

Whispers of Freedom

"I knew as well as I knew anything that the oppressor must be liberated just as surely as the oppressed. A man who takes away another man's freedom is a prisoner of hatred, he is locked behind the bars of prejudice and narrow-mindedness. I am not truly free if I am taking away someone else's freedom, just as surely as I am not free when my freedom is taken from me. The oppressed and the oppressor alike are robbed of their humanity."

– Nelson Mandela

Nestled in Table Bay, in the sparkling waters of the Atlantic Ocean, just a short ferry ride from Cape Town, South Africa, Robben Island beckons with tales of resilience, triumph, and the indomitable human spirit.

What was, for centuries, a lonely outpost of the Dutch, Robben Island rose to prominence as a symbol of the struggle against apartheid. The island served as a political prison, confining key figures such as Nelson Mandela for 18 years. Today, it stands as a UNESCO World Heritage Site and National Museum, inviting visitors to explore the poignant chapters of contrast in South Africa's history.

Uncover the embedded stories of brutal struggle and repression etched into the blue slate walls of the maximum-security prison, where guided tours provide a glimpse into the harsh conditions faced by political prisoners. Marvel at the desolate beauty of the island's landscapes, a stark contrast to the tumultuous events that unfolded within its confines.



Beyond its historical significance, Robben Island boasts a captivating natural beauty, offering breathtaking views of Cape Town and the surrounding coastline. Immerse yourself in the serene atmosphere as you wander through the historic precinct, where colonial-era buildings and lighthouses bear witness to a bygone era.

Robben Island's Early Footprints

Robben Island derives its name from the Dutch word for "seal", reflecting the abundance of seals in the surrounding waters. **The first documented landing by European explorers was by Portuguese explorer Bartolomeu Dias in 1488.**

Initially, it served as a pantry for passing ships who preferred to replenish their supplies on the island over stopping on the mainland, where they would have to deal with indigenous residents. It was also a valuable point for the mail exchange, with outgoing ships leaving letters underneath an inscribed stone for home-bound ships to collect and deliver. Over time, the island transitioned from a temporary haven for sailors to a place of exile, marking the beginning of a darker chapter in its history.

From about 1671, the Dutch arrived at the Cape in 1652 and began to place their convicted criminals on Robben Island, marking the island's beginning as a penal colony. The first prisoners marooned on Robben Island were John Cross and his group of fellow highwaymen in 1615. In addition to convicted criminals, so-

called 'undesirables' and other individuals deemed a threat to the Dutch colonial authority were also sent to Robben Island. These included kings, princes, and religious leaders from the East Indies who disagreed with Dutch rule in their country. This practice continued under British rule, who colonised the Cape in 1795, solidifying the island's reputation as an outpost for the unwanted and rebellious. Under British rule, army deserters, murderers, thieves, political prisoners of war, and indigenous Xhosa kings and chiefs were sent to Robben Island.

The island gradually shifted into more of a hospital, hosting the mentally ill, people suffering from leprosy, and impoverished people by the mid-1800s. Over time, the prisoners were moved to the mainland, and the island functioned mainly as a hospital for persons suffering from leprosy and mental illness. The island officially became a General Infirmary in 1846. Patients were divided according to race and gender.

In 1892, leprosy patients on Robben Island protested against harsh conditions imposed by the British Colonial Government. Troops quelled the uprising, conditions improved, and leprosy patients gained visitation rights. In 1931, the hospital was closed, and all patients were transferred off the island to mainland hospitals. All buildings were burned to prevent the spread of the disease. A church used by the leprosy patients remains one of the only quarantine buildings.

Robben Island's role as a penitentiary was briefly interrupted during World War II when the South African Navy used it as a naval defence station. During this time, the island's infrastructure was developed, including an improved water supply system, a new power station, modern housing, and secure roads.



A leprosy ward on Robben Island
(Unknown, "A leprosy ward on Robben Island," Google Arts and Culture, Robben Island Museum, <https://artsandculture.google.com/asset/a-leprosy-ward-on-robben-island-unknown/UgFhRUIUg7K-w>)

Shackles of Oppression: Robben Island's Apartheid Era

During the 20th century, Robben Island etched its place in history as a triumphant symbol of resistance against apartheid and repression. The island became a political prison where South Africa's apartheid government incarcerated anti-apartheid activists. In 1961, the Prisons Department of South Africa assumed control of Robben Island and erected a maximum-security prison, which operated from 1964 until 1991, when the last political prisoners were released from Robben Island. Over this period, more than three thousand men, including the renowned Nelson Mandela, were imprisoned on Robben Island, enduring prolonged sentences.

