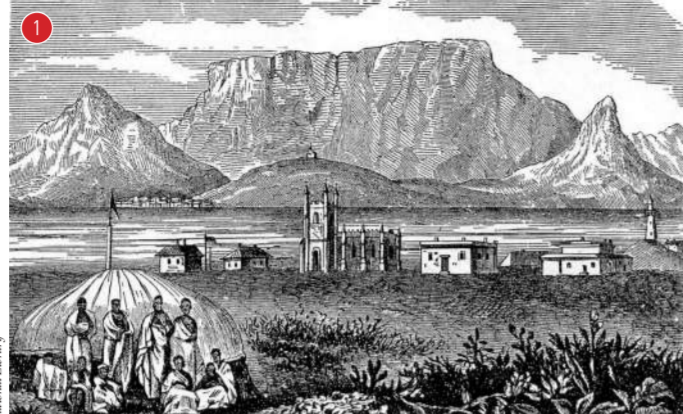


# Robben Island

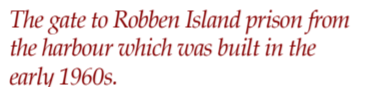


Michael J. Zeman



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 Wolffe 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 gained as much scrutiny 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 best-known struggle icon. 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 gate to Robben Island prison from the harbour which was built in the early 1960s.

**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 5 km of rock above the present bedrock has 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 Malmsbury 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



Shelly Beach



Blue Slate Quarry (started in the 17th century but also mined by prisoners in 1963)



Airstrip (1942)



Penguin Colony



Wreck House



Old Limekiln



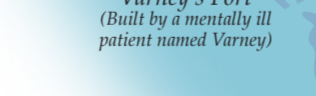
Bath of Bethesda (Tidal pools where female lepers bathed)



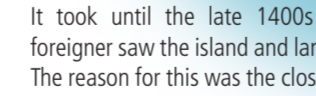
Robben Island Maximum Security Prison (1960-1977)



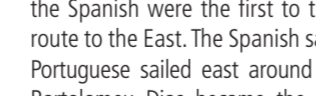
Cornelia Battery (1940)



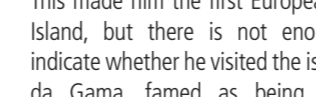
Quarry



Former female & children's leper colony (1846-1931)



Sanitary tip



Cape fur seal colony



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

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.

**A settlement is considered**

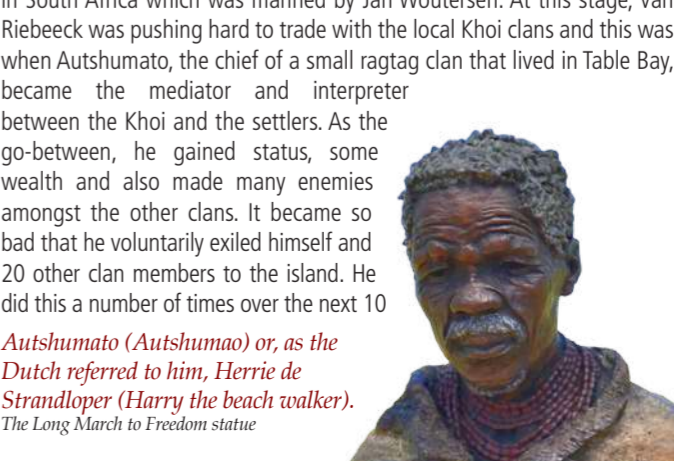
By 1615, the two remaining powers interested in Cape Town as a stopover point to the East, namely the Dutch and the English, realised a settlement was necessary at the Cape. The Portuguese had left the Cape and set up their halfway stations up the east coast of Africa and the French were out of the picture. 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.

**The Dutch come to stay**



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.

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 tough 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, 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



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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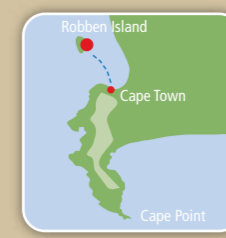
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