

The West Coast

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

iziko museums of South Africa

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'There is no finer sheet of landlocked water in the world than this.'

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

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 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 Velddrift.

One exception to the general flatness of the West Coast is a ridge of granite hills, starting in the south at the Darling Hills 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.

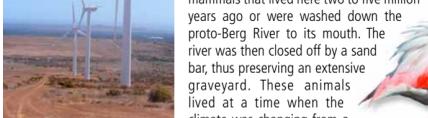


Bokbaai (buck bay) was originally a station for slaves of the VOC for collecting mussels. The homestead was built about 1750.

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-Colombine Arch, which runs next to the Colenso Fault Line that extends from Franschoek 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



The wind farm at Darling



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

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



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.

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 resources. By 1657 a group calling themselves 'Saldanhavaarders' 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' (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Utday70kx8>)
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, much to 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 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.



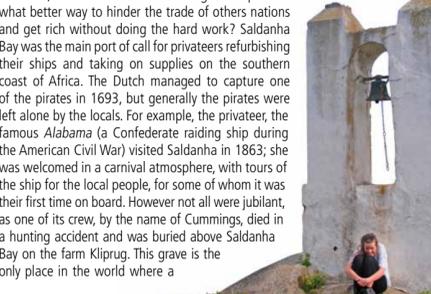
Wildebeest (Gnu) in the Buffelsfontein Game Reserve, which is an hour's drive from Cape Town. Visitors can stay overnight or take a day trip.

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 justify their looting). The British, who had entered the world sea trade later than the other European countries, were notorious for backing these privateers: what better way to hinder the trade of others nations and get rich without doing the hard work? Saldanha Bay was the main port of call for privateers refurbishing their ships and taking on supplies on the southern coast of Africa. The Dutch managed to capture one of the pirates in 1693, but generally the pirates were left alone by the locals. For example, the privateer, the famous *Alabama* (a Confederate raiding ship during the American Civil War) visited Saldanha in 1863; she was welcomed in a carnival atmosphere, with tours of the ship for the local people, for some of whom it was their first time on board. However not all were jubilant, as one of its crew, by the name of Cummings, died in a hunting accident and was buried aboard Saldanha Bay on the farm Kliprug. This grave is the only place in the world where a



Slave Bell at Klawer Vallei

confederate soldier was buried outside his native country. His body was returned to the USA 131 years later. Some people today still believe that pirates buried their elusive treasure at Saldanha Bay.

Within 50 years of the Dutch settling at the Cape there were 40 farms between De Groene Kloof (Mamre) and Saldanha Bay, and a fair sprinkling further up the coast. Most of these settlers were desperately

poor, but some big names such as Eksteen, Cloete, Van der Stel and Versfeld had large cattle farms, horse studs, and salt and fishing enterprises to supply the Dutch East India Company (VOC). The VOC controlled all business at the Cape with an iron fist but this was to change with the political alignment of the European powers, epidemic levels of corruption within the Company and the rise of the English East India Company.

The year 1781 saw the first shot over the bows – the beginning of the end – for the VOC. Holland sided with the Americans, France and Spain during the American War of Independence by declaring war on England. As a result of this declaration, Governor van Plettenberg decided to move some of his richly laden ships from Table Bay to Saldanha Bay for safe-keeping before they could be escorted back to Europe. What unfolded was a disaster for the company. The captains were given instructions to destroy their ships rather than let them fall into English hands. It so happened that the English discovered their whereabouts by tricky and then entered the bay deceitfully under a French flag. Short-lived jubilation turned into panic as the Dutch tried to destroy their own ships. The only ship prepared for this endeavour was the *Middelburg* which was set ablaze by its first mate, (François le Vaillant, the renowned natural historian, who was travelling on the *Middelburg*, lost much of his life's work.) The English managed to capture six Indiamen and other smaller vessels. This one-sided battle is on record as the biggest naval battle in South African waters.