Mandela notably authored the majority of his autobiography, "Long Walk to Freedom," during his captivity on the island. Political opponents from across South Africa and the neighbouring sub-continent were imprisoned on the island. Robben Island became a global symbol of the fight for justice, equality, and human rights.

Throughout the apartheid era, Robben Island gained notoriety for its harsh institutional practices. Initially, political and common-law prisoners shared accommodations. However, in 1971, political prisoners were further isolated and remained so until the last political prisoners were released from the island in 1991. Communication with the outside world was restricted to sending and receiving two letters annually. Family visits for prisoners were introduced but limited to once every six months, lasting a mere thirty minutes under challenging conditions. Security measures were stringent, and access to the island was nearly forbidden for civilians, including fishermen, until around 1980. Hunger strikes by prisoners started in the early 1960s to compel prison authorities to improve prison conditions.

Life on Robben Island during these years resembled more of a labour camp than a traditional prison, involving tasks like breaking rocks and mining lime from the island's quarry. All prison sentences during this period were accompanied by hard labour as part of the sentence, e.g. a sentence of 5 years imprisonment with hard labour. Physical abuse, extended solitary confinement, and inadequate food, bedding, and clothing were commonplace. In the early 1980s, prisoners began actively demanding rights, and a hunger strike in 1981, coupled with international pressure, resulted in modest improvements.

After extensive talks and negotiations with the South African government, Nelson Mandela was unconditionally released from prison on February 11, 1990. By May 1991, the remaining political prisoners, including those on Robben Island, were released. The island remained a medium-security prison for criminal offenders until 1996, when they were relocated to mainland facilities.



Nelson Mandela and Walter Sisulu in conversation on Robben Island
(Unknown, "Nelson Mandela and Walter Sisulu," Google Arts and Culture, Robben Island Museum, https://artsandculture.google.com/asset/nelson-mandela-and-walter-sisulu-unknown/hAhtwY_mihedGg)



1. Murray's Bay Harbour
2. Maximum Security Prison
3. African Penguin Colony
4. Lime Quarry
5. Robert Sobukwe House
6. Kramat of Sayed Abduraghaman Motura
7. WWII Airstrip
8. Blue Stone Quarry
9. Shelly Beach
10. Sea Challenger Shipwreck
11. Terraced Gardens of the VOC
12. Bath of Bethesda Tidal Pool (where female lepers came to bathe)
13. WWII Naval Guns
14. Lighthouse
15. Robben Island viewing point
16. Faure Jetty
17. Guesthouse (previously the Commissioner's house)
18. Robben Island Primary School
19. Staff Cemetery
20. Robben Island Ledewinkel
21. Garrison Church (Anglican Church)
22. Robben Island Club House
23. Medium B Prison (Multi-Purpose Learning Centre)
24. Cornelia Battery
25. Old Jail (Ou Tronk)
26. Van Riebeeck Quarry
27. De Waal Battery/Robben Island Battery
28. Church of the Good Shepherd (old male leprosy church)
29. Former Male Leprosy Colony Site
30. Minto Hill



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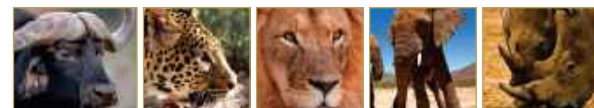


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HISTORY

The majority of inmates were black men incarcerated for political offences, enduring decades in prison for their political convictions. The island's administrators aimed to isolate opponents of apartheid and undermine their morale. Despite considerable challenges and abuse, the disciplined resilience of the apartheid-era prisoners, driven by their commitment to the struggle for freedom, especially for the majority black African population, turned Robben Island into a symbol of the triumph of the human spirit over adversity.

The end of apartheid in 1994 marked a new chapter for Robben Island. It transitioned from a place of suffering to a beacon of hope and reconciliation. Today, the island stands as a UNESCO World Heritage Site and National Museum, inviting visitors to witness the history that unfolded within its confines. Guided tours lead visitors through the stark cells, the lime quarry where prisoners toiled, and the communal spaces where resilience and resistance thrived.



