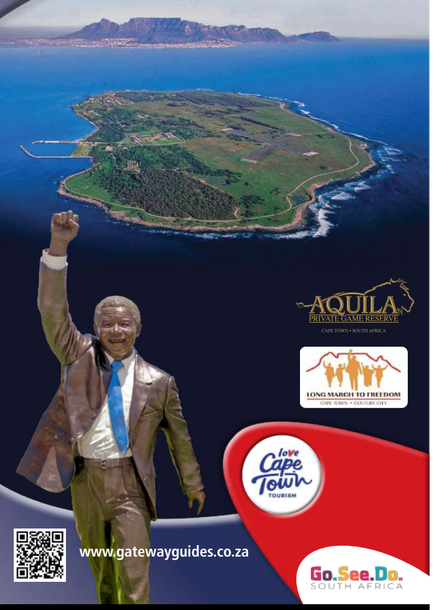
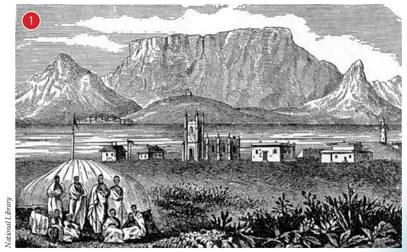
GATEWAY GUIDES
FREE EDITION 2

Robben Island



'Truly the island could a tale unfold of many a dark deed done in days of old, and many a treasure lies beneath its sands hid, in those early times, by shipwrecked hands.' (G. F. Gresley, Robben Island chaplain)



National Library

Xhosa chiefs from the Eastern Cape imprisoned on Robben Island in 1868. The Anglican Church in the background was built in 1882 by Captain Richard Wolfe using convict labour.

Since the beginning of time, humans have banished other humans to islands to rid themselves of any threat to their political power, their lives or because of their perceived danger to society. Islands make a perfect prison or a place of banishment without the major cost of infrastructure. Few island prisons have managed to capture the world's attention or become part of our shared common history. The Apostle John was banished to the island of Patmos in 95 AD, Napoleon was exiled to the island of St. Helena in 1815 and, in modern times, Alcatraz Island became famous with the incarceration of gangsters such as Al Capone. However, no other island throughout history has garnered as much attention as Robben Island. This was not because of its old history, but its most recent past with the imprisonment of Nelson Mandela, the world's most well-known struggle icon.

The gate to Robben Island prison from the harbour which was built in the early 1960s.

Because this guide is about Robben Island and not only it's most recent history which has made it famous today, all the underlying layers must be told.

The island in the bay

560 million years ago, the rock that makes up Robben Island was forming as sedimentary layers of siltstone in the ancient Adamastor Ocean (proto South Atlantic Ocean); then, South America collided with Africa to make up the Super Continent, Pangea. After millions of years of erosion, the island only retained the bedrock beneath the Cape Fold Mountains. Over five kms of rock above the present bedrock have been removed by weathering and erosion (you just need to look across to Table Mountain to understand how much has been removed). This is the blue-gray rock you see around the seashore, the Van Riebeeck's Quarry and the Blue Slate Quarry. Today, this rock is referred to as the Tygerberg Formation of the Malmesbury Group. The next step in shaping the island is millions of years of swell-energy refraction that curls around Mouille Point in Cape Town. This eroded the coast into a log-spiral bay (crescent shape). One of the results of this is it sometimes leaves an island in the bay. This same phenomenon can be seen up the coast at Mossel Bay and Gqeberha (Port Elizabeth). The last of the rock layers to form on the island is a thin layer of the Langebaan Formation, 200 000 year old wind-blown quartz sand grains and shell fragments cemented with calcite. This limestone is best seen at the famous Mandela's Quarry. The end result of all this geological time is an oval-shaped island 3.3 km long, 1.9 km wide, 30 m high and a distance of 12km from Cape Town and 8 km from Blouberg.