Because of the Napoleonic Wars, the English visited the bay again (during the First British Occupation of the Cape) in 1796, when 2500 soldiers marched from Cape Town at the same time as Admiral Elphinstone sailed up and managed, owing to superior fire power, to persuade the Dutch to surrender their ships. The Cape was given back to the Dutch in 1802 and then re-occupied under the Second British Occupation in 1806 when Saldanha Bay was secured by a small British force as part of the Battle of Blaauwberg.

The British decide to stay
Under the British administration freedom of trade was opened up to all, which paved the way for the West Coast's first entrepreneurs, the Stephan family, who saw a gap in the transport market. Since Van Riebeeck's time transport had been a major problem for the inhabitants of the area known then as the Agter Baai (behind the bay). Owing to the difficulties presented by the land route with its sandy terrain, nearly all transport had to be by sea. The Stephan family's business transported goods from farmers who were isolated from Cape Town. Their main base was at the mouth of the Berg River: virtually all goods leaving or arriving were carried on one of their vessels. The next phase of their operation was to acquire almost all the best



Klawer Vallei: Groote Post Winery



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Lighthouses of the West Coast



Dassen Island
This lighthouse, which was commissioned in 1893, stands 28 m high and is a circular cast-iron structure. Dassen Island, 9 km from Yzerfontein, is the second-longest island in SA. The lighthouse has a group flash of 2 every 30 seconds, with a 26-nautical-mile range.

South Head

Located at the southern entrance to Saldanha Bay. The first structure was built in 1969. The present circular concrete structure dates from 2000. It stands 23 m high and it has a group flash of 4 every 30 seconds.

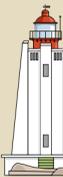


North Head

Located at the northern entrance to Saldanha Bay. The first structure was built in 1939. The present circular concrete structure dates from 2005. It stands 21 m high and has a group flash of 3 every 20 seconds, with a 23-nautical-mile range.

Stompneuspunt Beacon

Located on the southern point of St Helena Bay. Stompnose, as local fishermen call it, is actually considered a beacon. The first structure was built in 1934. The present structure dates from 2001. Designed in an exotic Middle Eastern style, it stands 8 m high. The light flashes every 3 seconds, with a 10-nautical-mile range.



Cape Columbine

This lighthouse is named after a ship that was wrecked here in 1829. Built in 1936 in the Art Deco style, it stands on the section of coastline in South Africa most dreaded by mariners. It is open to the public and has overnight accommodation for visitors. This lighthouse stands 15 m high on a granite outcrop called Castle Rock. The light flashes every 15 seconds, with a 30-nautical-mile range.



Ganzekraal, once the site of a historical homestead

farms from defaulting farmers who owed them money. Their involvement in the fishing industry and other enterprises brought the family huge financial success, but their sea transport business came to an end with the development of a road and of the railway line (in 1912) to the area. At this point the Stephan business empire was broken up and the proceeds channelled into a new cannery venture, mainly with rock lobster. During WWII the experimental canning of pilchards (seen as cheap food for troops) took the industry to new heights. As a result of a rush of other investors, 15 new canneries were established, and the West Coast earned the nickname 'Cannery Coast'.

At the same time as the Stephan dynasty was making its fortune, others were making theirs with something entirely different. The year 1844 saw the beginning of the guano rush on the islands off Saldanha Bay. So much for Van Riebeeck trying to find his fortune in gold, amber and musk up the West Coast!

However, the venture that might be considered to have brought the darkest hour of the West Coast was the whaling industry. As early as 1497 the first recorded whale hunt (by Vasco da Gama's brother at St Helena Bay) took place. The 1700s saw the Dutch trying whaling on a small scale without success, but with the arrival of American and British whalers whaling reached fever pitch. When Scandinavians (with Norway using the first steam whalers in 1909) joined in, the bloodbath saw Saldanha Bay stained red. The whales' only respite was during WWII, when men turned their attention to killing one another, but after the war the carnage continued until 1967. By then the whale population had been depleted to the point where whaling was no longer viable: the doors of Donkergat and Salamander Bay, which together had processed 40 000 whales, were closed. When you visit the Iziko Museum in Cape Town and admire the skeleton of the huge Blue Whale, pause to reflect that this was one of the whales from Salamander Bay.



