the informal title of “Governor of the Island”. Ironically, he was one of the first aboriginal people to be imprisoned on the island by the Dutch settlers after 1652.

For the 144 years between 1488, when the Portuguese explorer Bartholomeu Dias rounded the Cape, and 1652, when the Dutch established a permanent settlement at the Cape in 1652, the island played an important role for sailors who rounded the Cape, seeking a route to India. Portuguese, English, Spanish and French ships used Robben Island as a source of fresh water, meat and vegetables and as a post box for their letters.

When the indigenous population of the Cape did not want to submit to Dutch rule, the settlers started using the island as a prison. Autshumato and his niece Krotoa, both valuable translators for the Dutch, were among the most famous Khoi prisoners on the island. (Krotoa, called Eve by the Dutch, married a colonial officer. Quite a few Afrikaner families can trace their ancestry back to her.) A number of San or Bushmen who resisted the Dutch were also sent to the island, and many errant East Indian slaves spent time as punishment there. At the beginning of the 1700s political opponents and leaders of resistance to Dutch rule in other colonies were brought to the island. Some were of noble birth and of high rank. For example, Sheikh Pangeran Chakra Deningrat, the King of Madura, spent 12 years imprisoned on the island. Nor were Islamic priests spared.

The karamat (a Muslim shrine) on the island was built over the grave of Hadje Matarim, an Islamic priest who was banished to the Cape in 1743. He and another Islamic priest were sentenced to a life in chains on the island. Hadje Matarim died after ten years but his companion, Tuan Sayed Alawie, a prince from the Ternate Islands, was then released to become the first chief imam of the Cape Muslim community.

Like the Dutch before them, the British colonisers continued to use the island as a prison in the 1800s. In their frontier wars with the indigenous Xhosa people, many leaders were captured and sent to Robben Island. One of the chiefs, Maqoma, whose influence was greatly feared, had to serve a sentence of twenty years on the island. He was allowed to take his wife, Katyi, with him. Maqoma was released in 1869 but recaptured two years later when he attempted to regain his land. He was sent back to Robben Island where he died in 1873.

Other African chiefs who were imprisoned on the island were the Hlubi chief Langalibalele who was convicted of treason, murder and rebellion, and Stockwe Tyhali, a chief from Thembuland. Leaders of the first Koranna war like Piet Rooy, David Diedericks, Jan Kivido and Carel Ruyter were also sent to the island (the Koranna were a Khoisan group who lived near the Gariep River).

The prison on the island was closed at the end of the 1800s when it was changed into a place of exile for lepers and the mentally unstable. The patients lived in inhumane conditions. Many were chained and beaten. Lepers complained that the island was damp and ill suited for ill people – “a place of sorrow, horror and lonely exile”. Resistance against the separation of lepers from the rest of society continued until the 1930s after which they were returned to the mainland. At that time the island was a small town with about 2 000 inhabitants. After the lepers left, all buildings used by the lepers were destroyed and only the light house keepers and a few workers remained.

In 1936 the South African Defence Force took over Robben Island as a strategic base for the defence of Cape Town and turned it into a heavily defended military base. This “occupation” of the island lasted until after the Second World War and from 1950 it was used by the Navy as a training centre.

In 1961 the National Party government started using the island again as a prison for common law prisoners and from 1963 for political activists convicted of acts of resistance to its apartheid policies. For nearly three decades the cream of the leadership of the liberation movements were sent to the island.

During the Rivonia trial of 1963-1964 senior leaders of the African National Congress, Nelson Mandela, Ahmed Kathrada, Govin Mbeki, Walter Sisulu, Elias Motsoaledi, Andrew Mlangeni and Raymond Mhlaba, were found guilty of treason and were sentenced to life imprisonment on Robben Island, then reserved for black male prisoners. (Another trialist, Denis Goldberg, was not sent to Robben Island because he was white).

During these long years of imprisonment the island became a symbol of resistance to an inhumane political system. The prison was also to become the “University of the Island” where prisoners studied for university degrees, also educating others who were illiterate and uneducated. But it was also a “political university” where seasoned and experienced political leaders schooled a few generations of political prisoners in the art of politics of resistance and democracy. It was the dream of a free country that kept the spirits of these men alive.