When the humans arrived

The Western Cape is known as the birthplace of modern humans (our immediate ancestors) who lived around 200 000 years ago. This puts them as the first humans to set eyes on Robben Island and, more than likely, the first humans to set foot on the island. The only difference would be it was not always an island. For example, 20 000 years ago, the earth was going through a glacial maximum where the sea levels had dropped by 130 m or so and Robben Island was a hillock on a dry open plain and, at a later stage, when the sea started to rise, it remained a peninsula for many years as there is an underwater ridge that leads out towards it from Blouberg. 20 000 years ago also puts it into the same timeframe when the San arrived at the Cape, making them strong contenders to be the first people to walk on the soil of Robben Island. Today, there is no evidence of either groups setting foot on the island, but the circumstances make this a likely possibility.

African Penguin recolonised Robben Island in 1983 after an absence of 180 years.

Cape fur seals

The Europeans arrive

It took until the late 1400s before the first foreigner saw the island and landed on its shores. The reason for this was the closing off of the land routes between Europe and the Far East by the Ottoman Empire, which forced the European powers to find another way. The Portuguese and the Spanish were the first to try and find a sea route to the East. The Spanish sailed west and the Portuguese sailed east around the tip of Africa. Bartolomeu Dias became the first European to voyage around the southern tip of Africa where, on his return journey, he visited Table Bay in 1488. This made him the first European to see Robben Island, but there is not sufficient evidence to indicate whether he visited the island or not. Vasco da Gama, famed as being the first person to connect Europe to the Far East via the sea, was also acknowledged, in 1496, as the first person (or it may have been one of his crew members), to step foot on Robben Island in more than 12 000 years.

By 1892, the infirmary on the island was the only leprosarium in the Cape Colony.

The Portuguese dominated the sea route around the Cape for a number of years but it would not take long before the Dutch, English and French powers started using this route and, thus, the island. By 1503, the island became the pantry for passing ships, first with seal, tortoise and penguin meat. Cattle trade was happening with the Khoi on the mainland at this time but, due to unfavourable encounters, the Portuguese, for safety reasons, focused more on the island for their supplies – it is said, to the point of leaving some people on the island for some time in 1525. By 1591, letters were deposited and collected off the island too. The start of the 1600's saw, not just people taking stuff off the island, but the placement of 6 ewes and two rams for the use of passing ships. A few years later, Captain Joris van Spelbergen took advantage of some of the offspring of the sheep but also dropped off some rock rabbits (dassies) as a future food source. Small birds were also introduced for the use of passing ships over the years.

After the male lepers were told they could no longer attend the Anglican Church on the island, they built their own church in 1895.

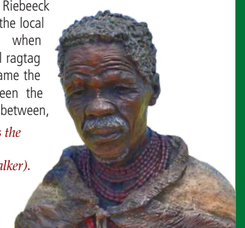
A settlement is considered

By 1615, the two remaining powers interested in Cape Town as a stopover point to the East, namely the Dutch and the English, realised a settlement was necessary at the Cape. The Portuguese had left the Cape and set up their halfway stations up the east coast of Africa and the French were out of the picture. The British East India Company made the first halfhearted attempt by sending 19 convicts, under the *de facto* leadership of John Crosse, to the Cape to make a permanent settlement. Their options were to go to the Cape or to be executed. Eventually, 10 landed at the Cape and were left there to fend for themselves. Within a few days, they had a fight with the local Khoi clan who were not very happy that foreigners had come to stay. After another violent altercation, the remaining settlers, about 6 in all, rowed over to Robben Island for their own safety. They stayed there for 9 months, after which 3 escaped back to England on a passing ship, but were executed within hours of their arrival. The other 3 remained on the island and history does not tell us what became of them.

Mandela's cell as depicted in the early years of incarceration on the island. Later on in his sentence he was allowed a bed, bookcase, desk and personal items such as a photograph of Winnie Mandela and a picture of a traditional female dancer.