Cape Columbine Lighthouse 5 km from Paternoster

WWII brought prosperity: with the Suez Canal closed, Saldanha Bay (called 'the Gibraltar of the South' at that time) became an important convoy staging post for Allied shipping. With an influx of military personnel, construction of airfields, coastal defence infrastructure, harbour refurbishing and the Boom Defence (a minefield for submarines) across the entrance to Saldanha Bay, a lot of money was poured into the area and a lot of local businesses must have smiled. Today these military installations can be seen all over the West Coast, from artillery batteries, runways and old sea mines left on Malgaskop, to lookout towers at Jacobsbaai.



Granite boulders on the way to Paternoster

The West Coast has always relied on its marine industry as its main source of revenue, but this industry, once among the biggest in the world, has taken a huge knock due to overfishing (but aquaculture with black mussels and oysters is now taking place in Saldanha Bay). The West Coast has met the challenge and diversified into the oil and gas industries. It has used its harbour effectively with the steel and shipping industries, and in 2013 it became a designated Industrial Development Zone. An industry that has taken off only in the last 10-15 years is tourism, owing to the area's distinctive landscape and spectacular flower display every spring.

Interesting places

Some places not strictly considered part of the West Coast are included as they are part of the journey up the coast. Information provided focuses on the interesting and unusual: for full tourist information see box at the end.

Blaauwberg (Blouberg): This was the setting for the only European-style battle in sub-Saharan Africa. The English victory at the Battle of Blaauwberg changed the course of South African history as it resulted in the Second British Occupation of the Cape in 1806.

Melkbosstrand: (Previously known as Losperd's Bay) Here the British landed over 5500 troops for the Battle of Blaauwberg.

Koebeg Nuclear Power Station: This is currently the only nuclear power station in Africa. (It had its roots in the Manhattan Project and the first atomic bomb dropped on Japan.) There is a visitors' centre (free admission) with great interactive exhibits and walks in the surrounding nature reserve.



Over 200 kinds of birds can be viewed from the Geelbek bird hide.

Witzand (Atlantis sand dunes): This is the place for sand-boarding and 4x4 extreme driving. The dunes are formed because Robben Island impedes the flow of the Benguela Current, causing an excess of sand to be pushed onto the beach, from where it is blown inland to form the dunes. The same phenomenon, because of Dassen Island, has created the Geelbek dunes.

Silverstroom: This beach resort is well worth a visit. The Duckitt family's famous Cape Dutch homestead, Bokbaai, can be viewed from here.

Bokbaai (Buck Bay): Walking up from Silverstroom beach, you will come across this beautiful homestead with its *holbol* gable and Norfolk pine tree planted as a landmark for sailors. Built around 1750, it was bought by the Duckitt family in 1870 and remained in their hands for 130 years.

Ganzekraal: Once an old homestead from the 1730s (since burned down), but now used as a holiday/conference resort with its focal point a small bay along the coast of which there are a number of nature walks.



The Hildebrand Monument, 6 km outside Darling, commemorates the death (in 1901) of a Boer soldier who lost his life fighting the British just outside Darling, after the Boers had occupied the town for a day. This was the closest the Boers came to Cape Town during the Anglo-Boer War.

mission station, with its beautiful old buildings, trees and magnificent church (built in 1818) with *holbol* end gables and interesting side-wall pediments, is well worth a visit. In August 2013 history came full circle when the government restored the title deed of Mamre to the residents.