The commander's house on Robben Island (Unknown, "Commander's House in Robben Island." Google Arts and Culture, Robben Island Museum. <https://artsandculture.google.com/asset/table-tennis-award/mgEBCsc5UUXDA7chIdAsset1g-t0HdZ1d5d0k7PA>)



The photo was taken during the 1977 media visit. On that day Mandela and his comrades were told to work in the garden instead of going to the lime quarry, which was their usual activity. (1977-04-25, Unknown, "Robben Island group of prisoners." Google Arts and Culture, The Nelson Mandela Foundation. <https://artsandculture.google.com/asset/robben-island-group-of-prisoners/DgEAVYx8dLFXA>)



In order from left to right. Top row: Nelson Mandela, Walter Sisulu, Govan Mbeki, Raymond Mhlaba; Bottom row: Elias Motsoaledi, Andrew Mlangeni, Ahmed Kathrada, and Dennis Goldberg. (Unknown, "8 Rivonia Trialists." Google Arts and Culture, Robben Island Museum. <https://artsandculture.google.com/asset/8-rivonia-trialists-unknown/w0QpK321R6o2iQ>)

The 8 Rivonia Trialists

The Rivonia Trial, held in 1963-1964 in South Africa, featured anti-apartheid activists who faced charges of sabotage and other offences. Fifteen were arrested, four escaped, and eleven stood trial for the first indictment, which failed. One fled the country, and ten faced charges on the second indictment. Two were discharged, and eight were found guilty. These courageous individuals were instrumental in their resistance against the oppressive apartheid regime. The group included the above iconic leaders. Each played a crucial role in the struggle for justice and equality. Seven of the eight were sentenced to life imprisonment, and they endured harsh conditions, primarily confined to Robben Island. Denis Goldberg went to Pretoria Central Prison instead of Robben Island (this was the only security wing for white political prisoners in South Africa during this period), where he served 22 years.

Imprisonment for all:	Released
Nelson Mandela 26 years behind bars	June 12 1964 Feb 11 1990
Walter Sisulu 26 years behind bars	Oct 15 1989
Govan Mbeki 23 years behind bars	Nov 5 1987
Raymond Mhlaba 25 years behind bars	Oct 15 1989
Elias Motsoaledi 26 years behind bars	Oct 15 1989
Andrew Mlangeni 26 years behind bars	Oct 15 1989
Ahmed Kathrada 26 years behind bars	Oct 15 1989
Dennis Goldberg 21 years behind bars	Feb 28 1985



A table tennis award (Unknown, "Table Tennis Award." Google Arts and Culture, Robben Island Museum. <https://artsandculture.google.com/asset/table-tennis-award/mgEBCsc5UUXDA7chIdAsset1g-t0HdZ1d5d0k7PA>)



The yard where visionaries gardened at work, but also conversed in politics



Grouped Beds on Robben Island

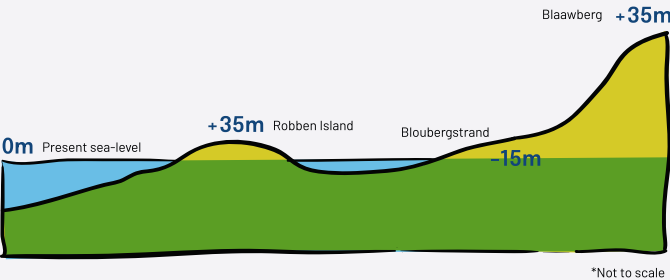
GEOLOGY

Beyond Concrete Walls: Robben Island's Flourishing Ecosystem

Geology

Robben Island is a bastion of historical significance and a repository of geological and natural wonders. The summit of an ancient, now submerged mountain is South Africa's most significant coastal island, and it sits 11km off the Table Bay harbour wall. The island's story is etched in the rocks, soils, and ecosystems that form its geological and natural tapestry. Geologically, Robben Island is a product of ancient processes shaped over millions of years. It is a testament to the dynamic forces that have sculpted the landscape. The island's rocky terrain reveals a complex history of sedimentation, uplift, and erosion. Every contour narrates a story of geological evolution from its rocky shores to the undulating landscapes.

Sea levels have experienced fluctuations over the past 700,000 years, altering the topography of the outcrop. Around 12,000 years ago, a rise in sea level resulted in a channel separating Robben Island from the mainland. The sediments constituting the present bedrocks of Table Bay and Robben Island were deposited around 900 to 800 million years ago at the entry point of an ancient river delta into shallow coastal waters. Indications of this geological process are observable through the ripple marks on the base of the oldest quarry in the southern part of the island. This bedrock is presently identified as the Tygerberg Formation within the Malmesbury Group.



A fall in sea level of only 15-20m would link Robben Island with the mainland.

The island is low-lying, with its geological formations including robust limestone, resulting from fossilised seashells and marine organisms compressed over time. These limestone outcrops contribute to the island's rugged beauty and tell tales of ancient seas and the transformative power of geological forces.

A significant chapter in Robben Island's geological history is written in its quarries. These quarries, once worked by prisoners, expose layers of limestone that hold clues to the island's past. Stone extracted from these quarries served practical purposes during different historical periods, from building construction to the island's infrastructure.