The Dutch come to stay

1652 was the year that Jan van Riebeeck landed at the Cape with 150 men and a few women to set up a trading post and a vegetable garden to service passing ships. The first four years were touch and go for the little settlement at the Cape and Robben Island became their saviour. Seals and penguins were killed by the thousands and penguin eggs taken 3000 at a time for food, to such a point that these creatures left the island only to return in the late 1900s. Rocks were quarried, shells collected to make lime and anything that added value to the survival of the small hamlet under Table Mountain was extracted from the island. Van Riebeeck also placed rabbits on the island to expand their food supply – ironically, Captain James Cook, years later, picked up some of these rabbits from the island and took them to Australia which resulted in their 200 million feral rabbit problem today. In 1658, under the orders of Van Riebeeck, a permanent bonfire was built on Minto Hill to act as the first 'lighthouse' in South Africa which was manned by Jan Woutersen. At this stage, Van Riebeeck was pushing hard to trade with the local Khoi clans and this was when Autshumato, the chief of a small ragtag clan that lived in Table Bay, became the mediator and interpreter between the Khoi and the settlers. As the go-between,



Autshumato (Autshumao) or, as the Dutch referred to him, Herrie de Strandloper (Harry the beach walker).
The Long March to Freedom statue

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Flag pole outside the main entrance to the prison.

he gained status, some wealth and also made many enemies amongst the other clans. It became so bad that he voluntarily exiled himself and 20 other clan members to the island. He did this a number of times over the next 10 years. He was imprisoned in 1658 for being involved in the theft of company cattle, which made him the first Khoi to live and be imprisoned on the island and, if that was not enough, he was the first person to escape from the island using a stolen boat. The story of Autshumato is not complete without mentioning his niece, Krotoa (Eva), who lived at the Castle of Good Hope from 1654 at age 10 and was raised by the Van Riebeeck family. She took over as the official interpreter for the Dutch where she found herself trying to appease two cultures at the same time. She married Pieter van Meerhof in 1662, after which she lived on Robben Island for 3 years, much of the time spent there miserable; her friends were the prisoners. After her husband's death. she lost status, she turned to drink and street living. Because of her immoral behaviour, she was once again banished to the island, out of sight of the public. Five years later, she died on the island, a broken woman, someone who was never seen as a true Khoi or European by both groups she loved.

Communal cells of the maximum security prison.

Prisoners from home and abroad

By the time of Krotoa, the island was now an official prison (1657) with over 42 local prisoners but, for the first time, at the beginning of the 1700s, the island was taking in foreign prisoners, people who were a threat to the Dutch colonies in the East. These prisoners included pirates, bandits and political leaders who were men of influence and power, such as royalty and devout Muslims. By 1722, there were 16 'Indiaanen'. One of the most famous was the Sheik of Madura who died on the Island in 1754. He is remembered today by the Kramat, built in 1969, on the northern side of the maximum security prison. Today, this shrine is a pilgrimage site for the Cape Town Muslim community. The ironic failure of the VOC's incarceration of all these Muslim holy men was the rapid spread of Islam within the Cape, a direct enemy to the one-religion policy of the Dutch Reformed Church.

