

# Cape Point

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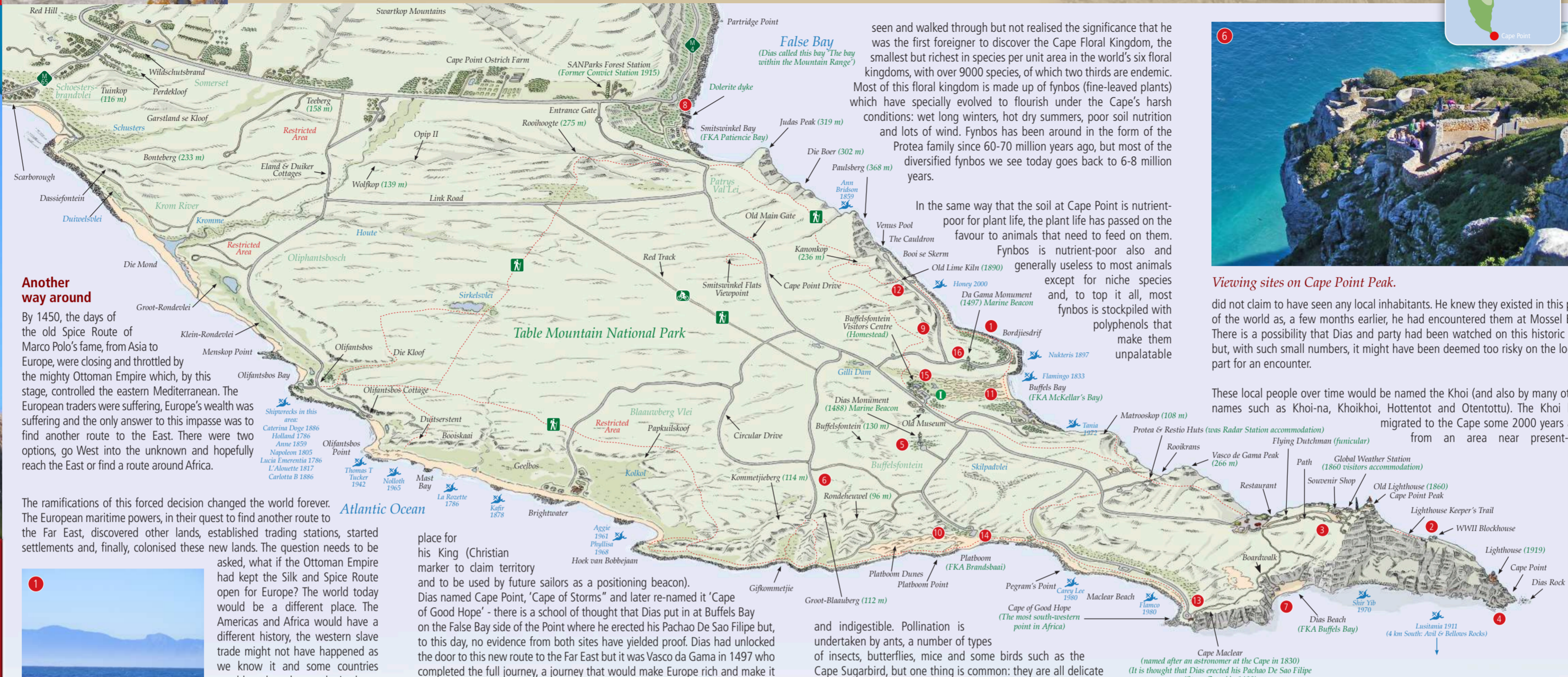
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*'This Cape is a most stately thing and the fairest Cape we saw in the whole circumference of the earth.'*

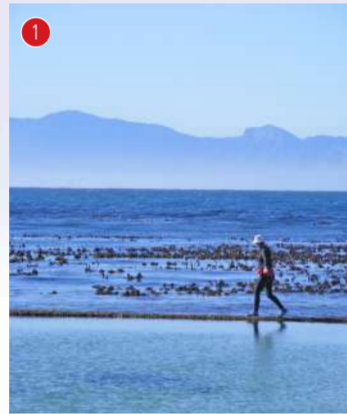
Sir Francis Drake (or the ship's chaplain) upon seeing the Cape Point on his circumnavigation of the world on the Golden Hind (1580)



**Another way around**

By 1450, the days of the old Spice Route of Marco Polo's fame, from Asia to Europe, were closing and throttled by the mighty Ottoman Empire which, by this stage, controlled the eastern Mediterranean. The European traders were suffering, Europe's wealth was suffering and the only answer to this impasse was to find another route to the East. There were two options, go West into the unknown and hopefully reach the East or find a route around Africa.