Groote Post and Klaver Vallei: These two homesteads in De Groene Kloof were once a vegetable garden for the VOC. Groote Post was a military post to

Darling district has about 1200 species of flora; for beginners, here are 8 to get started on.



Vine Cup (Kalkberg) • Geissorhiza radicans



Sun petal on Hill-Spreel (Geelsuring) • Oxalis pes-caprae



Enslange • Romulea



Yellow Daisy (Malgaskop) • Ursinia anthemoides



White Daisy • Dianophthoea pluvialis



Harlequin Catwing • Lapeirousia jacquinii



Blue Flax • Helipholia coronopifolia



California Poppy (alien weed) • Eschscholzia californica



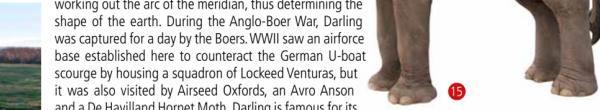
The 4 m high Pulpit Rock at Kraalbaai is made up of shell fragments and quartz sand and dates from 100 000 years ago. A superb example of dune stone cross-bedding, it was once the domain of strandlofters, then the location for the first Dutch fort-cum-postal depot. This is also the site where Eve's footprint was discovered: see a replica of it at Geelbek.

repl Khoi-na cattle rustlers. South Africa's successful merino sheep industry started here in 1789 (based on a half-truth at the king of Spain's expense). As a result of this, in 1796 an Australian purchased a few sheep which he took back to Australia to start the merino sheep industry there. Groote Post was taken over by Lord Charles Somerset for hunting and later William Duckitt acquired it by swapping High Constantia in Cape Town for it. It is here that Hildagonda Duckitt wrote her famous book of Cape recipes and household hints. Klaver Vallei was once owned by Henning Huising who had a run-in with Governor Willem Adriaan van der Stel over the latter's obscene corruption. When Huising left for Holland to take over his farm. In 1791 Sebastiaan van Reenen built the present homestead. Both farms are currently owned by the Pentz family, who farm dairy cattle and have re-established wine production.

Darling: 180 inhabitants wanted a church and the establishment of their own village on the farm Langfontein. This request was granted in 1853 by the Cape governor, Charles Darling. The village's history is closely linked with that of De Groene Kloof over the hill; thus the Duckitts and Versvelds and the wool and dairy industries are interlinked. On Kapokberg, a hill overlooking Darling, Abbé de la Caille in 1751 took a measurement for working out the arc of the meridian, thus determining the shape of the earth. During the Anglo-Boer War, Darling was captured by a day by the Boers. WWII saw an airforce base established here to counteract the German U-boat scourge by housing a squadron of Lockheed Venturas, but it was also visited by Airseed Oxfords, an Avro Anson and a De Havilland Hornet Moth. Darling is famous for its flowers and has held an annual flower show since 1917. The town has also established more than four areas where the public can enjoy the flowers (www.darlingwildflowers.co.za). The biggest orchid nursery in South Africa is also found here. Two other places worth a visit are the Darling Museum and Evita se Perron.

Darling Wind Farm: 30 km from Koebeg (the first nuclear power station in Africa) is the first wind energy farm in South Africa. This project cost R75 million and supplies 8.6 GWh per year from 4 turbines, each having a rotor diameter of 62 m (24.2 tons) with a 50 m tower (62 tons).

Yzerfontein: (iron spring) This area was a VOC farm, with the finest salt in the Cape district. In the early 1700s it was a tiny harbour which also served Dassen Island. Look out for the historic lime kilns on the road to this holiday town, which is named after the spring water that had a rusty colour.



Fossils of many of the first mammals found on earth, such as this gomphothere that became extinct about two million years ago, can be seen at the West Coast Fossil Park.

using it; this expired in 1990.

Vredenburg: This town, sitting on top of Witteklip, was founded in 1875 to serve a new Dutch Reformed church, but bitterness over access to a freshwater spring gave it the name Twisfontein. Only once this was resolved was the town renamed Vredenburg meaning 'peace town'.

