

The Overberg



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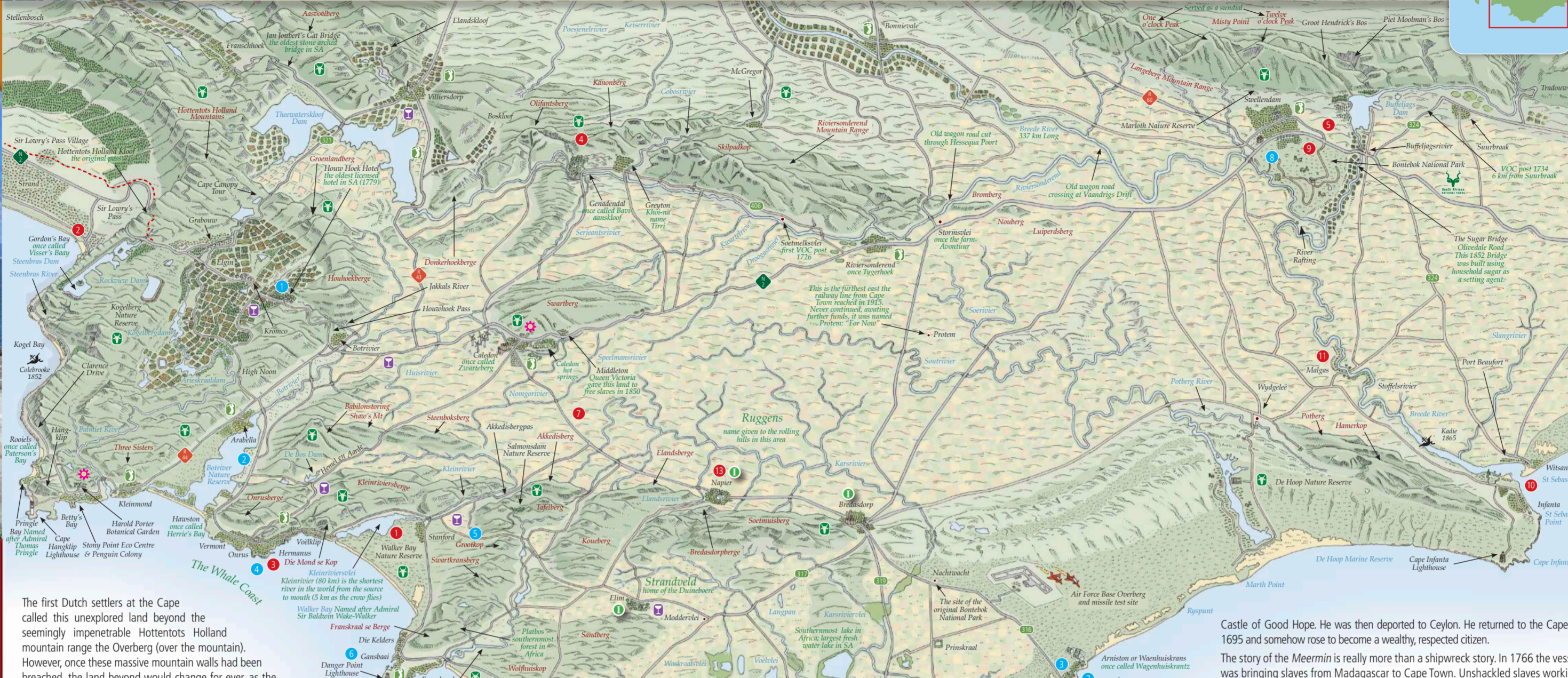


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'There rose no murmur from the ranks, no thought by shameful strength unhonoured life to seek. Our post to quit we were not trained, nor taught to trample down the weak. So we made women with their children go; The oars ply back agen, and yet agen, Whilst inch by inch the drowning ship sank low Still under steadfast men.'

Sir Francis H. Doyle • The Poetic Picture of the Birkenhead



The first Dutch settlers at the Cape called this unexplored land beyond the seemingly impenetrable Hottentots Holland mountain range the Overberg (over the mountain). However, once these massive mountain walls had been breached, the land beyond would change for ever, as the Sousouqua soon discovered. Captain Klaas (not his real name, but one given to him by the early European traders) was the leader of this Khoi-na (Khoi, Khoikhoi, Hottentot, Otentott) clan in the area near the Kromco building. Within a few years not only his Khoi-na name, but also his land, culture and way of life would be lost to these people. During the 1600s and early 1700s there were about 100 000 Khoi-na inhabitants throughout the Overberg. They shared the area with the San people: the two groups seemed to co-exist relatively well. The Europeans had hardly ventured into this area, and by the 1660s the Nguni Africans had reached only as far south as the Fish River hundreds of miles up the east coast, so the Khoi-na and San lived in isolation from the outside world. Some early explorers and traders described the Khoi-na as the happiest, most carefree and healthiest people on earth ...