The island had a plentiful supply of fresh water from several springs. In 1963, with the increase in demand for fresh water, a new practice was put into place. Fresh water used to be transported by boat from the mainland to the island to supply the domestic consumption requirements. Water for irrigation was extracted from boreholes until a fully-fledged desalinating plant was erected on the island in 1985. The desalinating plant is capable of producing 50,000 litres of potable water per day.



Fauna and Flora

Beyond its geological heritage, Robben Island is a sanctuary for diverse flora and fauna, showcasing the resilience of life in a seemingly inhospitable environment. The island's vegetation, adapted to its arid climate, includes hardy shrubs, grasses, and endemic species that have evolved to thrive under its unique conditions. During the spring, the spectacular array of veld flowers that the West Coast is known for can also be seen on Robben Island.

The surrounding waters teem with marine life, contributing to the island's ecological richness. Seabirds, including cormorants and African penguins, find refuge on the shores. The aquatic environment plays a crucial role in the island's ecosystem, supporting diverse fish species and sustaining the island's avian inhabitants.

Robben Island's natural history is interwoven with human interactions and interventions. Its ecological narrative includes the introduction of non-native species, the impact of human settlement, and the challenges posed by changing environmental conditions. Past farming practices affected the fauna and flora of the island, with exotic shrubs and trees being introduced. The delicate balance between natural processes and human activities adds complexity to the island's natural history.

Preservation efforts on Robben Island extend beyond its historical structures to include its geological and natural heritage. The island's designation as a UNESCO World Heritage Site reflects the global recognition of its cultural, historical, and natural significance. Conservation initiatives strive to protect its unique ecosystems, ensuring that future generations can appreciate the geological and natural wonders that define Robben Island.

Robben Island is a living tableau where geological evolution and natural history chapters converge with the human story. From its rugged limestone formations to the resilient flora and fauna, the island invites us to explore the depths of its historical past and the intricate web of life woven into its very fabric. As we step onto the shores of Robben Island, we embark on a journey through time and the geological and natural wonders that make this island a genuinely remarkable and multi-faceted treasure.

Did you know?

An annual swimming event, the **Freedom Swim**, involves participants swimming from the island to the mainland. The swim is challenging due to the cold water and strong currents.

ARTS & CULTURE

The Robben Island Museum was established in 1997 and declared a world heritage site by UNESCO in 1999. Tours to Robben Island run seven days a week, with guides transporting you around the historical sites on the island, including the graveyard of those who died from leprosy, the lime quarry where political prisoners worked, and the maximum security prison where thousands of South Africa's freedom fighters were imprisoned. The final stop on the tour is a viewing of Nelson Mandela's prison cell, with the tour guide providing historical commentary throughout the tour. After the tour, there is an opportunity to view and explore museum exhibits, showcasing photographs, artefacts and artworks depicting the island's history. This is possible at the Nelson Mandela Gateway after your return from the ferry.

ADVENTURE

As you approach the island, getting to Robben Island entails a 30-minute ferry ride from Cape Town's V&A Waterfront, with spectacular views of Table Mountain and Cape Town. Stunning views of Robben Island can be seen from Table Mountain.



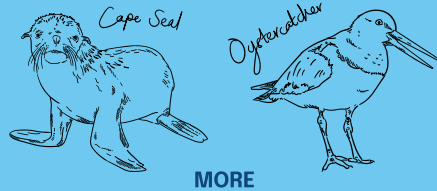
The view of Cape Town city and Table Mountain that the prisoners saw from Robben Island.



A modern ferry ride takes you over to and back from the island.

ANIMAL SIGHTINGS

True to its name, you can expect to see Cape Fur Seals on a visit to Robben Island. Other mammals include Southern Right Whales, dolphins, springbok and eland. Robben Island is home to around 132 species of birds, including sea birds, water birds and terrestrial birds. The island is a breeding and roosting ground for these birds and some species from the mainland, such as the Crowned Cormorant and Black Crowned Night Heron, who form large colonies on the island for breeding purposes. Some species to look out for on the island include the globally endangered African Penguin and the African Black Oystercatcher. Also, keep an eye out for the Cape Spurrow and Chukar Partridge, the only 'naturalised' population in South Africa.



MORE

May the echoes of Robben Island continue to inspire and remind us that even in the face of adversity, the human spirit can rise above, forging a path toward a brighter, more compassionate future. We invite you to take these stories with you, to share them, and to reflect on the lessons that Robben Island imparts—a journey that transcends time, leaving an indelible mark on our hearts and minds.



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