The British arrive

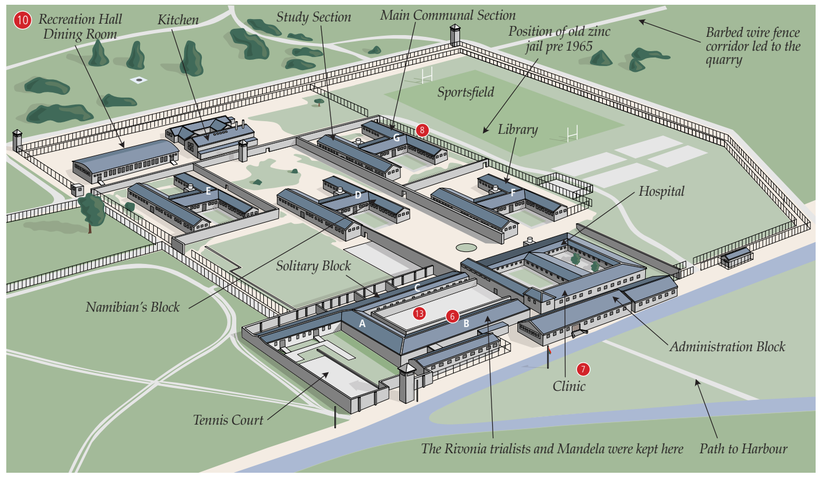
In 1795, the British took control of the Cape for 8 years. Life at the Cape became easier for the local population, but the prisoners remained on the island, numbering 90 inmates and growing. There was a hiatus of 3 years when the Batavian Republic ruled at the Cape, but the British were back when they won the Battle of Blaauwberg and they stayed for a 100 years. The first political prisoner incarcerated by the British on the island in 1809 was David Stuurman, a man of Khoi descent and a resistance fighter against British rule. He is better known today as the first person to escape from the island twice. His ability to escape was so great they banished him to Australia in 1823. He died there in 1830. He was buried under what is now Sydney's Central Railway Station.

Under British rule, the role of Robben Island changed but also, in many ways, remained the same. Prisoners were relocated to the Amsterdam Battery on the mainland for a short time in 1806. Whaling, mining and a playground for the upper-class became the order of the day. In the early 1800s, there was a co-existence between private enterprises, prisoners, slaves, soldiers, paid workers and government employees.

The frontier wars bring more prisoners

The British were no different from the Dutch when it came to expansion or claiming lands. The Boers of Dutch descent were already on the border of the Eastern Cape, the land of the Xhosa, but now, under British rule, whether the Boers liked it or not, it was seen as British territory by the new rulers. In 1779, war started between the powerful Xhosa groups and settlers. This lasted 99 years, with 9 defined wars in this period. The British, much like the Dutch, sent all the main Xhosa agitators and political prisoners to Robben Island. Chief Maqoma was the most renowned Xhosa leader who fought on after Sandile, the Rharhabe ruler, had surrendered to the British in 1847 and British Kaffraria was established. Maqoma continued fighting but was finally captured and sent to Robben Island for 12 years. After his release, he was sent back to what had once been his home. He was unable to accept the annexation of his land and was returned to the island where he died in 1873. Another hero of the Xhosa frontier war, who also ended up as a prisoner on Robben Island, was Makhanda who, in 1819, took the war to the British for the first time by attacking Grahamstown with 6000 men. His zeal and 'muti', which would seemingly make them impervious to the White man's bullets, were no match for the firepower of the British, Boer commandos and hundreds of Khoikhoi. In 1820, he made a daring escape from the island on a stolen boat belonging to John Murray's whaling station. This was a mass breakout, which included David Stuurman's second escape, but Makhanda never made it to the mainland as he drowned in Table Bay. By 1857, there were 900 Xhosa prisoners on the island. Over the next few years, as the British expanded their empire, more prisoners were added. Many disparate groups were imprisoned on the island: in 1824, Khoi and San agitators from the Bokkeveld Rebellion; from 1874 to 1875, the proud Hlubi chief, Langalibalele, and the leaders of the Kroanna Wars from the Orange River uprising in 1870 also felt the isolation of Robben Island.

There was only one positive under British rule that affected the island. Slavery was abolished in 1834 and a rudimentary form of human rights began to take shape. No longer were the incarcerated subjected to physical torture or executed for minor mis-demeanours. Their punishment would be harsh labour and excruciating isolation from their loved ones and their people.