Gordon's Bay

The first European to set foot in the Overberg was the Portuguese navigator, Bartolomeu Dias, in 1488. He also became the first person to round the southernmost tip of Africa. He landed at Mossel Bay where he encountered the local populace. After reaching Algoa Bay, at the request of his disgruntled crew he reluctantly headed for home instead of continuing east; he sailed down the Overberg coast, making landfall on the western side of the Breede River mouth, which he named Cabo de Infante. He made several more stops and left his mark by naming Aguada de Sao Jorge (Struisbaai), Ponta de Sao Brendao (Cape Agulhas) and Cabo Falso (Cape Hangklip). The first attempt to explore the Overberg was in 1620 when Augustin de Beaulieu walked around the rugged coastline from Gordon's Bay to Cape Hangklip. He encountered elephants, lions, many other animals and 'miserable savages' as he called the people living there.

A road more travelled
For the next 44 years, no Europeans set foot in the Overberg. This changed after Jan van Riebeeck had established the Dutch settlement at the Cape in 1652. Within months he had turned to the West Coast for trade and supplies, but the Overberg was spared for another 10 years as the Hottentots Holland mountain range looked impenetrable.

A large Khoi-na clan lived near the site of present-day Somerset West. At first, the Dutch traded there, but in 1664 Corporal Hieronymus Cruse and Ensign Oloff Bergh, under orders of the Dutch East India Company (DEIC or VOC), entered the Overberg to establish trade and look for resources that the VOC could exploit. The key to unlocking the Overberg was the Gantouw Pass (Elandspad) which was first used by migrating eland and subsequently by the Khoi-na. With a gradient of 1:4 and steep rock ledges, it was not an easy pass. A farmer would lose on average a wagon a year on this pass. By the end of the 1800s this track had become a road catering for 4500 wagons a year. Because of excessive traffic and heavy losses, this pass was replaced by Sir Lowry's Pass in 1830.

Elandspad was the first stage in the evolution of a track that became known as the Bolandse Pad or the Kaapse Wagenweg. This route was defined by Khoi-na kraal locations for trade, river crossings and passes. From the Gantouw Pass, the old road runs just north of today's N2 route, crossing the ford at Steenbras (Grietsgat), dipping down into Grabouw where its main obstacle was the Palmiet River (the Khoi-na name was Houterna, meaning Snake River), which was impassable for four months of the year, until a bridge was built in 1815. This valley was first known as Groeneland. Elgin, which was called Koffiekraal, was an old wagon halt and kraal on this route. The Bolandse Pad regains the N2 at Houwhoek Pass which has changed its route five times in 300 years: from a position roughly where it is today, it was moved into the Jakkals River Valley, then it moved back to close to the present-day pass where it drops down to Bot River. The route from Bot River to Caledon followed a similar route to today's N2, but this is where the N2 and the Bolandse Pad part company. A side road took visitors to the healing waters of the hot springs at Caledon as early as 1662. The Khoi-na were using them long before this. The Bolandse Pad, the N2 of yesteryear, took the same turn-off to Genadendal that is used today. The reason for this route was that most of the trade with the Khoi-na in the Overberg took place in this valley from Genadendal to Stormvlei; later grazing, farmland and timber were sought after in this broad valley. (The forests of Riviersonderend and Swellendam were once abundant, but from 1726 the forests were cut out and the wood was transported over the Franschoek Pass for the VOC.)

Grazing rights
The demand for livestock by the VOC was becoming too great for the Khoi-na to meet, so the VOC gave themselves grazing rights throughout the Overberg. The governor of the Cape, Willem Adriaan van der Stel, led the way by bestowing upon himself grazing rights on 18 farms that stretched uninterrupted from the Houwhoek Pass all the way to near Swellendam. He was a highly talented governor, but as a result of his legendary self-enrichment, in 1707 he was banished from the Cape after facing corruption allegations from the leading burghers of the time such as Adam Tas. This episode marked a turning point: the VOC withdrew from direct trade with the Overberg and instead worked through burghers.

The first loan places in the Overberg were granted in 1708 at Botriver, and Caledon followed in 1710. From then on increasing numbers of burghers moved into the Overberg, seasonally at first and then on a permanent basis. One of the reasons for this mini-trek was to escape the claustrophobic governance of the VOC. The

meanwhile the smallpox epidemic of 1713 had almost wiped out the Khoi-na, so they were no longer really a force to be considered. There was a futile half-hearted attempt at a rebellion in 1777. The Khoi-na ended up working on settlers' farms or escaped to the sanctuary of mission stations.

