



CITY OF CAPE TOWN  
ISIXEKO SASEKAPA  
STAD KAAPSTAD

# Stories of the South Peninsula

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Historical research, stories and heritage tourism opportunities in  
the South Peninsula



SOUTH AFRICAN TOURISM

*The peninsula from Cape Point Nature Reserve*

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## **Background**

The primary objective of this project was to prepare a series of 'story packages' providing the content for historical interpretive stories of the 'far' South Peninsula. Stories cover the geographical area of Chapman's Peak southwards to include Imhoff, Ocean View, Masiphumelele, Kommetjie, Witsand, Misty Cliffs and Scarborough, Plateau Road, Cape Point, Smitswinkel Bay to Miller's Point, Boulders, Simon's Town, Red Hill, Glencairn and Fish Hoek to Muizenberg.

The purposes for which these stories are to be told are threefold, namely to support tourism development; to stimulate local interest; and to promote appropriate and sustainable protection of heritage resources through education, stimulation of interest and appropriate knowledge.

To this end, the linking of historical stories and tourism development requires an approach to story-telling that goes beyond the mere recording of historic events. The use of accessible language has been a focus. Moreover, it requires an approach that both recognises the iconic, picture-postcard image of parts of Cape Town (to which tourists are drawn initially), but extends it further to address the particular genius loci that is Cape Town's 'Deep South', in all its complexity and coloured by memory, ambivalences and contradictory experiences. We believe there is a need to balance the more conventional approach, which selects people or events deemed worthy of commemoration (for example, the Battle of Muizenberg) to tell the story of places, by interweaving popular memory and culture into these recordings (for example, the rich Muslim culture that existed in Simon's Town before the removal under the Group Areas Act).

Thus, these are stories, familiar and unfamiliar, that link intangible heritage with (largely) material forms and are about real-life characters and events that have shaped our past. The tone of these stories is conversational in order to engage local residents and tourists alike, and can be utilised in story-telling mode (by tour guides for example) or to fulfil on-site interpretive requirements.

Stories have been selected to balance historical themes from prehistory, through pre-colonial to colonial settlement, apartheid and democratic South Africa. The history of Cape Town's South Peninsula has been very ably and comprehensively recorded by many of its residents, and we wish to acknowledge and give thanks to all those cited as references.

## **Referencing**

The stories are intended for popular consumption. Therefore, the traditionally detailed referencing that would be expected of historical research was not regarded as appropriate in this instance, although full accuracy in terms of content and referencing has been sought. All references utilised have been listed. In respect of images, reference sources have been provided, which are open-source as far as possible.

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# 1. Beauty secrets of the South Peninsula

(C. Postlethwayte)

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*"This cape is a most stately thing and the fairest cape we saw in the whole circumference of the earth."*

Attributed to Sir Francis Drake (or the ship's chaplain) upon seeing the Cape on his circumnavigation of the world on the Golden Hind, 1580



SOUTH AFRICAN TOURISM

*The peninsula from Cape Point Nature Reserve*

The scenic splendour of the Cape Peninsula has been much talked about by visitors since the Cape was circumnavigated by Sir Francis Drake in 1580. From the spectacular marine drive over Chapman's Peak to the rugged coastline of Cape Point at the tip of the peninsula, the sheltered anchorage at Simon's Bay to the white beaches of Muizenberg, the peninsula's astounding beauty is linked to ancient geological processes forming this land.

The two main rock formations are the late-Precambrian Malmesbury group (metamorphic rock) and the peninsula granite, a huge batholith (igneous rock) that was intruded into the Malmesbury group about 630 million years ago. The older Malmesbury group was laid down in the Adamastor Ocean, an earlier version of the South Atlantic (named after the Greek-type mythical giant, whose body lies on his back from Cape Town to Cape Point, and who had the Cape as his forbidden portal, beyond which neither ship nor sail should pass).