Maximum Security Prison

The key to Nelson Mandela's cell

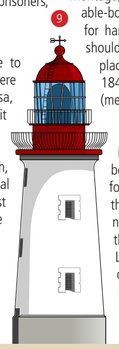
of the only church on the island. Many of the inmates tried to escape the island by stealing boats, making rafts or, in the case of a 'lunatic' named Plaatjies, building beautiful boats from shipwrecked parts in order to escape. Whenever they were discovered and destroyed, he would build another one. He is also known for making coins out of old brass bolts which he was going to use as revenue once he had escaped to the mainland. Additionally, he secretly used to make working guns. One theme that persists in all the writings about island life during this time period was shipwrecks. There were many of them and they brought a great deal of joy to the interned and workers alike which broke their sad, monotonous lives. There was treasure to be found, material for building and things they could sell. One such case is the tale of the ship *Bernicia* which, in 1861, sank close to the island with its cargo containing vast amounts of liquor. The end result was that, when the authorities made it to the wreck site the next morning, they were greeted by hordes of inebriated sailors, lepers and 'lunatics'. Seven people died in the wreck and this became big news in Cape Town with a well publicised court case. The one positive out of this shipwreck was that it hastened the building of the lighthouse we see today on Minto Hill.

The Limestone Quarry first mined in the late 1600s and later by the political prisoners under the Apartheid government.

From the 1850s to the 1890s, many changes to conditions on the island were seen. This was due to major scandals and a change of authority on the island. The result was an influx of many more White patients (that could pay). They were segregated from their Black and Coloured counterparts. By 1892, there were 1070 people living on the island but, in 1921, all the mentally ill and sick were taken off the island and, in 1931, the lepers were removed. For 5 years, while the island was virtually empty, the island became a recreational vacation spot for visitors, but this would change when World War II began.

Lunatics, lepers and layabouts

The true melancholic circus started on Robben Island when, in 1843, John Montagu, Colonial Secretary of Roads and Harbours, recommended that able-bodied convicts from Robben Island be transferred to the mainland for hard labour on public works projects and, in return, the island should be a place to hide the undesirables of society, all disguised as a place of 'recuperation and restoration'. This experiment lasted from 1846 to 1931, with the lepers first, followed by the 'lunatics' (mentally ill), the incurably sick and, lastly, the severely impoverished. They joined the convicts who had stayed behind on the island because they were too dangerous to be sent to the mainland. This was a recipe for disaster. The government relinquished their duties and left most of the work to the nuns and priests of the Anglican church. All these parties had free rein over the island. Later, the lepers were confined to the north of Boundary Road so as to not 'infect' the rest of the island. The lepers had to build their own church as they were now cast out



The Robben Island lighthouse was built in 1864 on Minto Hill on the site of the first navigational bonfire south of the Equator. It is the only lighthouse in South Africa that flashes and does not rotate. The lighthouse is 18 metres high and was electrified in 1938. The light can be seen from 25 kilometres away.

The second coastal battery, known as De Waal Battery, was added in 1942. Here, 9.2" calibre guns were installed in November 1940 and July 1941.

War comes to the island

The world went to war for the second time and hardship gripped a large portion of the planet but, in contrast, Robben Island went through the happiest and most peaceful period in its history. In 1936, Oswald Pirow, the Minister of Justice, declared the island a military base. The reason for the importance of the island was the shipping lane around the Cape and Cape Town Harbour as a strategic military hub. The Suez Canal was too dangerous to take Allied ships to the warfront and the Cape route was the only viable one. The Axis nations knew the importance of this route and it would not take long before German and Japanese u-boats were hounding this shipping lane. Two gun batteries were placed on the island.The Cornelia Battery was built to protect the inner channel to the harbour and the outer channel was

Robben Island is the only place where you can see the Chukar Partridge in South Africa. This European bird was introduced to the island in 1964 by customs officials.

B Section courtyard where the the Rivonia trialists, including Nelson Mandela and Walter Sisulu, spent many a day breaking up stones as part of the programme to dehumanise and humiliate the leaders of the resistance movement.

covered by the De Waal Battery. Hundreds of other military installations were built to detect the enemy whether by sight or radar. Over the course of the war, the island housed thousands of troops and military personnel. Many jobs, especially surveillance, were performed by women (SWANS), to free up as many able-bodied men as possible to go to the warfront and, it is said, they did a better job. The presence of women on the island made war life agreeable as they organised dances and other social activities. Harry Oppenheimer met his wife, Bridget, while serving time on the island. A little known fact is that the island also housed non-White regiments who trained there before being sent off to the war. By 1945, the troops had left the island but it remained under military control until 1960.

