CITY OF CAPE TOWN
ISIXEKO SASEKAPA
STAD KAAPSTAD

Stories of the South Peninsula

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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Contents

2. A graveyard of ships

(C. Postlethwayte)

In 1770, a Swede, Jacob Wallenberg, who put into Simon's Bay claiming to be the first Swedish ship to have done so, remarked humorously: "It is as rare to weather the Cape without a storm as it is to get out of Cadiz without a broken heart."[5] Hard to believe on a sunny, cloudless day at Cape Point, but as a testament to this, the Cape Peninsula is littered with the wrecks of ships that fell victim to the treacherous conditions. Stories tell of the drama and heroism, mutiny and murder, avarice and corruption, and sheer incompetence that accompanied these wrecking.

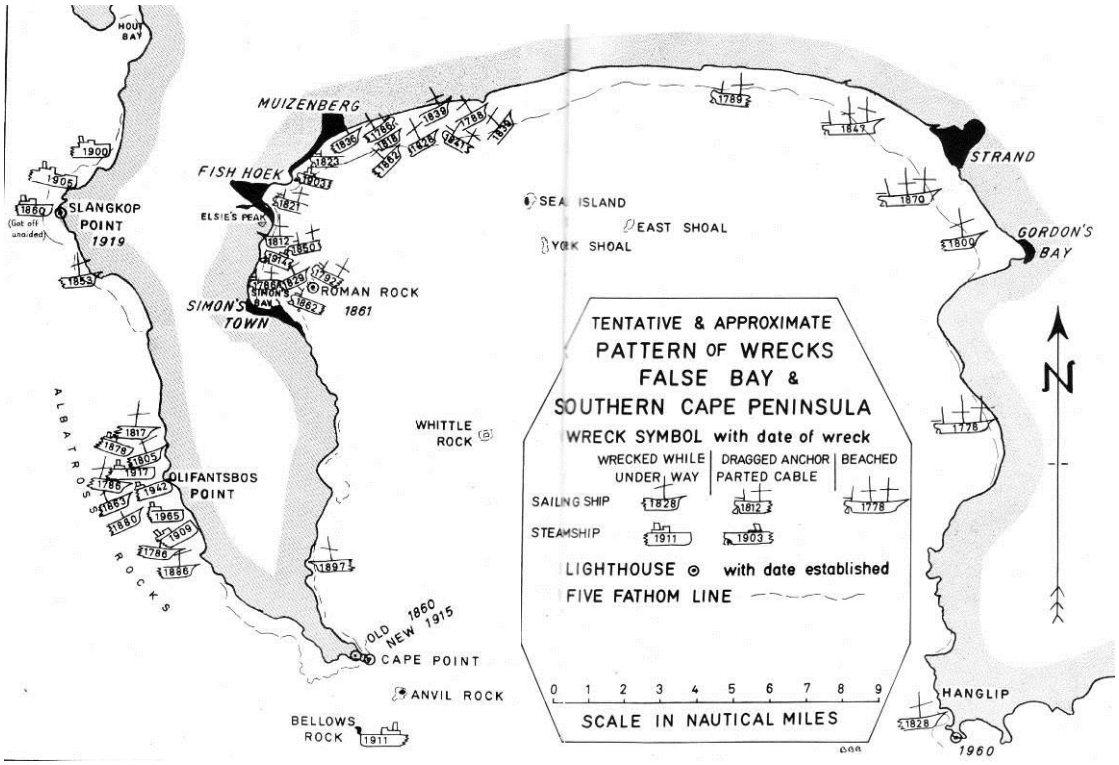
The most ghostly of all is of course the legend of the Flying Dutchman, immortalised by, amongst others, Longfellow, Kipling, Wagner and Sir Walter Scott. The tale follows Captain Hendrick Vanderdecken in the employ of the Dutch East India Company, who attempted to round the Cape of Good Hope in 1641. A fierce southeaster repeatedly thwarted his attempt to round the peninsula. Refusing to listen to the pleas of his crew, the merciless Vanderdecken strapped himself to the wheel and vowed to carry on, swearing that even God would not force him to change his mind. His blasphemy was heard, an angel descended and condemned him to sail the oceans for all eternity with a ghostly crew of dead men, bringing death to all who saw the spectral ship, never to make port nor know a moment's peace. The legend has been kept alive by numerous sightings, most famously by the princes Albert and George (later King George V), who were midshipmen on the HMS Baccante in 1881. The ship's log records the appearance of the Flying Dutchman as a strange red light, as of a ship all aglow, but upon reaching her, there was no material presence. That same day, the seaman who

SMITHSONIAN AMERICAN ART MUSEUM

The Flying Dutchman by Albert Pinkham Ryder circa 1887.