*An artist's impression of the giant Adamastor, showing the Portuguese fleet rounding the Cape of Good Hope.*

Eventually, the ocean began to close and the continents collided, which led to the formation of Cape granite. Most of the visible granite has been weathered down to the characteristically rounded core stones that we see along the coastline between Simon's Town and Cape Point. At Boulders Beach (Simon's Town), regarded as one of the ten most unique beaches in the world, the eponymous boulders provide a secluded spot for penguins (standing around like "perplexed nuns", according to Paul Theroux) and bathers alike. Froggy Pond, just south

of Boulders Beach, is regarded as a place of special geological interest, and is a good place to stop and see the granite. It also makes for a sheltered dive site, as long as you have a permit. Continuing on to Cape Point and beyond into the Noordhoek Valley provides the traveller with a passion for geology a rich panorama of geological evolution. In some places, intense weathering has altered the granite to kaolin clay soils (or china clay, used to manufacture cups and saucers and glossy paper), which are processed and packed near Fish Hoek and Noordhoek.



*Boulders Beach*



*Froggy Pond from the road.*

Over a period of 40 million years, this weathered down to a nearly flat surface, onto which the Table Mountain group sediments were deposited. In a feat of geological engineering, the spectacular Chapman's Peak roadway has been cleverly constructed along the contact zone between solid and conveniently located Cape granite and the overlying Table Mountain sequence. In 1922, soon after it opened, a traveller commented as follows: "The road here is cut out of the mountainside proper and the slopes and kloofs are thickly wooded. Glancing back, one obtained a magnificent panorama of mountain, sea, sky and valley. When nearing Chapman's Peak, the sun was suddenly shut out. Precipitous cliffs towered hundreds of feet above; below, a sheer drop of a 1 000 feet, the sea dashed against the rocks sending up columns of spray. Our coach seemed a very insignificant thing on the streak of roadway between sky and sea. Without doubt this drive is the most beautiful and will be the most popular of all which the Peninsula can boast."<sup>1</sup>



*Chapman's Peak Drive*

#### Chapman's Peak

Regarded as one of the most scenic drives in the world, Chapman's Peak winds its way along the vertical cliffs rising out of the ocean between Hout Bay and Noordhoek. Opened in 1922 and built by convict labour, it was named after John Chapman, the chief mate of the ship *Consent*. Upon being becalmed in the area of Hout Bay, Chapman was sent ashore to find provisions. The name of the bay was recorded as Chapman's Chance ('chance'). It is reputedly the oldest surviving English place name in South Africa.

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<sup>1</sup> Ross (2007) pp 128-9.

The local sandstone and granite, quarried at outcrops high above the towns of the South Peninsula, was used in many of the historic buildings and walls of the area (between Muizenberg and Cape Point), as well as the Simon's Town naval dockyard and Selbourne dry dock, resulting in the characteristic False Bay architecture.



*Muizenberg Station*



*Old Magistrates Court, Muizenberg*



*Main Road, Muizenberg*

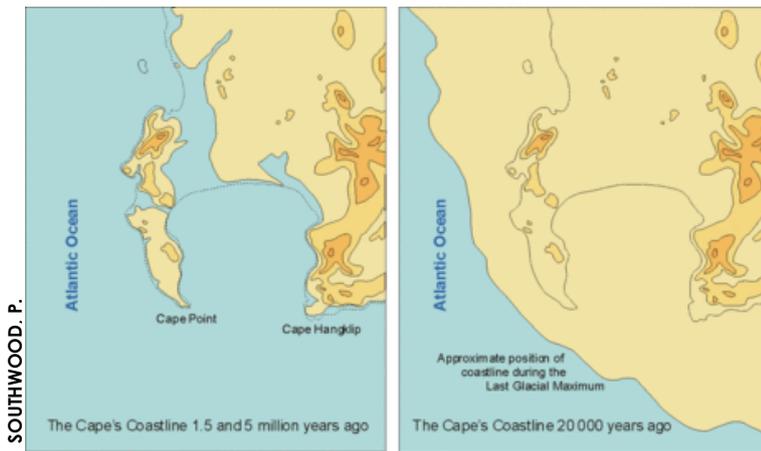


*Star of the Sea*



*Martello Tower, Simon's Town, late 1800s. Saints Simon & Jude Catholic Church, Simon's Town, with the Jackson quarry visible behind the church Simon's Town Museum from which many of the local buildings and structures were constructed*

Fluctuating sea levels over millions of years have also added to the unique natural landscape of the South Peninsula. Between two million and 15 000 years ago, with changing global temperatures and varying amounts of water accumulating at the polar ice caps, the Cape coastline varied considerably. At times, the sea covered the Cape Flats and Noordhoek Valley, and the Cape Peninsula was then a group of islands. At others, the sea was substantially (up to 130 m) lower than today, which turned False Bay into a huge dune-field.