The Apartheid years

In 1948, the National Party (NP) swept into power, plunging South Africa into its darkest years. It did not take long for the government to make Robben island a prison again, starting in 1961 with regular criminals. Robert Sobukwe and other Pan Africanist Congress (PAC) members found themselves incarcerated on the island, mainly due to the Sharpeville riots in 1963. The NP were swift in taking down the main leadership of the African National Congress (ANC) and South African Communist Party (SACP) when they imprisoned 8 of the Rivonia trialists on Robben Island which included Mandela, Sisulu and Mbeki. This took the pressure off the government for a while, but a stream of political agitators were still sent to the island. In 1976, the next major intake of prisoners, who were part

The Commissioner's House also known as the Guest House.

of the Black Consciousness Movement, were sent to the island. The Soweto Uprising was the main trigger. There were now 4500 prisoners on the island, housed in a prison made for 2500. The NP kept placing political troublemakers on the island, right up to 1989, even though, at the time, there were major talks between the government and the ANC, which would lead to the creation of a new non-racial South Africa. The last political prisoner to leave the island was in 1991.

Throughout the 30 years that the island was a maximum security prison for non-Whites, conditions varied. The first few years were hell on earth for the inmates. Hard labour, low food rations, torture and no beds were the order of the day. Anything possible to make the inmates lives miserable was employed. In 1977, the outside world got wind of the way the prisoners were being treated. With mounting pressure, things changed so inmates were permitted to study, play sports, receive letters and the punishments were not as severe. Labour, such as mining the quarries, was still in place.

The prison guards still tried to make life unpleasant and also create disunity. This was achieved by separating different political factions and racial groups and treating them differently and also mixing in common criminals with the political prisoners. These acts only reinforced the unity between all the parties and, it has been said, that the years on the island strengthened the government-in-waiting, teaching them patience, negotiation skills, policy formulation and structure. No matter what the NP did, even though there were casualties, the outcome was the opposite of what they were trying to do. The last common prisoner to leave the island was in 1996, allowing Robben Island to become a place of healing and peace.

Take the Tour of Robben Island (Bookings Only)

Bookings at: www.robben-island.org.za

Currently, Robben Island Museum (RIM) has tours that run as follows: 09h00, 11h00, 13h00 and 15h00. The ferries depart from the Nelson Mandela Gateway at the V&A Waterfront. The tour takes 3.5 hours including the ferry trip to and from the island (Depending on the boat used as they have different travel times).

You will disembark at Murray's Bay Harbour situated on the east coast of the island and take a short walk to buses that will transport you to all the historical sites around the island. On the way to the buses, you will pass buildings and a high wall built by prisoners during the 1960s. The buildings were used for family and lawyer visits to prisoners.

You will meet your Robben Island tour guide when you have boarded the buses. This is part of their integrated tour model. They are fully conversant and knowledgeable about the island's multi-layered 500-year-old history. The tour route includes the graveyard of people who died from leprosy, the Lime Quarry, Robert Sobukwe's house, the Bluestone Quarry, the army and navy bunkers and the Maximum Security Prison where thousands of South Africa's freedom fighters were incarcerated for years. The tour culminates with a viewing of Nelson Mandela's cell.

Please refer to RIM for any changes.

Some famous people who spent time on the island

Please Note

Thousands of people served time on Robben Island, all playing their part in the liberation of their people, whether locally or abroad, and their contribution is seen as just as important as the big names that emerged out of the freedom struggle.

Autshumato

The chief of the Gorinhaikonas became the first prisoner on Robben Island in 1658. He was also the first prisoner to escape from the island.

Krotoa

is the most famous woman who lived on the island. She lived there with her husband from 1665 for 3 years. She left the island but later was banished there for disorderly conduct.

Makhanda (Makana)

was a Xhosa traditional doctor who led a raid of 6000 men to capture Grahamstown in 1819. He lost the battle and was interned on the island. He drowned when trying to escape.