The ramifications of this forced decision changed the world forever. The European maritime powers, in their quest to find another route to the Far East, discovered other lands, established trading stations, started settlements and, finally, colonised these new lands.



The tranquil Bordjiesdrif picnic spot and tidal pool with False Bay and Kogelberg in the background.

stories about the Phoenicians rounding the tip of Africa over 2000 years ago. The Greek navigator, Eudoxus of Cyzicus, in 130 BC was also, supposedly, a contender who perhaps died on his quest. A planisphere (map) known as the 'Semito', illustrated in 1306, mentions what seems to be the Cape Point; the 'Fra Mauro' map of 1450 mentions the southernmost point of Africa as 'Cape of Diab' (basing this information on a 1420 expedition undertaken from India). Lately, there has been a push for Zheng He, the famous Chinese navigator, as



World War Two military blockhouses (radar outpost) on the Lighthouse Keeper's Trail.

the first to have circumnavigated the world in 1421-1423, making him also a potential candidate for first rounding Cape Point. All these stories have been tested but, due to minimal evidence, improbabilities and lack of proof, historians will stick with the accepted narrative we have today until enough evidence dictates otherwise.

**The first visitor missed it by miles**

By 1400, the Portuguese had crossed the equator. 1485 saw Diego Cao reach modern day Namibia and, by January 1488, Bartolomeu Dias, the Portuguese navigator, was poised to be the first foreign visitor to Cape Point. The renowned Cape weather rained on his parade by sending a violent storm which blew his ships out of sight of land and into the beyond. Days later, he decided to sail East and then North where he stepped ashore at Mossel Bay, a few hundred kilometres up the East coast. His journey to the East was halted near Port Elizabeth when his crew advised him to turn back in a mutinous tone. It was only then, on his return journey in May, that, for the first time, he saw Cape Point in all its glory. It must have been fine weather for him to put in at Dias or Maclear Beach to erect his Pachao De Sao Filipe 'Stone Cross' on Cape Maclear to claim this newfound

place for his King (Christian marker to claim territory and to be used by future sailors as a positioning beacon). Dias named Cape Point, 'Cape of Storms' and later re-named it 'Cape of Good Hope' - there is a school of thought that Dias put in at Buffels Bay on the False Bay side of the Point where he erected his Pachao De Sao Filipe but, to this day, no evidence from both sites have yielded proof. Dias had unlocked the door to this new route to the Far East but it was Vasco da Gama in 1497 who completed the full journey, a journey that would make Europe rich and make it a dominant power in the world for the next 400 years.

**What had Bartolomeu Dias discovered at Cape Point?**

As well as the key to the Far East, he also discovered an extremely old peninsula made up of solid rocks which started forming 560 million years ago in an ancient sea. With millions of years of sediment build up, through periods when the sea was deep and periods where it was considered a river or a tidal mud flat, these deposits buried under immense heat and pressure, formed into rock (at one stage, Table Mountain and the Cape Peninsula range were more than twice the height that they are today before erosion took its toll). Around the 540 million year mark, molten magma from deep within the crust mantle slowly rose up while cooling. This hot magma managed to intrude the bed's oldest rocks, deep-marine siltstones of the Malmesbury Group, that make up the basement of the peninsula. This granite now makes up virtually all of the base rock of the Cape Peninsula except for Cape Town (City Bowl and Sea Point) which still has the original base formation of silt stone. By the time that these formations were exposed through erosion and uplifting, they had all become solid rock.

One of the biggest geological episodes that helped expose these rocks and started the erosion process, was the forming of the Supercontinent Gondwana, when South America and the Falkland Plateau crashed into southern Africa in slow motion about 300 million years ago, moving at a rate of two centimetres a year over millions of years. The force was so great that they managed to buckle, bend, contort, twist and fracture these once horizontal formations which, in some places, left the bedding planes in beyond vertical positions. Table Mountain, and the chain of mountains running all the way down the peninsula to Cape Point, was fortunate to escape most of these distortions. This happened because, as the lateral pressure built up and the rock formations started to buckle, forming arch-like anticlines and U-shaped synclines ridges and valleys, Table Mountain and the peninsula range found itself right in the centre of a syncline valley, exposing this area to the least amount of buckling. Is it not ironic that one of the oldest mountains in the world was once a valley?

After this period, millions of years of natural erosion has helped shape and slowly reduce this mountain range in size. This erosion took an extremely long time, considering that this mountain range has one of the slowest erosion rates in the world, at 2-7 mm per 1000 years and is also considered one of the strongest mountains in the world because it is virtually 100% pure quartzite.