5 Tredgold (1985) p 43.

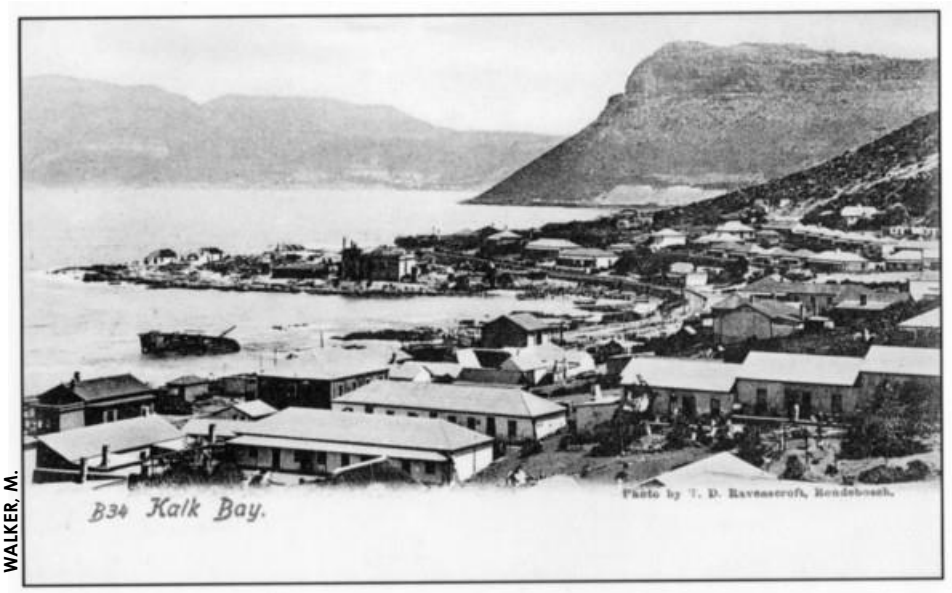
had reported the phantom ship, fell to his death from the top mast. Other sightings include dozens of bathers at Glencairn in 1939, a British man-of-war cruising between Africa and South America, and a German submarine during World War II, as well as a 1959 sighting by the captain of the Dutch freighter Straat Megelhaen.



BROCK & WILLIS, SIMON'S TOWN HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Note: This map is a generalisation of data available at the time of publishing, and is not exhaustive nor to be used by divers. It is used here for illustrative purposes only.

The early sailors struggling to set a safe course around the southern tip of Africa faced a host of problems from its treacherous coastline: Poor visibility, storms and lack of recognisable landmarks were the most obvious, particularly before harbours and breakwaters were put in place in the second half of the 19th century. Navigators had to make do with outdated and inaccurate charts, which, without lighthouses, were the cause of many a wrecking. Human nature, unchanged over centuries, also contributed to the littering of our ocean floors: overloading of cargo, lack of maintenance due to competition and avarice, corruption (bribing the authorities to declare ships seaworthy), piracy, mutiny, human error and a fondness for drink! Nevertheless, these shipwreck clusters tell us of the irrevocable transformations that colonisation brought about on the subcontinent, as both a catalyst and vehicle for change. The wrecks also led to the development of harbours, lighthouses and, consequently, settlements. But not all wrecks changed the face of local settlement. There are many stories of un-dramatic wrecking, unremarkable crews, no tales of derring-do. One such story is that of the trawler Rex, which met an ignominious end when, in 1903, loading ice in Kalk Bay, it was caught by a southeaster, dragged anchor before her crew could realise, and ran aground opposite Kalk Bay Station. She remained on the rocks for many years, finally leaving only the boiler on the beach, evident in postcards of early Kalk Bay. Some remains are still visible at low tide in the harbour.



