

Discover the history and interesting information about the West Coast Peninsula including the area from Cape Town to Velddrif



The Moravian mission station with its church, watermill and outbuildings set in the heavenly De Groene Kloof. Mamre was established in 1808 as a refuge for the remaining Khoi-na.

In 1497 the renowned Portuguese explorer, Vasco da Gama, was recognised as the discoverer of the sea route to the East: it is less widely known that he also accidentally 'discovered' the West Coast. He named the place where he made landfall St Helena. Da Gama stayed for eight days, cleaning his ship and taking on basic supplies. He soon realised that he was not in fact the first there: the indigenous inhabitants, who became known as the Khoi-na or Khoikhoi, had been there for thousands of years.

Not surprisingly, encounters between the Portuguese and the Khoi-na often ended in tragedy: Da Gama was wounded in one encounter; in another Francisco d'Almeida and 64 of his men were killed at Table Bay. As a result of such incidents the Portuguese decided to make their halfway stop to the East in Mozambique. Thus the history of the West Coast, the Cape and ultimately South Africa was written by other European powers that subsequently came to dominate the lucrative trade route to the East.

To appreciate the full story of the West Coast we must go back to a time before the local Khoi-na clans, before the ancient San people, before our modern human ancestors walked at Kraal Bay and before the earliest mammals of Langebaanweg. The story starts with the rock under our feet.

**Set in stone**

The West Coast has the same geological history as that of Table Mountain. Over millions of years, the younger Table Mountain Group of sandstones has been eroded away, leaving only the siltstones of the Malmesbury Group (18 km thick), which are intruded by various bodies of granite. Parts of the Malmesbury Group are visible along the coast as dark grey siltstones at Bokbaai and Ganzekraal. One agent of erosion was the Berg River, which once had a flow rate of 50 km/h



Bokbaai (buck bay) was originally a station for slaves of the VOC for collecting mussels. The homestead was built about 1750. although today it meanders gently through a vast plain. Over the last few million years the river has changed its exit point to the sea from Langebaanweg to its present position at Velddrif.

One exception to the general flatness of the West Coast is a ridge of granite hills, starting in the south at the Darling Flats and running in a NNW direction all the way up to Shelley Point. This intrusion of several large bodies (plutons) of granite happened at the time when Africa collided with South America and Antarctica around 550 million years ago. Hot molten magma intruded the Malmesbury Group and crystallized into granite, 10 km underground. The granite domes we see exposed to the surface today are the result of millions of years of erosion. This linear array of granite hills is part of the Agulhas-Columbine Arch, which runs next to the Colenso Fault Line that extends from Franschhoek to Cape Columbine.

Most of the surface we see today is coated (60 m thick) with very young sedimentary formations. The four main formations, from oldest to youngest, are the Elandsfontyn, Saldanha and Varswater Formations and 6 m of the Anyskop terrestrial deposits. All these formations are made up mainly of dunes with fragments of sea shells that have undergone cementation. These four formations indicate when this area was under water and then later exposed as dry land. This process of change has happened about six times in the last 24 million years.

**Before man**

It was through the exploitation of these younger rock formations for commercial mining that one of the greatest discoveries on the West Coast was made on a farm which was being mined for phosphate near Langebaanweg. One of the workers uncovered fossils which he passed on to the South African Museum. Little did he know that he had exposed the biggest collection of tertiary vertebrate fossils in the world. These fossils are of early mammals that lived here two to five million years ago or were washed down the proto-Berg River to its mouth. The river was then closed off by a sand bar, thus preserving an extensive graveyard. These animals lived at a time when the climate was changing from a warm, humid period to a cool, dry period. During this process, the landscape changed to grasslands and riverine forests. Some of the most exciting of these ancient animals are the large mammals that resemble, in part, their modern counterparts but on a much larger scale, such as short-necked giraffe, sabre-tooth cat, bear, elephant with four tusks, musk ox, giant pig and many more, unique to this location. Today you can relive this turbulent transition period by visiting the West Coast Fossil Park, an absolute must for anyone exploring this area.

**Humans before written history**

The West Coast is one of the places in southern Africa that lays claim to the oldest examples of modern man, not the so-called 'missing links' such as Little Foot, Mrs Ples and the Taung Child. In 1953 Keith Jolly uncovered at Elandsfontein a

fragment of a skull now named 'Saldanha Man' (archaic *Homo sapiens*). This fragment has been dated to about 400 000 years (before humans moved into Europe). Since this discovery, over 60 skull fragments, teeth and other artefacts have been found at this site.

The next step in the story of ancient man on the West Coast was actually a young girl given the name Eve. In 1995 Dave Roberts was studying the coastal platform close to Pulpit Rock at Kraal Bay, when he stumbled upon human footprints imprinted in the rock, an extremely rare find. The footprints have been dated to about 117 000 years ago, to a day when a young girl with a size five foot walked diagonally down a sand dune to the lagoon edge, which at that time was a metre away. Since the footprints were now exposed to the elements and eroding fast, a decision was made to cut them out and relocate them to the safety of the Iziko Museum in Cape Town.