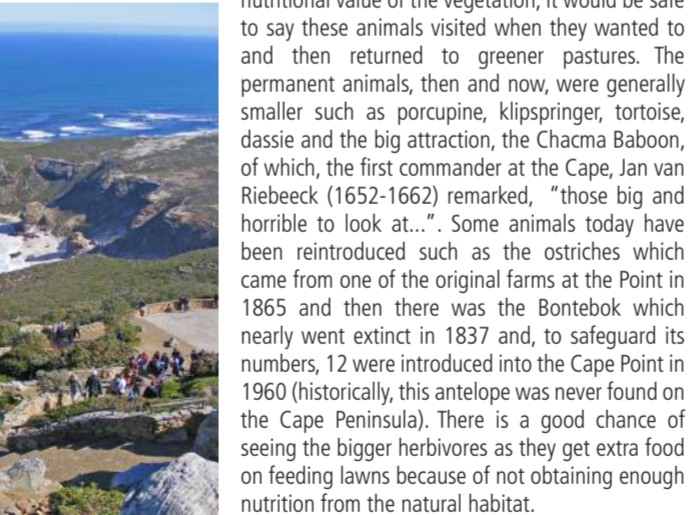
The fact that this area is made up of nearly all quartzite which is extremely nutrient-poor for plant life, brings us to the next thing that Dias must have

seen and walked through but not realised the significance that he was the first foreigner to discover the Cape Floral Kingdom, the smallest but richest in species per unit area in the world's six floral kingdoms, with over 9000 species, of which two thirds are endemic. Most of this floral kingdom is made up of fynbos (fine-leaved plants) which have specially evolved to flourish under the Cape's harsh conditions: wet long winters, hot dry summers, poor soil nutrition and lots of wind. Fynbos has been around in the form of the Protea family since 60-70 million years ago, but most of the diversified fynbos we see today goes back to 6-8 million years.

In the same way that the soil at Cape Point is nutrient-poor for plant life, the plant life has passed on the favour to animals that need to feed on them. Fynbos is nutrient-poor also and generally useless to most animals except for niche species and, to top it all, most fynbos is stockpiled with polyphenols that make them unpalatable

and indigestible. Pollination is undertaken by ants, a number of types of insects, butterflies, mice and some birds such as the Cape Sugarbird, but one thing is common: they are all delicate partnerships. Not all plants rely on multiple pollinators and some serve only a few plants and, if this relationship was broken, the plants would cease to exist, such as the red disa *uniflora* and the mountain pride butterfly *Aeroptes tulbaghia*.

Today, we visit a national park expecting to see lots of animals but, in the case of Cape Point, it was never well-populated with animals and especially the big game that we come to expect from an African safari park. There was a time when big game visited this part of the world but, because of the lack of nutritional value of the vegetation, it would be safe to say these animals visited when they wanted to and then returned to greener pastures. The permanent animals, then and now, were generally smaller such as porcupine, kipspringer, tortoise, dassie and the big attraction, the Chacma Baboon, of which, the first commander at the Cape, Jan van Riebeeck (1652-1662) remarked, "those big and horrible to look at...". Some animals today have been reintroduced such as the ostriches which came from one of the original farms at the Point in 1865 and then there was the Bontebok which nearly went extinct in 1837 and, to safeguard its numbers, 12 were introduced into the Cape Point in 1960 (historically, this antelope was never found on the Cape Peninsula). There is a good chance of seeing the bigger herbivores as they get extra food on feeding lawns because of not obtaining enough nutrition from the natural habitat.

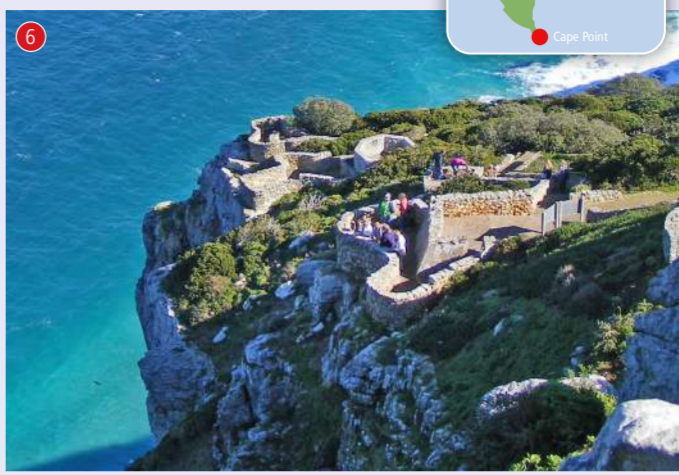


**Was someone watching Dias?**

Humans had made the Cape Point their home or temporary home for nearly 200 000 years. The evidence is there with over a hundred sites mainly middens (ancient rubbish dumps). One such site is just above Cape Maclear. These ancient people must have survived in small groups, living off small animals and whatever they could catch from the sea. There was a stage, 20 000 years ago, they would have had access to larger game when, at a Glacial Maximum, the Cape Point was surrounded by land. False Bay was dry land with over 20 km stretching out into the Atlantic Ocean, an ideal scenario for savannah game. There was also a time when the Cape Point was an island with a water channel running through the Fish Hoek Valley and sea surrounded the whole of Table Mountain; this happened 1,5 and 5 million years ago.