The trawler Rex lies forlornly on her starboard side, Kalk Bay.

Simon's Town harbour was developed to provide safe winter anchorage from the northerlies that made Table Bay harbour itself a locus of many a shipwreck. (A disastrous storm in 1722, for example, saw the loss of 600 lives in Table Bay). Whilst explorations were under way to find a suitable harbour site in False Bay, an added incentive arrived in the form of a pirate ship. In 1725, a suspicious ship, Great Alexander, was found to have anchored in False Bay. Officers and crew had come ashore and tried to make the local fishermen drunk, failing which, they asked for food and water, for which they offered to pay double the asking price. Armed forces were dispatched, who received confirmation from deserters that the ship was indeed a pirate ship. Indecision on the part of the soldiers, however, allowed the ship to disappear in the middle of the night. The deserters and captain, who had been imprisoned, were eventually released due to the cost of holding them, most surprising given the harsh penalties at the time for mutineers or sailors committing murder, who rather drastically were sentenced to death, but not before they were tied to a cross, their limbs broken from below upwards between pauses, after which their right hand and head were cut off and displayed for all other seamen who might consider similar action. A lucky escape for the pirates, but the dangers of an uncontrolled anchorage was brought home to the authorities, and the search for an appropriate harbour intensified until 1743, when what was then called Simon's Bay was established. Although it was initially only intended to be temporary, it expedited the creation of the settlement that was to become Simon's Town.

After the Second British Occupation, Simon's Town became a British naval base in 1814, from which base the Navy protected the southern seas for the British Empire, assuming a very significant role for such a small town. The protection of the sea route around the Cape was invaluable during the two World Wars. It was also involved in finally bringing to a close the scourge of slavery. Slavery was abolished in Britain in 1807, and later, her colonies' naval forces were required, in terms of the Webster-Ashburton Treaty of 1842, to actively prevent the shipping of slaves along the coast. Before abolition, a number of slavers had been wrecked along the Cape coast, leading to terrible loss of life, as all the slaves were left in chains. To add insult to injury, those who survived were sold off again into slavery in Cape Town, or put onto the next slave ship to continue their journey. After abolition, those slaves 'rescued' by the Navy were then indentured as apprentices for up to 14 years, after which they were released, compounding the tragedy of people who never again saw their homeland. The slavers were however scuttled in large numbers after 1842, so much so that

the resident magistrate of Simon's Town complained that the large number of scuttled slavers and other wrecks made the beach look like a ship's graveyard! As late as 1993, trainee marine archaeologists found the remains of the Brazilian slaver Rowvonia, which was wrecked (fortunately with no loss of life) in Simon's Town in 1850.

NATIONAL ARCHIVES UK

Archival image of the slave trade, depicting East African slaves taken aboard HMS Daphne. Archival image of the slave trade, depicting East African slaves taken aboard HMS Daphne.

The strategic importance of the southern tip of Africa, together with the establishment of a harbour (and the Navy) at Simon's Town and the many wrecks along the coast, gave rise to the need for a lighthouse at Cape Point. However, erecting much-needed lighthouses in the region has always been beset with the inertia of bureaucracy, and it took many a tragedy or near tragedy to finally force their hand. A lighthouse was only built at Cape Point in 1860, at the peak of the Cape Point Peak, with a wide view across the bay and the Atlantic. In 1868, an article in Charles Dickens's weekly journal *All the Year Round* featured a journey to the newly constructed lighthouse: "The lighthouse keeper was out on the rock watching our toilsome ascent through a long ship's glass. A strong pull, a final breathless desperate struggle, and we stand, hot, heaving, panting and perspiring, at the southernmost point of Africa; the actual 'Cape of Storms' enchanted ground. For is it not the very home, castle-keep, of the dreaded Flying Dutchman? No longer a solitary storm-lashed rock 'far from humanity's reach', the meddling British engineer has annexed it, and supplies it with elliptic lenses, argand lamps, plate glass, and colza oil."[6] However, the remote location made it difficult to get the three-monthly supplies of oil and food to the lighthouse keeper, who complained of almost starving to death. But an even more fundamental problem emerged: At that altitude, the lighthouse was enveloped in fog or cloud for an astonishingly high proportion of the time, which made the facility useless. This was recorded on numerous occasions over many years. Despite numerous wrecks where difficulty in seeing the light was cited as the cause, the authorities still failed to act. It took the wreck of the SS Lusitania in 1911 to force the decision. She had 793 passengers on board and, incredibly, only three lost their lives: the largest ship rescue to that date in South Africa.