Farms were once circular
As more burghers poured into the Overberg, farms and grazing areas had to be defined. One method used was to measure out 7-8 km from a central point using leather rope. The resulting circle was defined by stone beacons and this became the boundary line of the farm. Another method was to ride out on a horse for 30 minutes and place stone beacons. To this day, there are a few farms in the Overberg that are still circular.

Shipwreck stories
When a ship was wrecked off the coast of the Overberg, someone's loss became a farmer's gain. Shipwreck 'treasure' found its way into the homesteads (legally or not). To this day some old homesteads can show some part of a ship or its contents somewhere on the farm, such as a beam in the living room, a bell, crockery or cutlery.

There are hundreds of stories about ships and wrecks off the Overberg, but only a few can be told here, for there have been over 250 shipwrecks and more than 2500 lives lost since the first recorded shipwreck on this coast - that of the Zoetendal which went down off Struisbaai in 1673. (The survivors were helped back to the Cape settlement by the Khoi-na, less one who was killed by an elephant.)



The old Hermanus harbour was once called Visbaai.

In 1722 the wreck of the Schooneberg, which went down on a calm clear day, aroused the suspicion of the authorities back in Cape Town. The story unfolded that it had been intentionally sunk for the loot: the captain was broken on the wheel, one accomplice committed suicide and the others were deported. The loot was buried at Vergelegen in Somerset West, where a sniper in a tree made things difficult for those searching for it. Nothing was found at the time, but the ship's bell was uncovered 100 years later. (Another dishonest practice in order to cause shipwrecks was to light a fire to imitate a lighthouse.)

Ensign Oloff Bergh was used on many salvage operations, but his unofficial cut became so noticeable that he spent some time on Robben Island and in jail at the

Castle of Good Hope. He was then deported to Ceylon. He returned to the Cape in 1695 and somehow rose to become a wealthy, respected citizen.

The story of the Meermin is really more a shipwreck story. In 1766 the vessel was bringing slaves from Madagascar to Cape Town. Unshackled slaves working on deck managed to take over the ship but they could not sail it. They killed some of the crew, but the captain persuaded the slaves to let the remaining crew live, telling them that, in exchange, he would sail them home. According to some versions, for several days the captain sailed east (under half sail) but at night, unbeknown to the slaves, he turned the ship around and sailed west under full sail. When land was sighted at Cape Agulhas, the captain convinced the slaves they had reached Madagascar. Nearly half the slaves left the ship, and after being hoodwinked again by the sailors, they were captured on land by burghers; the remaining slaves were overpowered on board. The slaves had, however, cut the anchor ropes, and the ship ran ashore.

The Armiston (which supplied the reinforcements at the Battle of Muizenberg) went down off Waenhuiskrans in 1815, with 6 survivors and the loss of 372 lives, because the captain, mistakenly thinking they had already passed Cape Point, turned north and grounded the ship.

The Doncaster sank off Struisbaai in 1836 with no survivors; what happened can only be surmised. The wreck was bought by wagon builders who turned its remains into 'ships of the veld'.

The wreck of the troopship HMS Birkenhead off Danger Point in 1852 is one of the most famous maritime disasters because this is when the order 'Women and children first' (the Birkenhead drill) came into being. An interesting side story is that there were nine horses on board; eight made it to shore and in less than 48 hours one of the horses had found its way back to its stable in Cape Town, 125 miles away. This is how Cape Town first had an inkling that all was not well with the Birkenhead.

The vale of grace
With the influx of settlers, the smallpox outbreak of 1713 and diminishing natural game, the Khoi-na of the Overberg were forced into unsustainable areas between farms. Only divine intervention could preserve their dignity. This came in the form of George Schmidt, a Moravian missionary, who set up a mission station at Baviaanskloof, later to be named Genadendal (vale of grace). The only reason the Dutch Reformed Church (DRC) gave him permission was that they thought he was wasting his time on the heathen Khoi-na. His mission station grew until, in 1742, he had a run-in with the DRC over baptismal rights, as a result of which he was pressurized to leave the Cape. The story should go that everything fell apart once he left, but in 1792 the Moravians sent three missionaries to see what had become of Baviaanskloof. To their surprise, they found an 81-year-old woman (one of the first converts) had kept the place alive. This safe haven flourished, attracting more Khoi-na and so-called 'coloureds', to the extent that the farmers wanted it closed down because



Genadendal was the first mission station established in South Africa.

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