When Dias walked up to Cape Maclear to place his Stone Cross (some people think it might have been wood because no one has found it) he

*Dias Monument was built to commemorate the 1488 rounding of the Cape which doubles up as a navigational positioning beacon. On viewing the monument, you will note that the two sea-facing sides are painted black - this is to make it more visible against the skyline.*



**Viewing sites on Cape Point Peak.**

did not claim to have seen any local inhabitants. He knew they existed in this part of the world as, a few months earlier, he had encountered them at Mossel Bay. There is a possibility that Dias and party had been watched on this historic day but, with such small numbers, it might have been deemed too risky on the locals part for an encounter.

These local people over time would be named the Khoi (and also by many other names such as Khoi-na, Khoikhoi, Hottentot and Otentottu). The Khoi had migrated to the Cape some 2000 years ago from an area near present-day



Botswana. They were predominately a cattle tribe with some sheep but also could live off nature's opportunities. The Khoi groups that lived around Cape Town had chosen areas where their cattle would flourish and the groups were large. The Khoi that were at the Cape Point were small and opportunistic, living off the land and sea; fish traps were constructed and whale and seal meat was consumed. Due to the nature of the Point, cattle were not a priority; also, these groups were loners and did not want to be discovered. There is no evidence that they were permanent but one thing is clear, the Cape Point was a place for people who wanted to be away from mainstream life and in small enough numbers not to be noticed. After Jan van Riebeeck made Cape Town a permanent settlement in 1652, the Cape Point also became an escape for runaway slaves and criminals such as tobacco thieves.

The first recorded encounter between the Cape Point Khoi and the Dutch was not a pretty episode. This was the first overland (spying) expedition to the Point in 1659 but ended at Noordhoek due to illness. The second expedition that same year was undertaken by Elias Giers who made it to the point where he encountered Khoi. He killed two, mortally wounded one who fell off the summit and also destroyed their camp. The rest of the Khoi retreated. Tension at the Cape, for a number of years, was running high as the Khoi considered their land stolen and the settlers considered theft from the farms, especially tobacco, unforgivable.

**Harold Cooper's, Cape Point lighthouse built in 1919 to replace the earlier 1860 lighthouse built on top of Cape Point Peak.**

**A highway to the East**

The land at Cape Point, during the 1600 and early 1700s, had little value for the new settlers at the Cape, except for Simon van de Stel who claimed the whole of the Cape Peninsula beyond Groot Constantia as his cattle grazing right. There is no record of him ever using his self-given right but we do know he personally visited Simonstown (named after himself) in 1687 but went no further. Simonstown was earmarked by him as a safe winter harbour which helped increase the flow of ships between the East and West which was growing exponentially. From Dias's first rounding of the Cape and the establishment of a refreshment station at Cape Town, the Portuguese, then the Dutch and French and, lastly, the British, exploited this new route.

Virtually all of the famous navigators of history have rounded this corner at some point in time, from Bartolomeu Dias, Vasco da Gama, Ferdinand Magellan, Captain James Cook, Sir Francis Drake and Horatio Nelson. There was an increasing flow of ships, from the first small Portuguese caravels to the majestic, speedy clippers of the Cutty Sark fame which still used the Cape



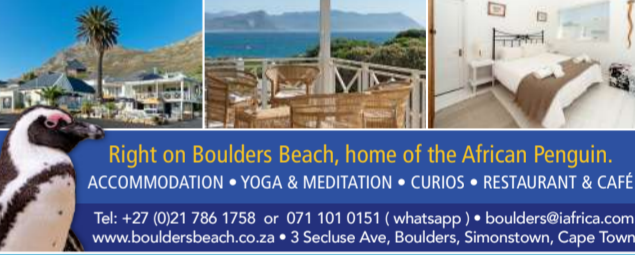
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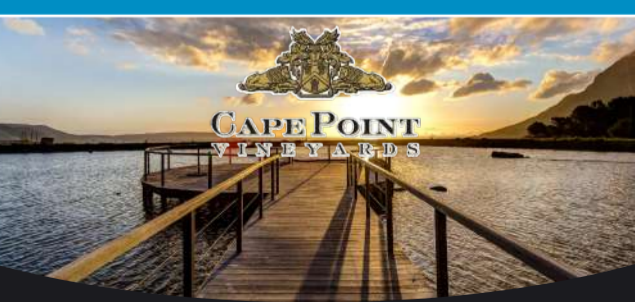
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