

ALL THAT GLITTERS

- Lüderitz, Namibia - on the move again

“...Only the train line from Prieska will be running, as our cannons and guns will be coming from Lüderitzbucht...” These were the apocalyptic words of the Boer prophet, Seer Nicolaas van Rensburg, a questionable visionary of the early 1900’s and military advisor to the generals and politicians of the Boer War, De La Rey, Kemp, Louis Botha and J C Smuts. Van Rensburg believed that help for the Boer nation would come from Germany, through the Namibian town of Lüderitz, via the railway line to South Africa.

Many years later the publication of van Rensburg’s visions by Adriaan Snyman (“Voice of a Prophet”, Vaandel Publishers), in particular the prophecy of using the Lüderitz/Prieska railway line, was met with scorn by the then Commodore of Cape Town as the line in question had been disused for over 80 years. It was considered impossible to restore as it lay under several metres of sand with only the tops of the telegraph poles still visible.

The explorer Bartholomeo Diaz was the first European to set foot on this lonely section of the Namibian coastline in 1487 and duly erected the ubiquitous symbol of Portuguese annexure - a cross - a replica of which can be seen today at Diaz Point. After a series of Dutch and British whaling and guano prospecting expeditions, Lüderitz was officially proclaimed a German protectorate in 1883 when Adolf Lüderitz bought the area from the local Nama chief for 10 000 Reichsmark and 260 rifles. The German flag was run up and South West Africa was ultimately born. Lüderitz’s purchase was certainly the bargain of a lifetime as it was not known that the area was liberally sprinkled with diamonds. Only later did the region become known as the Sperregebiet (forbidden area) for obvious reasons.

Lüderitz the town, however, was slow to develop. Ironically it was the construction of the railway line to the interior that led to the glittering discovery of diamonds in 1908 at Kolmanskop, a railway siding 9km from Lüderitz, that ultimately resulted in its boomtown status. Kolmanskop rapidly developed into a bustling modern town boasting a theatre, hospital, public playground and swimming pool, soda water and lemonade plant, with daily ice deliveries - all in the heart of one of the most inhospitable wastelands on earth!

The elusive gems at Kolmanskop slowly evaporated like the sparkling drops of water they so resembled and by 1950 all mining had ceased. The stately mansions were abandoned to the echoing winds and the restless sands of the inimitable Namib. Today the rooms are filled with drifts of sand and rusted doors bang eerily in empty frames. Sightless windows stare out at the shifting desert and the vacant rooms wait patiently for the daily influx of tourists who come to marvel at its graceful past.

Luckily, a burgeoning tourist industry stepped in to fill the economic void and Lüderitz is once again firmly on the Namibian map. Unique in its situation, the juxtaposition of German colonial architecture, complete with bay

windows, gables and turret rooms, balanced seemingly precariously on tumbled heaps of rock, lends an air of impermanence to the town. Initially it would appear as if the exquisite buildings and well-tended gardens were façades for some bizarre film set. But on thorough exploration, a sense of history permeates the streets, born out by the dates on the buildings (some go back to 1901). At sunrise, on a clear morning, it seems as if the town has grown from the surrounding desert, organically, as if from the rock itself.

Apart from the superb architecture there is plenty to attract the visitor to Lüderitz. Excellent hotels, B and B's and restaurants abound, most specialising in mouth-watering seafood dishes. The Krabbenhöft and Lampe shop offers exquisite stained glass items; the Karakul Carpet Mill produces luxurious handwoven carpets; and visits to the ghost town of Kolmanskop and the penguin colonies on Halifax Island may be arranged. Fishing is excellent and permits may be obtained from the local CDM office to prospect for "desert roses" (crystals of sand and salt formed into flower-like shapes under damp conditions). Birdlife is prolific along the many lagoons to the south of the town and sightings of black oystercatchers and bank cormorants are guaranteed, as are enormous flocks of flamingoes at low tide. A visit to Diaz Point is essential, particularly as the access road offers the opportunity to experience the frightening desolation and harshness of the coastline and appreciate the courage of the original settlers who carved a home from this inhospitable area.

Even the main tarred road to Lüderitz has its surprises. Amazingly, a small population of wild horses - thought to be descendants of the Schutztruppe mounts abandoned during the early 1900's - have evolved to survive the Namib's hellish conditions. Sustained by an artificial water source their numbers fluctuate according to available grazing.

And Seer van Rensburg's prophecy? Interestingly, although the large-scale diamond mining in the Sperregebiet is declining, the local fishery has increased to the degree that the harbour is now being enlarged to accommodate greater fishing fleets. The old railway line linking Lüderitz to South Africa is also being upgraded and the town is once more enjoying an economic boom. German investment has boosted both these projects, and certainly most of the tourists in Lüderitz are German. Who knows, perhaps the Seer mistook cannons and guns for the far more friendly Deutschmark.

Contacts

Namibian Tourism, PO Box 78946, Sandton City, Sandton 2196, South Africa, tel: +27 11 784 8024/5, or fax: +27 11 784 8340, or e-mail: namtour@citec.com.za.

Kolmanskop Tour Company, PO Box 357, Lüderitz, Namibia, tel/fax: (+264 63) 202 445.

Lüderitz Tours & Safaris, PO Box 76, Lüderitz, Namibia, tel: (+264 63) 202 719, fax: (+264 63) 202 863.

List of Captions:

1. - Beware of horses crossing - a strange sight in the middle of the desert on the main road to Lüderitz.

2. One of the most stately Kolmanskop residences, now abandoned to slow decay under the desert sun.
3. It is truly a miracle that these sturdy horses have eked out an existence in this most arid of regions.
4. It is truly a miracle that these sturdy horses have eked out an existence in this most arid of regions.
5. The restless dunes of the Namib Desert frequently cover the main access road to Lüderitz.
6. Goerke House, originally the private residence of a wealthy German businessman, later became the Old Magistrate's Residency and is now the guest house for visiting Consolidated Diamond Mine officials.
7. The Krabbenhöft and Lampe Shop, built in the early 1900's now also houses the Karakul Carpet Mill.
8. Karakul carpets are handwoven to specific design at the Karakul Carpet Mill, Lüderitz.
9. The Namibian Wildlife bungalows on Shark Island are reasonably priced and offer stunning views across Lüderitz bay.
10. Fishing boats moored in Lüderitz harbour
11. The rapidly expanding Lüderitz harbour.
12. Colonies of black oystercatchers are common around the lagoons south of Lüderitz.
13. A replica of the cross erected by Bartholomeo Diaz in 1487 at Diaz Point.
14. The rocky shores and the cold Benguela current that flows around Diaz Point ensures a wealth of marine life.
15. The ghost town of Kolmanskop where diamonds were originally discovered is now a busy, if not eerie, tourist destination.
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17. Sightless windows and rooms filled with shifting dunes are a feature of the ghost town of Kolmanskop.
18. The plethora of abandoned baths that litter the dunes at Kolmanskop appear to hint at an almost pathological cleanliness of the German inhabitants.
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20. The Evangelical Lutheran Church, 'Felsenkirch', or 'The Church On The Rock' - was built in 1906 for the first minister who arrived from Germany in 1909.