

# An Yzerfontein *adventure*



Yzerfontein Tourism office, with its reconstructed lime kiln, and village as it appeared in the 1970s.



Archaeological digs around Yzerfontein have detected middens and tools left by the San people who existed in the region aeons ago. Changes began to occur when the Dutch settled at the Cape, before reaching the present vicinity in 1732 when Cornelius Heufke received permission to graze his livestock on a farm which was called Eijzerfontein (iron deposits in the water gave rise to the name).

In 1915 the land was purchased by Nicolas Pienaar, and in 1937 he sold sections of the farm to various families and Yzerfontein Seaside Estates, but retained one piece for himself. It was the beginning of growth of the village.

By the early 20th century, as was common practice at the time, the coast was a popular place for inland farmers to trek for a camping holiday. Only a few permanent structures existed at the time. The farmers holidaying at the beach naturally brought all their own supplies - cows for milk, hens for eggs, sheep for meat. To protect the latter from jackals they placed them on the island just offshore, cut off from the mainland at high tide. Its name originated from the Dutch *Schaap*, for sheep.

Today it hosts a short, two km walking trail which begins at the main beach and takes one in the direction of the harbour. Bird species, such as the endangered Black Oyster Catcher, Black Cormorants and three types of seagull are easily spotted. Also resident are a colony of dassies, and during whaling season calving may be observed in the bay.

The oldest structure still evident is the much altered tourism office, known as the Vishuis (Fish House), which gives an indication of the early style of structures. Its original function was to store locally mined salt, which was brought to the coast via a railway link, and eventually shipped to Cape Town by freighter.

Two lime kilns are situated on the road leading to Yzerfontein. With expansion came the demand for lime; as mussel shells make an excellent source and an abundance was to be found in the area, lime kilns were constructed to create the product. Lime ash may be utilised in three ways: with water to make cement, with salt to make whitewash for painting buildings, and with tallow (animal fat) to create a waterproofing substance. Many farm houses in the Sandveld were built with a lime mix from Yzerfontein.

During World War II Yzerfontein had a radar station. It was run by six women whose job was to track enemy ship and air traffic and especially to look out for enemy submarines threatening the Allied shipping and troopship convoys. Air combat pilots from up north recuperated at the SAAF 23 Squadron base at Darling and occasionally used to visit for recreation. The foundations of the radar station were subsequently used to construct a new house.

A personal encounter with the town was in 1971. A friend, Geoff, and I came up with a madcap concept of walking from Yzerfontein to the outskirts of Cape Town – down the coast. Without our own transport we hitch-hiked to our starting point and arrived fairly effortlessly at a substantially smaller community than which presently exists, despite the fact it had already expanded from the camping resort it had once been.

The hike took three blistering days, dragging feet through heavy sand, sleeping in a dry river bed one night, encountering bokkies, snakes, a dying seagull. Ill prepared, we had to venture inland whenever our water ran low, seeking farms to replenish. We were fortunate and were successful every time. Before the West Coast Road and the subsequent developments it would have been a trek to extricate ourselves from the situation if we had needed to.



One of the lime kilns still in existence just outside Yzerfontein.



An early reference to the radar station, and later views before it was demolished.





The bus parked atop a cliff; an early example of recycling. This one had become a weekend holiday home. Somewhat incongruously, the sign informing potential passengers of certain restrictions.



An attempt was made to save a gull which appeared to have a broken wing. Sadly it had to be left to nature to deal with,



The beaches stretched endlessly, first breaking more or less where Grotto Bay is today. We encountered surprises: at one point, cliffs (I had not been aware that these rugged faces existed in the region), the wonder of the structures at Bokbaai (I also did not know of this complex), and a complete anomaly.

While toiling one day we could see light glinting on one of the higher points in the distance; only when we neared did we realise it was a double-decker bus, converted to accommodation,

presumably by a local farmer. WHITES ONLY MINIMUM FARE LIMITED STOPS. I wonder if the same conditions still apply?

On the last evening, despite the lights of the city clearly beckoning on the horizon, we ran out of steam and piled into our sleeping bags amongst a set of dunes. We had also run out of food and went to sleep wracked by hunger pangs, ruminating about steaks. When we awoke we were stunned to see that we were on the very outskirts of Melkbosstrand - if we had continued just a short way we would have found comfort.

Tired and very sunburnt we caught a bus, and onto our steak meal.

These black and white photographs were taken during the walk in 1971.