

A taste of the early West Coast



[2] Stone tools found in the Sandveld.



[3] Kasteelberg, near Paternoster, stands proud of the surrounding plain. Wind turbines contribute to the changing environment.

The #Weskus bears evidence of human occupation from the Earlier Stone Age (ESA), through Middle Stone Age (MSA) to the Later Stone Age (LSA).

Parts of a human skull was found in 1954 on the farm Elandsfontein near Hopefield, belonging a sub species now called



Saldanha Man [1]. Its origin is estimated to be from the earlier stone age (approx 2.5m - 250 000 years ago). Stone hand axes [2] are scattered across many parts of the landscape, as are bifacial tools and microlithic stone tools from later periods, the latter illustrating hunting activities. Charred stones describe sites where food was prepared over fires.

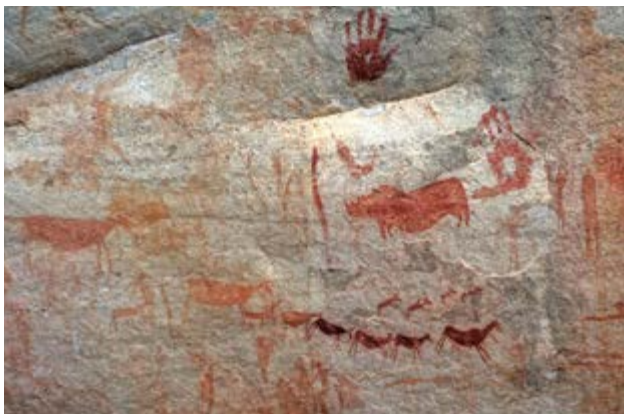
Other sites illustrate later occupation, such as Kasteelberg [3] on the Vredenburg Peninsula or Steenbokfontein near Lamberts Bay, where evidence of the hunter/gatherer San and pastoral lifestyles of the Khoekhoen [4] exist. Further evidence litters the coastal belt in the form of middens [5], whilst paintings from Elands Bay to the Cederberg [6] tell tales of living in the region.

Pre-dating the occupation by people are the fossilised remains of animals which roamed this landscape some five million years ago. They include sabre-toothed cats, short-necked giraffes, hyenas and African bears which roamed the west coast then with a more subtropical climate hosting lush, riverine forests and open grasslands. The West Coast Fossil Park [7, 8, 9] hosts displays of these fascinating remains.

The situation of natural evolution in the region began to alter with exploration by European seafarers. In November 1497 Vasco da Gama [10], following after Bartolomeu Diaz, anchored in St Helena Bay,



[5] Looking over Verlorenvlei at Elands Bay, the rock overhangs are littered with shells.



[6] Examples of rock art in the Agter Cederberg.



[7] Top: visitors exposed to the fossil remains.
 [8] Below: the impressive new entrance to the West Coast Fossil Park exhibition space.
 [9] Top right: working on the replica construction of extinct fauna from the west coast region.



[10] The memorial to Vasco da Gama's landing at St Helena Bay in 1497.

where his crew first encountered the indigenous peoples, setting in train centuries of competition and conflict, ultimately leading to the demise of this race.

Once it was established that it was possible to round Africa by sea other European nations followed, until the Dutch established a victualling station at the Cape. They soon began expanding from this base into the interior, including the west coast, where farming was established, with cattle, sheep and wheat becoming vital. Viticulture too was part of the early mix [11, 12, 13].

Travellers and explorers set forth, seeking famed cities of gold and other resources. A memorial commemorating one of these expeditions overlooks the Riebeeck Valley, when a party led by Pieter Cruythoff [14] crossed in 1661. Another remnant is the overhang at Heerenlogement [15, 16] where many of these early venturers left their marks.

Missionaries [17, 18] arrived with the purpose of gathering converts, bringing with them an alien philosophy, and creating an ambiguous legacy; they spread from Mamre (after previously being a cattle outpost) in 1808, to Wupperthal [19] deep in the Cederberg with many other centres spread around. Some settlements in this vast area still exist as if time has stood still [20].

Today cultural and other history is kept alive through the museums of the region, highlighting the various aspects, such as references to the Khoekhoe and San at the Jan Danckaert Museum in Porterville, and some quite unique, such as a tribute at the Wheat Museum in Moorreesburg [21], and a Windmill Museum in Loeriesfontein.



[11, 12, 13] Agriculture became a dominant economic activity in the #Weskus, dramatically altering the landscape.



[14] The Pieter Cruythoff memorial on the Botmaskloof Pass overlooking the Riebeeek Valley. Consider the view that he and his party encountered, of wildlife beyond imagination.



[15, 16] Many of the early adventurers passed by Heerenlogement, on their way north, leaving their 'calling cards' in the overhang, thus a record of their travels.



[20] This type of settlement deep in the Agter Cederberg has changed little over time.



[21] The wheat Museum in Moorreesburg contains a unique installation, and is one of a group in the #Weskus depicting the heritage of the region.



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[17, 18, 19] Missionaries founded settlements such as Goedverwacht, Wupperthal and Saron.





[24] Verlorenvlei, with the Cederberg in the background, a spectacular natural environment.



[23] The West Coast National Park erupts in splendour after winter rains. The park, a magnificent display of flora and fauna, also contains fossil remains, evidence of early human occupation in the form of footprints, to early settler architecture, literally taking us on a journey through time.



Endeavouring to keep the story of the San intact and vibrant is a project thriving at the !Khwa ttu San Culture and Education Centre [22]. The key focus of the project is heritage restitution and sharing through the development of a San Museum.

The legacy of nature is celebrated at the West Coast National Park [23]. Once a group of farms, state land and other resources, Sanparks united and restored the habitat into one of the natural jewels of the #Weskus. The natural world is further represented by birding locations in the Swartland, Velddrif and Verlorenvlei [24]. Included in these are RAMSAR sites, confirming their international conservation status and value in retaining their heritage landscapes. The picture is completed by the Cederberg, a mostly pristine littered with ancient geological formations and San paintings.

In all, the #Weskus contains the story down a long evolutionary road, from fauna long extinct, the natural environment, through various aspects of human development – hunters and gathers to pastoralists, then travellers and adventurers, to settlers. The layers are all here.

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Some useful links:

- www.swartlandheritage.com
- www.heritagechroniclesa.org
- www.hwc.org.za
- www.sahra.org.za
- www.fossilpark.org.za
- www.khwattu.org
- www.sanparks.org/parks/west_coast
- www.cedheroute.co.za
- www.capewestcoast.org