**The first documented people**

The Portuguese explorers discovered a well-populated land with two different peoples, the first being the San (Bushmen). They are the original people of the West Coast and southern Africa whose presence goes back over 20 000 years. The San were hunter-gatherers, small in stature, with a traditional territory; they moved their camp to different locations within this territory, according to the availability of water and food. What also helped this environmentally friendly lifestyle was that each clan numbered between 25 and 50 individuals, so they had a low-impact footprint. Also, they acquired minimal material possessions. The clan had no leader but relied on older members for guidance.

When Vasco da Gama landed at St Helena Bay, it was the second group of people that he discovered – the Khoi-na. These people made up most of the population as they had herds of cattle and therefore were in control of their food source. Their clans were much larger than those of the San and they had a leadership structure mainly determined by how many cattle they owned. Their clan structure allowed for members to be workers for richer members. The ancestry of the Khoi-na is a bit of a mystery: the most accepted theory is that they ended up at the Cape with domesticated animals is that they migrated from present-day Botswana 1800 years ago. Besides relying on their cattle for meat (which they did not like doing, as cattle were their wealth), whale and seal meat were also part of their diet. They moved around to a lesser extent than the San: finding water and fertile land for their cattle was the motivating factor. As access to fresh water was so important, springs were guarded to the point of death. Water supply was therefore the main cause of conflict with the Europeans when they arrived: they did not know that according to Khoi-na custom no one owned the springs, which fell under the jurisdiction of the chief of the area. Anyone wanting water had to obtain the permission of the chief. In reality this process was just a formality, but permission was granted only in exchange for a 'gift'. The importance of water also led to the Dutch choosing Table Bay for a settlement instead of Saldanha Bay, which had an excellent harbour but lacked fresh water. If the Dutch had settled at Saldanha the demise of the San and Khoi-na would have happened faster.

In 1652 the Europeans settled at the Cape permanently; this signalled the start of the demise of the Khoi-na. Within five months of Jan van Riebeeck's arrival, he had sent his small sail boat, the *Goede Hoop*, up the coast to exploit its natural



Langebaan is the leisure centre on the lagoon; it has always been a place to relax and unwind. Not surprisingly, it also boasts the first hotel on the lagoon. During WWI it was still reached by a wagon track and mail arrived from Cape Town by cart.

resources. By 1657 a group calling themselves 'Saldanhavevaarders' had moved up there permanently. The San were hunted by the Dutch (and by the Khoi-na) so most of them migrated north for their own survival. There are accounts of resistance by the Khoi-na, but it was futile. The smallpox epidemic of 1713 wiped out a vast number of Khoi-na and some San. Some decided to leave and follow Adam Kok, the founder of the Griqua nation, up north. Those that remained fought the Dutch on three occasions but ended up moving north or working on European farms or eking out a living as strangers in their ancestral land.

**'I have a flag'**

As more Europeans rounded the Cape, the West Coast saw more visitors. The French had started using Saldanha Bay as far back as 1602, a year after the Dutch sailor Joris van Spilbergen had stopped there. He named the bay after the renowned Portuguese navigator Antonio de Saldanha, who he mistakenly thought had landed there in 1503. (De Saldanha had in fact landed at Table Bay.) The French were keen to move their halfway station on Madagascar to Saldanha Bay, the consternation of the Dutch. Thus in the late 1600s and early 1700s there were three players vying for control of this bay. The remaining Khoi-na were reluctantly accommodating at first, and traded with the French and Dutch, but as the



Geelbek Manor, which is now a restaurant, was rebuilt in 1860.



Wildebeest (Gnu) in the Buffelsfontein Game Reserve, which is an hour's drive from Cape Town. Visitors can stay overnight or take a day trip.

Europeans came to have a stronger presence in the area tension increased, resulting in wars between the Khoi-na and the Dutch, the first of which was in 1657. These interactions were low key, mainly involving cattle raids and resulting in few deaths.

As the French and Dutch both knew the importance of the area, whenever they were in the bay plundering its resources (such as water, penguin eggs, seals and fish) or fixing their ships, they would put up a flag or plaque claiming it as their own. However, when the French left on a voyage or the Dutch went to their new settlement at Table Bay, the other party would remove the symbol of authority and replace it with its own. (One of the plaques was knocked down by a rhino!) On one occasion the Dutch stole over 2000 seal skins the French had left on Scaapen Island for safekeeping, but despite some hostility a state of war was never reached. Eventually the Dutch had control

of the bay, with a growing permanent presence there – a prize to be valued as the settlement at Cape Town relied heavily on the West Coast in terms of food and resources for its survival.

Jan van Riebeeck visited the West Coast in 1660 to set up the first government post (a small fortification) called Oude Post at Kraalbaai. When the spring dried up at this post, it was moved to a new site under Postberg. Later, in 1821, under British control, the post was moved to Oosterwal on the Langebaan side of the bay. Van Riebeeck was not a great fan of the West Coast, remarking that '... there is no land in the whole world so barren and unblest by the Lord.' But when it comes to blessings, there are few places on earth that can compete with the bounty of the sea on the West Coast, thanks to the nutrient-rich Benguela Current. (By 1945, it was one of the top six fishing areas in the world.) The bounty of the land enabled the area to become part of the breadbasket of South Africa and to support the merino sheep industry. In addition, being a disease-free zone made it perfect for raising cattle and top-class horses.

The next visitors to the West Coast were pirates (or 'privateers' as they were called by their home country to

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Captain Semmes of the Confederate raider, the Alabama, on entering Saldanha Bay in 1863

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