*The historical Cape coastline.*

From the vantage point of Ou Kaapse Weg, one can imagine how the flat valley before you, between Fish Hoek and Long Beach, Noordhoek, was once an ocean bed and the South Peninsula an island. As the sea retreated, beach sands with shell fragments and estuarine muds were deposited and later overlain by calcrete-cemented dune sands. Some dunes in the Dido Valley area possibly date from prehistoric times. The sands

of Fish Hoek were hazardous to travel in the early settlement of the peninsula and, combined with the relentless southeasters, required many a horse, oxen and wagon to brave the water's edge, even belly-deep, where the sand was firmer. Rudyard Kipling, who knew this coast well from several visits between 1891 and 1907, is said to be referring to Glencairn or Fish Hoek in his story "Mrs Bathurst" when he speaks of "moulded dunes, whiter than any snow, rolled far inland up a brown and purple valley of splintered rocks and dry scrub", and described how "the strong south-easter buffeting under Elsie's Peak dusted sand into our tickey beer".<sup>2</sup>



COBERN, J.

*Fish Hoek Main Road, 1910.*

<sup>2</sup>Tredgold (1985) p 161.



*The valley of sand: Fish Hoek valley to Noordhoek pre-development. People remember sailing their boats on the pans that appeared in winter.*

We can also see evidence of the higher stands of the sea in the wave-cut platforms, benches, boulder-beach ridges, sea cliffs, caves and undercut ledges along the peninsula's rugged coastline. Wave-cut caves, indicating former sea-level stands of between +4 and +8 m, are found between Cape Point and Muizenberg at the descriptively named Boiler Room, Batsata Cove, Blaasbalkgrot, Slimy Boulder and Hell's Gate, amongst others. Many are difficult to get to and extremely dangerous, even when the sea is calm, and are therefore not well explored by cavers.

As the sea levels dropped, False Bay became an area of well-watered grass and bush in which animals roamed, including grazing antelope, quaggas, elephants, hippopotamuses, rhinoceros, lions, leopards and buffalo. The first colonists recorded these encounters, including Simon van der Stel, who, in 1687, searching for safe anchorage in False Bay, came across a large 'tiger' (most likely a leopard) and enthusiastically reported on the abundant game (including a marauding lion, which forced him to sleep in a tent after it had killed one of the party's sheep) and fishing. Tragically, communities of yesteryear had little appreciation for the value of biodiversity, and wild game was simply meat or sport. In 1689, it was recorded how two huge elephants caused significant damage to the young trees that the Dutch East India Company (VOC) had planted in Hout Bay, following which the animals were shot down with flintlocks, slaughtered and the flesh divided up amongst the company slaves. The last recording of a Cape lion being shot near Cape Town was as recent as 1850. However, the peninsula still provides refuge to fauna, particularly in Table Mountain National Park (itself a natural world heritage site and one of the New7Wonders of Nature), where they are uniquely adapted to the fynbos ecosystem and where some locally extinct species have been reintroduced in Cape Point Nature Reserve, amongst others.

The human-wildlife conflict that seems inevitable is still played out when it comes to our evolutionary cousins, the chacma baboon. In 1851, one Lieutenant John Shipp, in a memoir of his military adventures, described several encounters he had had with baboons near the Cape of Good Hope:

“On these hills, whole regiments of baboons assemble, for which this station is particularly famous. They stand six feet high, and in features and manners approach nearer to the human species than any other quadruped I have ever seen. These rascals, who are most abominable thieves, used to annoy us exceedingly. Our barracks were under the hills, and when we went to parade, we were invariably obliged to leave armed men for the protection of our property; and, even in spite of this, they have frequently stolen our blankets and greatcoats, or anything else they could lay their claws on. A poor woman, a soldier’s wife, had washed her blanket, and hung it out to dry, when some of these miscreants, who were ever on the watch, stole it, and ran off with it into the hills, which are high and woody. This drew upon them the indignation of the regiment, and we formed a strong party, armed with sticks and stones, to attack them, with the view of recovering the property, and inflicting such chastisement as might be a warning to them for the future. I was on the advance, with about twenty men, and I made a detour to cut them off from caverns, to which they always flew for shelter. They observed my movement, and immediately detached about fifty to guard the entrance, while the others kept their post; and we could distinctly see them collecting large stones, and other missiles. One old grey-headed one, in particular, who often paid us a visit at the barracks, and was known by the name of Father Murphy, was seen distributing his orders, and planning the attack, with the judgment of one of our best generals. Finding that my design was defeated, I joined the corps de main, and rushed on to the attack, when a scream from Father Murphy was a signal for a general encounter, and the host of baboons under his command rolled down enormous stones upon us, so that we were obliged to give up the contest, or some of us must inevitably have been killed. They actually followed us to our very doors, shouting, in indication of victory; and, during the whole night, we heard dreadful yells and screaming; so much so, that we expected a night attack. In the morning, however, we found that all this rioting had been created by disputes about the division of the blanket; for we saw eight or ten of them with pieces of it on their backs, as old women wear their cloaks. Amongst the number strutted Father Murphy. These rascals annoyed us day and night, and we dared not venture out, unless a party of five or six went together.

One morning, Father Murphy had the consummate impudence to walk straight into the grenadier barracks; and he was in the very act of purloining a sergeant’s regimental coat, when a corporal’s guard (which had just been relieved) took the liberty of stopping the gentleman at the door, and secured him. He was a most powerful brute, and, I am persuaded, too much for any single man. Notwithstanding his frequent misdemeanours, we did not like to kill the poor creature; so, having first taken the precaution of muzzling him, we determined on shaving his head and face, and then turning him loose. To this ceremony, strange to say, he submitted very quietly; and, when shaved, he was really an exceedingly good-looking fellow, and I have seen many a ‘blood’ in Bond Street not half so prepossessing in his appearance. We then started him up the hill, though he seemed rather reluctant to leave us. Some of his companions came down to meet him; but, from the alteration which shaving his head and face had made on him, they did not know him again, and, accordingly, pelted him with stones, and beat him with sticks, in so unmerciful a manner, that poor Father Murphy actually sought protection from his enemies, and he in time became

quite domesticated and tame. There are many now alive, in His Majesty's 22<sup>nd</sup> regiment, who can vouch for the truth of this anecdote."<sup>3</sup>

Whilst it seems that humans are still not entirely free of such attitudes, and baboon persecution remains a thorny issue to resolve in urban areas, the authorities are actively addressing it. When walking in the mountains of the South Peninsula, you might be surprised to see field rangers appear as if from nowhere, paintball rifle in hand, tracking a baboon troop and encouraging them to forage in their natural habitat.



*Baboons at Cape Point*

Of course, a discussion about the fauna of the peninsula is not complete without reference to the Cape Floristic Region, one of the Cape's greatest assets. The rich mosaic of the fynbos provides a fascinating window onto the complex evolutionary interaction of geology, climate, fire and pollinators that provides us with a wealth of floral biodiversity, some of which is confined to very small areas, such as the delicate *Erica fairii* Bolus, which is currently known from a single subpopulation limited to an area of only 6 km<sup>2</sup> on the Red Hill plateau. For those less interested in the botanical or geological minutiae of the flora, the extraordinary scenic beauty of fynbos in the peninsula's natural areas is well worth the visit (walk it if you can), and opportunities to do so abound. Admiration of natural scenery has not always been part of humans' engagement with their environment: Rugged mountains, sand-swept flats and hardy vegetation were frequently viewed as an uninviting prospect by early travellers to the Cape; more of a hindrance to travel and trying to wrest a living from the elements. However, an appreciation for the peninsula's charms grew. In 1822, William Wilberforce Bird, a controller of customs in Cape Town, wrote of his journey to Simon's Town: "From that place (Muizenberg) to the bay, it skirts the foot of lofty mountains, overhanging the traveler on his right hand, while the ocean rolls majestically through the bay, on his left. The scene is so picturesque and beautiful, that it cannot be passed for the first time without feelings of delight."<sup>4</sup> There are many now who would concur in respect of our 'fairest Cape'.

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<sup>3</sup> <http://www.oldandsold.com/articles11/evening-book-82.shtml>.

<sup>4</sup> Tredgold (1985) p 43.

TURNER, R.C.



*Erica fairii* Bolus

MOLENTO, S.



*The king protea*

## **Acknowledgements and disclaimer**

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