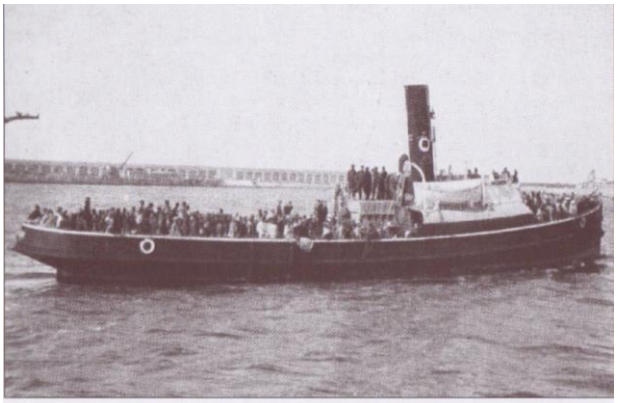
6 Young (1999) p 7.

Galvanised into action, the authorities finally built a second lighthouse at Cape Point, this time at a lower altitude to eliminate the problems of visibility. It was completed in 1919 and first lit at sunset by the then light-keeper's three-year-old daughter. It is the most powerful lighthouse in South Africa, with a luminosity of 10 million candlepower helping the passing ships avoid the lurking menace of the infamous Albatross and Bellows rocks.

Soon after the first Cape Point lighthouse was built, the need to provide safe passage for ships entering and leaving Simon's Bay precipitated the building of Roman Rock lighthouse. It is, not surprisingly, the only lighthouse in the southern hemisphere built on a rock in the sea. As such, it was very complex to construct, and conditions were terribly dangerous. During storms, the lighthouse vibrated terrifyingly and was engulfed by water, making it impossible for the light-keeper to emerge. The salaries were the highest in the service! Roman Rock was unmanned in 1919, when a new mechanism was installed. It is now powered by an undersea electric cable, the only in South Africa.

WALKER, M.

This could well have been the start of her fateful journey, April 1911. PC



WALKER, M.

The tug *Scotsman* arriving at Simon's Town with passengers from the wreck.

Ox-wagons were provided at Cape Point to convey those who had landed there. BG

The rescue of Lusitania.

Official reports following the wrecking of the Lusitania also highlighted the need for an additional lighthouse at Slangkop Point, Kommetjie, where the seas are dangerously rough and numerous wrecks had occurred. The breaking point, so to speak, was probably the 1905 wreck of the Clan Munro. The iconic Slangkop lighthouse is unique not only because it is the tallest lighthouse in South Africa, but also the only one built of cast iron. One can even take a tour of this lighthouse and learn more of the fascinating history of lighthouses on the peninsula.

Despite being littered with wrecks, the only visible wrecks along the South Peninsula now are those of the SS Clan Stuart (of which the steam engine block is visible off Mackerel Beach, Glencairn), the SS Thomas Tucker (a 'Liberty Ship' that was on her maiden voyage carrying military supplies, including five Sherman tanks, only three sections of which remain on the rocks off Olifantbos beach, Cape Point), and the Kakapo (the skeleton of which lies on Noordhoek beach).

Slangkop lighthouse

BERTOLDI. J.

Roman Rock lighthouse.

Remains of the Clan Stuart.

HAIG-SMITH, T.