Langebaanweg: This military aerodrome, originally named Airforce Station Conqela, was established in 1942. Its initial purpose was as a training unit to counter the German and Japanese submarine threat. Since the first aircraft, to land here was a Hanley Page in 1919.

Jacobsbaai: Now a holiday and retirement destination, it was once a safe haven for fishermen who could not get back to Saldanha in bad weather. One of its first residents was a Swede who lived like Robinson Crusoe for 30 years. The Stephan brothers had a 99-year lease on the bay for the sole purpose of stopping any other marine business



Paternoster, where new development has taken on the style of the old, is one of the last traditional fishing villages on the West Coast.

IKhwa ttu San Culture Centre: Here you can experience the ways of one of the oldest cultural groups in the world and the oldest in Africa and take a journey into their history, traditional knowledge, skills, language and customs.

West Coast National Park: This is not a 'big five' National Park, but it does have animals that belong to the area and, more importantly, it is a world-renowned birding site with Ramsar status. It is also a great place in the flower season when the West Coast explodes into colour. Within the park you can visit the historic Geelbek homestead with its VOC boundary stone dating from 1785, take a drive up to the top of Postberg to enjoy the view or visit Kraal Bay which has been inhabited since Eve's time and was the first VOC post on the bay. (Postberg Nature Reserve is only open in August and September). Those who enjoy the beach should try out a spot next to the famous Pulpit Rock. Also within the park is Churchhaven, a quaint village established by George Albert

an Anson in 1946, it has seen Hanvards, Venturas, Spitfires (training for the Korean War), Vampires, Impalas and in the new South Africa, the Pilatus Astra in 1994. This base is where the famous Silver Falcons started in Impalas; they are now flying Astras.

West Coast Fossil Park: This provincial heritage site is one of the richest sites in the world of early mammal fossils. (See Before man and Humans before written history on page one and visit www.fossilpark.org.za).

ArcelorMittal Saldanha Works: On the R79 you will see a massive building complex on the left. Just opposite this is a viewing platform. This plant is the only steel mill in the world to have successfully combined the Corex/Midrex process into a continuous chain, replacing the need for coke ovens and blast furnaces, and making this plant a world leader in emission control and environmental management. Once this process is complete, the hot rolled



coil is moved to the bay for shipping. While you are there, look out for the longest train in the world, with a maximum length of 4100 m.

Paternoster: One of the oldest villages on the West Coast, it was long known for its unique old-fishing-village feel. Its main industries are tourism, rock lobster and other fishing. It is also the home of the well-known South African brand of fish paste, Redro, which was developed by the Stephan family in 1930 to compete against Peck's Anchovette which was originally produced in Britain.

Cape Columbine Nature Reserve and Tietiesbaai: Just past Paternoster is the gated entrance (small fee). The lighthouse here was the last manned lighthouse built in South Africa and the first to have light, fog signal and radio beacon simultaneously (1936). It was named after the *Columbine* that sank close by in 1829. This Art Deco-style lighthouse is built on a large granite rock called Castle Rock. The most well-known ship to sink off Soldiers Reef near the lighthouse was the *Libsoa*. This was the first time a radio telegraphy distress call was made from a ship in South Africa. (Hundreds of ships have sunk off this treacherous coastline but it would take a book to tell all the stories.) Tietiesbaai within the park is well worth a visit. According to the lighthouse keeper, it takes its name from two hills resembling breasts that can be seen from the direction of the bay.

Shelley Point: This little peninsula has become a gated leisure resort with a country club and spa as its central drawcard. It is also the only place in the world where there is a museum dedicated to Vasco da Gama as it was close to here that he made landfall in 1497.

