



ROBBEN ISLAND



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.

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.

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.

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/LqFhgRU07K-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. The 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.

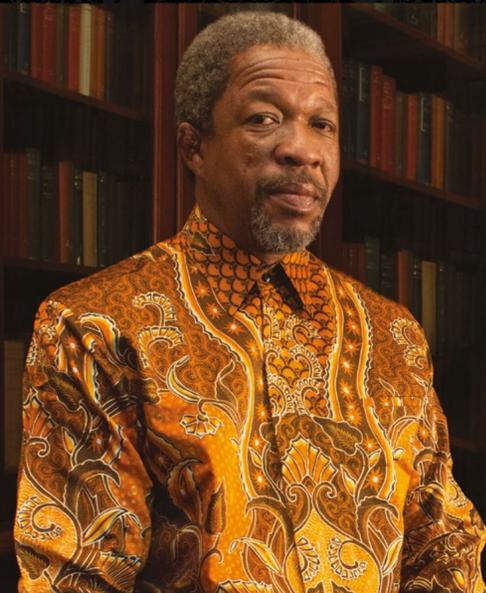


Nelson Mandela and Walter Sisulu in conversation on Robben Island (Unknown, "Nelson Mandela and Walter Sisulu," Google Arts and Culture, Robben Island Museum. https://artsandculture.google.com/asset/nelson-mandela-and-walter-sisulu-unknown/h4hwo7_m1heudg)



1. Murray's Bay Harbour
2. Maximum Security Prison
3. African Penguin Colony
4. Lime Quarry
5. Robert Sobukwe House
6. Kramat of Sayed Abduraghman 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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