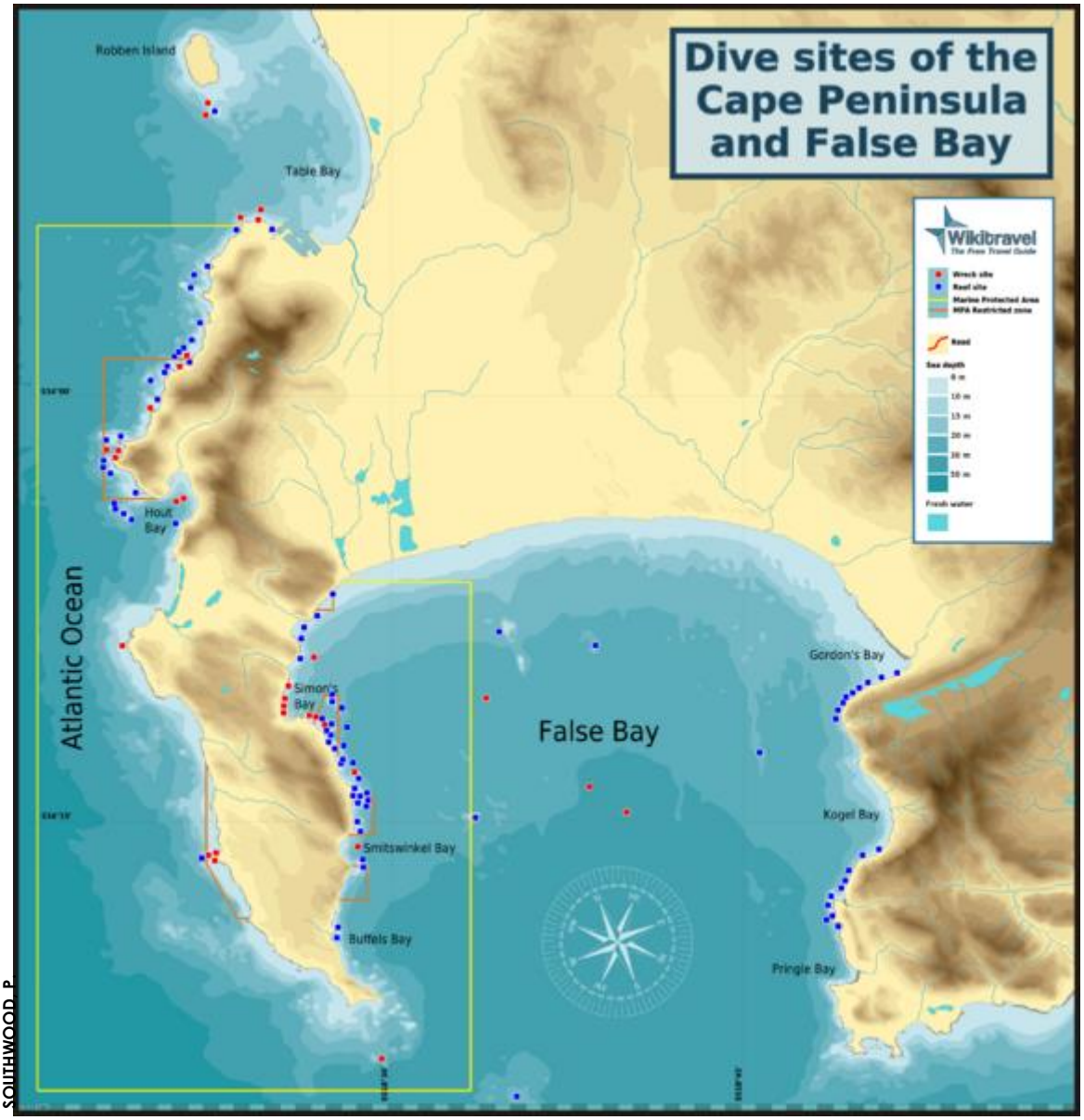
The wreck of the SS Thomas Tucker.

WESTERN CAPE ARCHIVES

Kakapo, 1900, wrecked on Noordhoek beach.