Dimitri Tsafendas

He killed Hendrik Verwoerd, the architect of apartheid. He blamed the assassination on a 'giant tapeworm inside his head'. He spent 4 months on Robben Island before being transported to Pretoria.

Nelson Mandela

Prisoner number 46664 is the most famous inmate that the island has ever seen. He spent 18 years on the island. He served as the president of South Africa from 1994 to 1999.

Robert Sobukwe

founded the Pan Africanist Congress. The defiance march he organised became known as the Sharpeville Massacre which led to his 3 year sentence on the island. However, he was only released 6 years later as a result of the Sobukwe Clause which allowed the government to detain political dissidents indefinitely.

Herman Andimba Toivo ya Toivo

was a founding member of SWAPO, fighting for the independence of Namibia which was under South African government control. He served 16 years on Robben Island.

For More Information

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"Geological Adventures in the Fairest Cape: Unlocking the Secrets of its Scenery" by John Rogers. johnrogers1944@gmail.com

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Timeline

Khoi and San | 1652: Dutch | 1795: British | 1803: Batavian Republic | 1806: British | 1910: Union of South Africa | 1922: South African government | 1961: Republic of South Africa | 1994: Republic of South Africa

560M years ago

The bedrock of Robben Island is deposited in the form of siltstone.

20 000 years ago

Due to a glacial maximum, Robben Island is left high and dry which makes it a hill on an open plain.This gives an opportunity for early humans or the San to be the first to stand on top of this island.

1488

Bartolomeu Dias becomes the first European to see Robben Island.

1498 *sees the first overnight stay on the island by Portuguese sailors.*

1632

Autshumato and 20 of his followers stay on Robben Island for eight years intermittently.

1652

The Dutch settle in Cape Town. In the first few years, Robben Island becomes essential for food and resources.

1682

From this date forward, the VOC banishes prisoners and opponents to their rule to Robben Island. The first was a prince from the Island of Macassar. So begins a long period where many Muslim leaders are exiled to the island.

1795

The British take control of the Cape including Robben Island after 143 years of Dutch rule. The Cape is returned to the Dutch in 1803 followed by the British once again in 1806.

1819

Makana becomes the first Xhosa political prisoner for resisting British colonial expansion in the Eastern Cape.

1843

Under the leadership of John Montagu, lepers, ill paupers and lunatics are to be placed on the island. A leper colony is established in 1846 which lasts till 1931 and the Mental Asylum is established in 1846 and closes down in 1920.

1939

The world goes to war and Robben Island becomes an important military base to defend the shipping lanes between Europe and the East. The military presence on the island is scaled down after 1945 but retains control of the island till 1960.

1960

This is the year that the island is handed over from the Department of Defence to the South African Prisons service and turns into one of the main prisons in South Africa for political prisoners.

1964

Nelson Mandela arrives on Robben Island where he would spend 18 of his 27 prison years.

1999

Unesco declares Robben Island a World Heritage Site.

In 2016, a R25 million solar energy micro-grid is built on the island.

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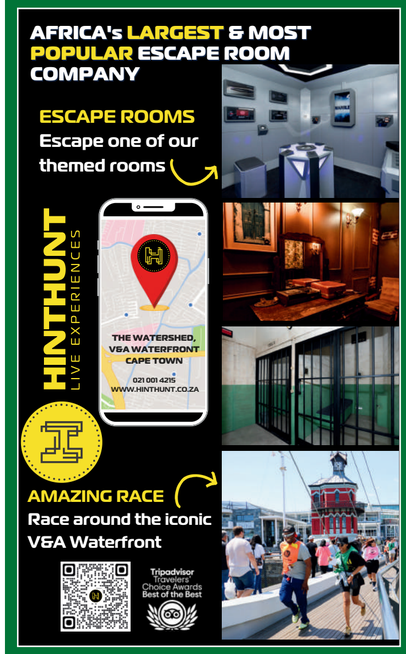

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