The most prominent Pan Africanist Congress leader who was detained on the island after the Sharpeville shooting of 1960 was Robert Sobukwe, who was sentenced to three years imprisonment. He was, however, detained for a further six years under the “Sobukwe clause” – a special law to detain prisoners indefinitely after the completion of their sentences. Sobukwe was detained alone in a secluded house on the island with very little human contact apart from the warder who guarded him and occasional visits by his wife.

Leaders of the South West African Peoples Organization (Swapo), fighting to free Namibia from South African rule, were also imprisoned on Robben Island,

Andimba Herman Toivo ja Toivo being the most well-known. He became a cabinet minister in the first Namibian government after liberation in 1990.

For the first few years after 1963, the political prison on Robben Island was, according to the accounts of many prisoners, a nasty place. Assaults by warders, racism, insufficient and inedible food, random punishment for insubordination and solitary confinement were the order of the day. But through a combination by organised resistance and agitation by the prisoners themselves, court actions brought against the authorities and the persistent activism of individuals like the opposition member of the white parliament, Helen Suzman, conditions improved considerably by 1976, when a new generation of political prisoners, the leaders of the youth uprisings that started in June in Soweto, started arriving.

For most visitors to the Island, the highlight is the most famous jail cell in the world, that of Prisoner 46664, Nelson Rolihlahla Mandela. He writes in his autobiography *Long Walk to Freedom*: “My cell was at the end of the corridor. It was tiny – I could walk from one side to the other in three steps. When I lay down, my head touched the one side and my feet the other...”

Even the island did not escape the absurdities of apartheid segregation measures: “Coloured” and Indian prisoners were allowed long pants, but black prisoners only had short pants issued to them. Different races were also given different food. White prisoners were sent to whites-only jails.

The quad between the cells, the space for games and social interaction, stands in stark contrast to the surrounding cells of isolation. It is as though one can hear the voices of men at play –perhaps it was the only time during the day when they experienced human closeness. Several former prisoners have said that what they missed most during their time on the Island were the voices of children.

Hard labor was the fate of most political prisoners and that meant digging limestone with a pick and shovel in the limestone quarry. As Michael Dingake, one of the prisoners remarked, “blisters and calloused hands were the hallmarks of quarry span prisoners”.

The sun shining on the white limestone has a blinding effect, causing the cave in which some of the limestone was mined to look like a gaping black hole. It is not hard to imagine the political prisoners plotting strategies here during their breaks. A fine mist of limestone sand sifts down in the slight breeze to be inhaled. Years of working in this quarry have damaged many a prisoner’s eyes. After Mandela’s release the constant tearing of his eyes had to be relieved through surgery.

After 18 years on Robben Island Mandela was taken to Pollsmoor Prison in Cape Town and later to the minimum security prison of Victor Verster near Paarl. The last prisoners left the island in 1991.

In the post-apartheid democratic dispensation, many of the top positions in government, the civil service, the armed forces, the judiciary and the private sector were filled by “graduates” of the political prison on Robben Island.

In 1996 the government rejected proposals that the Island be used as a theme park or holiday resort and decided that the Island should be run as a museum celebrating the struggle for freedom.

But there is more than just buildings to Robben Island. The 504 hectare island is the breeding ground for 74 different species of birds such as African penguins (some forty thousand of them), Crowned Cormorants, Bank Cormorants, African Black Oystercatchers and Spotted Dikkops. It also houses 23 species of mammals including the Cape Fur Seal, the Cape Dune Molerat, Bontebok, Springbok, Steenbok, Eland and the European Fallow Deer, as well as small

mammals such as rabbits. The island is also home to approximately 60 species of indigenous plants.

Just in case the visitor gets trapped in the recent history of the island, the rusty carcass of an old ship washed up on the shore, one of 22 ships that ran aground here, serves as a reminder that the last forty years were a mere second in the long history of this famous island.

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