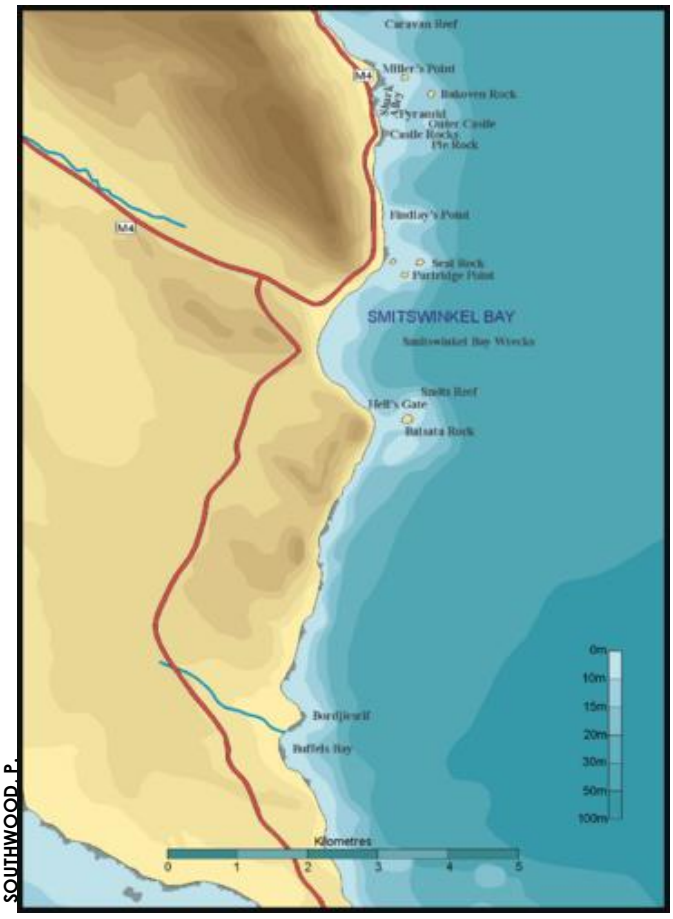
Of these remaining visible wreck sites, the Kakapo's story is the most colourful. This British steamer was on her maiden voyage from Swansea to Sydney. Leaving Table Bay harbour in stormy weather, she ran ashore on Kommetjie beach. Although later blaming a faulty compass, the court of enquiry was disbelieving, and it is more likely that the captain and second officer mistook Chapman's Peak for Cape Point and, having thought the ship had run her distance, ordered hard-a-port, full-steam ahead … straight onto the beach. At such speed, she was firmly lodged and her crew were able to disembark without getting their feet wet! Winter storms gradually pushed the vessel inland until she was impossible to refloat. The story goes that the captain was so humiliated by the ordeal that he refused to leave the ship, living there for three years, communicating via messages in a bottle, and passers-by could see the smoke from his fires rising from the ship's tunnel. More prosaically, others claim it was smoke from the fires of a homeless man who had made a temporary shelter of the ship. The wreck enjoyed another brief moment of fame when featured in the Academy Award-winning 1968 film *Ryan's Daughter*. Now largely buried, the remaining skeleton of the ship lies at the high-tide mark at the southern end of Noordhoek beach.

The ships lost on the shores of the South Peninsula have made diving in the area a popular pastime, and excavations and explorations by marine archaeologists have contributed to our knowledge of important historical, political and social trends. The wreck sites offer a variety of representative vessels. However, indiscriminate treasure hunters, salvors and divers have meant that much of our underwater heritage has been denuded of valuable historical information and context. In response to these problems, South Africa has developed world-class protective legislation in the form of the National Heritage Resources Act, which protects any wrecks older than 60 years. A good alternative (yet challenging) diving option is the Smitswinkel Bay wreck site, where, between 1972 and 1983, five vessels were scuttled to form artificial reefs, which have been very successful in attracting marine life.


Dive sites of the Cape Peninsula and False Bay
Robben Island
Table Bay
Hout Bay
Atlantic Ocean
Simon's Bay
False Bay
Gordon's Bay
Kogel Bay
Smitswinkel Bay
Buffels Bay
Pringle Bay
Wikibravel
The Free Travel Guide
Wreck site
Reef site
Marine Protected Area
MPA Restricted zone
Road
Sea depth
Fresh water

SOUTHWOOD_P

SOUTHWOOD. P.



SOUTHWOOD. P.

Acknowledgements and disclaimer

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