Laaipele, Port Owen and Velddrift: This area offers the holiday-maker a great deal, including water sports, golf, birding and bokkoms (small fish dried on outdoor racks - a traditional food that has fed the local people for hundreds of years). Laaipele was the centre of the Stephan family business which was conducted from an old run-around ship, the *Neere*. (Smuts's Boers used the ship as a fort during their raid on the Cape.) At one stage the Stephans employed so many runaway Italian sailors that there was more Italian than Afrikaans spoken. (Some Italian names are still found here.) An interesting story to come from this area concerns the origin of the song, 'Daar kom die Alibama', a folk song of the 'Cape Coloured' communities that is familiar to most South Africans. People have generally thought the song is about the Confederate raider, the *Alabama*, but according to Lawrence Green it is actually about a small boat called the *Alibama* that sailed down to Cape Town from Laaipele carrying a certain type of reed that grows at Velddrift. These reeds were used in making the traditional Cape Malay wedding bed.

Daar kom die Alibama. Die Alibama kom oor die see. Noot Noot die riekooi noot. Die riekooi is gemaak....

Kersefontein and Langrietvlei: These two old Cape Dutch homesteads are on the road between Hopefield and Velddrift. Kersefontein was bought as a cattle post by Martin Melck in 1770, but today it is known for the



The Vredenburg Dutch Reformed Church, near the site of the spring that caused a major dispute over water rights.

breeding of top-class horses. The farm is still owned and lived in by the Melck family - surely a record for unbroken family tenure in South Africa. The last known hippo in the Berg River was shot in 1869 by a later Martin Melck when it attacked and killed one of his employees. At one stage Kersefontein had a severe mole problem which resulted in thousands of mole skins being sent to England to be made into clothing - a problem solved, a profit made. Langrietvlei was established in 1715 by Hendrik Oostwald Elkeen of Constantia fame. Because of the generosity of the VOC regarding tenders, he owned at least two other farms and a fishery up the West Coast. The house you see today is the third homestead, built in 1789. The neoclassical gable is a replacement of the older *holbol* gable that collapsed as a result of two earthquakes.

Hopefield: This small town on the banks of the Sout River was founded in 1853 by two people whose surnames were Hope and Field. It was once considered the capital of the West Coast as it was the main town en route to Saldanha and Vredenburg, before the new coastal road was built. Today people visit it for its old-world charm, fynbos, fossils and traditional homesteads.

This guide provides but a taste of only a part of the West Coast: when you visit, take your time, smell the flowers and enjoy all it has to offer.



Saldanha Bay is considered the 'academic' centre on the lagoon. Besides the fishing, shipping and iron ore industries, it is also home to the naval training base and the SA Military Academy.

For More Information

Tourist Information
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Hopefield: 022 723 1720 • hopefield@sbito.co.za
Langebaan: 022 772 1515 • langebaan@sbito.co.za
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Vredenburg: 022 715 1142 • vredenburgh@sbito.co.za
Darling: 022 492 3361 • www.darlingtourism.co.za
Velddrift: 0227831821 • www.tourismvelddrift.co.za
Yzerfontein: 0224512985 • www.tourismzyerfontein.co.za

Sources:
Lighthouses of South Africa by Gerald Hoberman • All of Lawrence G. Green's books with reference to the West Coast • *Mountain Club of SA Journal* 1951 • *Langebaanweg* by Q.B. Hendey • *A West Coast Odyssey* compiled by Gabriel, Louise and Nikolai Athiros and Mike Turner

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SA FISHERIES MUSEUM

The SA Fisheries Museum is unique in that it highlights the history of fishing on the West Coast from the whaling history, pelagic fishing and rock lobster catching. It also celebrates local history, interweaving fishing from the past and present.

SA Fisheries Museum Velddrift • Tel: 022 783 2531 or 082 849 9251
Fax: 086 672 4183 • Email: seaquic@smweb.co.za • www.safisheriesmuseum.co.za
Laaipele Hotel Grounds, De Villiers Street, Laaipele (32°46'15" S 18°9'5.03" E)

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