



## Cape Town's Robben Island: An Emblem of Change?

By Aaron Beerman | June 6, 2011

Cape Town draws tourists from all over the world for a variety of reasons, including the spectacular views from Table Mountain, beautiful beaches, world renown vineyards, and the vibrant nightlife. However, there is one location that accords a special place on every tourist's "To Do List", and that is Robben Island. In fact, a sizable portion of visitors to Cape Town come simply to see Robben Island, which has become one of the most visited tourist destinations in sub-saharan Africa. For many people, especially Africans, who make the journey to the site of Nelson Mandela's imprisonment, it is a place of inspiration, hope, and a symbol of the ideal Africa.



After spending nearly a month in Cape Town I finally had the opportunity to take a ferry out to Robben Island with a couple of fellow interns to see the cell that Nelson Mandela's spent 27 years behind prison walls in for myself. The experience certainly lives up to expectations, at least mine. Aside from the world renown views of Cape Town from across the bay and the resident penguins, which inhabit its shores, the tour itself is makes a lasting and veritable impression well worth the time and ticket price.



For those who are unacquainted with Robben Island, it is an island that sits northwest of Cape Town several miles. In many respects it is reminiscent of San Francisco's Alcatraz, only, it is considerably larger and I would argue has more interesting characteristics. For instance, there is a quaint little town on the island that houses the museum staff and other caretakers. There also is a school that was established to support some of the most financially disadvantaged children in Cape Town. Moreover, the island has historically been a place of exile and imprisonment for well over two hundred years, housing numerous political figures including three Presidents: the Nelson Mandela, President Motlanthe, and current President of Jacob Zuma. It was also where the first anti-colonial activities were imprisoned. Aside from the island's amazing history, there is an abundance of wildlife. There are penguins, hundreds of different bird species, and aquatic life like seals for which are the name sake of the island (Robben is Dutch for seal). Those are just a few of the things that make the island unique.

The tours themselves are spectacular. The tour guides are all ex-political prisoners of Robben Island and have some of the most extraordinary stories a person can tell. Our guide, who could not have been even retirement age,

recounted some of his own experiences as a prisoner on the island, including his first boat trip to Robben Island in the dark hull of a boat, in which he was vomiting and beaten by guards. During his imprisonment his father was shot eight times by guards after he attempted to help him, even though he had been granted permission. Today this same tour guide works along side many of the same guards that abused him. He is even good friends with the guard who personally guarded him. And impressively, most of the tour guides are also personally acquainted with Nelson Mandela, and visit him for his birthday each year.

For me, Robben Island was a great deal more than a museum tour, it was a reminder that the apartheid system is not simply something from the oracles of history, but rather a complex entity that South Africans are still in the process of removing piece by piece. In fact, many South Africans alive today lived through apartheid and the historic transition of 1994. More importantly, the social divisions imposed as a result of apartheid are yet to find an equitable equilibrium. While it is impressive to see the cooperation and friendship that has developed between people such as our guide and the guards (not to mention the between many Cape Town residents of various ethnicity), these commendable improvements overshadow the reality of the current situation considerably.

It is easy to look back and see the release of Nelson Mandela from prison and his subsequent election to the Presidency as the terminus of racial segregation in South Africa. In truth, in the twenty years since the formal eradication of apartheid many of the economic and social impediments that it imposed still pervade South African society, even in Cape Town. As a tourist, it is surprisingly easy to be shielded from the extreme poverty and economic disparity that is ramped throughout Cape Town's many townships, which are exclusively black and so-called 'coloured' neighborhoods. In fact, it is quite possible to spend an entire visit within the luxurious confines of Cape Town's waterfront or Camps Bay, never seeing the extreme poverty that separates 3 of the 4 million Cape Town residents from the rest of the populace who live just minutes from city center.



As an intern at the Cape Town Refugee Centre I am grateful to have had the unique opportunity to see the legacy of racial segregation and discrimination in South Africa in a way that most visitors to the Cape region will likely never have the opportunity to see. Everyday I interact with people from the poorest areas of the city, people who are disproportionately of black descent and still live in the same racially distinct communities that they would have lived in twenty years ago under apartheid. Today, the only real difference is that it is the result of an economic, rather than political, disparity. Apartheid is woven into the very layout of this city's infrastructure and that is not gooding to change anytime soon. Perhaps ironically, for a large number of short term visitors, Robben Island offers one of the few real glimpses of South Africa's past apartheid system and a reminder of it's continuing affects.