



Cape Agulhas Lighthouse stands 31 metres above sea level



Robben Island: an inside view of the lens, which dates back to 1865



Cape Recife's spiral wooden staircase provides access to the lantern house



Views from the Cape Agulhas lighthouse balcony are spectacular



# BEACONS of Light

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PHOTOGRAPHY FROM *LIGHTHOUSES OF SOUTH AFRICA* BY GERALD HOBERMAN

Forty-five lighthouses illuminate our coastline, but just a few are still manned. Lighthouse keeping—renowned as one of the loneliest jobs on earth—is a dying profession, and only 15 South African lighthouses still have keepers. The others are all fully automated.

Andries de Jager has had a lifelong love affair with lighthouses. He's been a lighthouse keeper at 13 different lighthouses along the coast, and still—though retired—lives under his favourite light at **CAPE ST FRANCIS**. He has plenty of stories to tell after a lifetime of minding lights, and a career spanning 40 years.

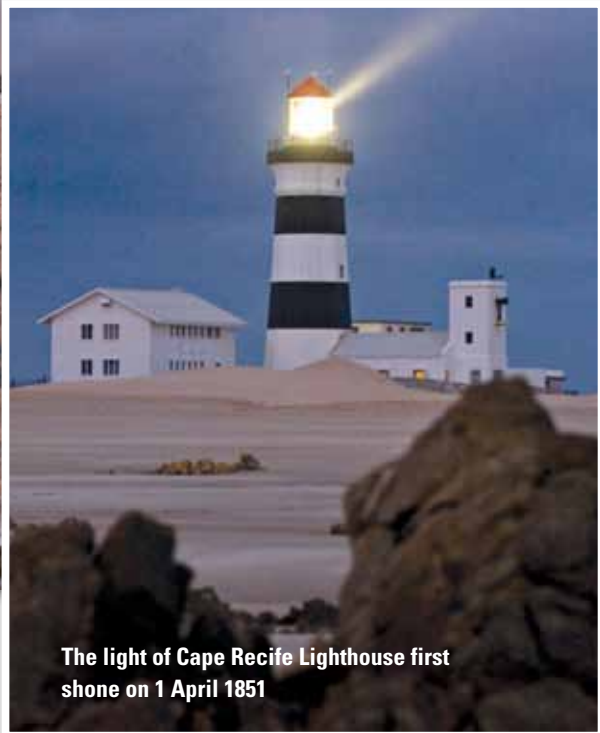
Yet back in 1958, when Andries was first stationed at Cape St Francis, things were very different. "Ox wagons used to carry diesel for the lighthouse on a road over the sand dunes

and along the beach. And we got a weekly mail delivery by horse-drawn cart." Now the lighthouse is automated, whereas back then it needed three keepers to run daily operations.

Built in 1878, Cape St Francis lighthouse is the tallest masonry tower along the South African coast and warns ships of the two-kilometre long reef that runs out to sea. Before the lighthouse was built, over a dozen ships came to grief along this rugged coastline, which Andries calls his "paradise". Ironically, since the

*There's an air of nostalgia about lighthouses—as if they have a thousand stories to tell but are sworn to secrecy*





The light of Cape Recife Lighthouse first shone on 1 April 1851



Cape St Francis: Seal Point Lighthouse is the tallest masonry tower on the South African coast

## ‘There are just a handful Most of the lighthouses are automatic, and with ships having

lighthouse was built, at least another dozen ships have struck rock off Cape St Francis. One memorable maritime disaster was in 1977, when two mega tankers, *Ven Pet* and *Ven Oil*, collided off this coast.

“I was sitting in the lighthouse office when it happened,” remembers Andries. “You could see the black smoke rising above the horizon as the tankers were burning.” And from Cape St Francis, Andries relayed messages to Port Elizabeth, from where rescue operations were launched.

Further along the Eastern Cape coast, near Port Elizabeth, **CAPE RECIFE** beams

its light out to sea to warn ships of the submerged Thunderbolt Reef nearby. Yet still the *Kapodistrias* ran aground in the shadow of the lighthouse in 1985. The most famous wreck off Bird Island, just off Port Elizabeth, was the Dutch East Indiaman, *Doddington*, in the 1700s. Yet it took a full century for the first lighthouse to be erected on **BIRD ISLAND**. Today, the stone tower is an icon along the coast, painted in striking red and white. Though now also fully automated, Bird Island was once one of the most remote lighthouses along the coast. Keepers used carrier pigeons to send urgent messages to the mainland,

if medical attention or supplies were needed. Still today, maintenance staff members refuse to sleep over on Bird Island when working there. They say a ghost pulls off their blankets as they sleep, and chilly draughts blow through the room, even though the windows are all closed. They believe it’s the ghost of Mrs Hansen.

The wife of a lighthouse keeper, Mrs Hansen is said to have become depressed at living in such extreme isolation. Then one day, her body was discovered in a well near the lighthouse. While the story dates from 1908, many believe her spirit still wanders there,



Bird Island is a sanctuary for many thousands of birds



Cape Columbine: the DGPS antennae are located at the top of the lantern house

## of lighthouse keepers left. advanced navigation systems, lighthouses seem less important'

and some accounts claim to have seen the ghost of a woman.

Andries says he never experienced any ghosts while on Bird Island, but he does admit Bird Island was definitely one of the loneliest postings.

Ghosts are also said to haunt the towers of Cape St Francis and Cape Recife lighthouses, and inexplicable, strange noises are sometimes heard, along with footsteps—yet nobody physical is there.

Lighthouse keeper at **CAPE COLUMBINE** on the West Coast, Japie Greeff, knows he is part of a “dying breed”. “There are just a handful of lighthouse keepers

left,” he says with sadness. “Most of the lighthouses are automatic, and with ships having such advanced navigation systems, the part lighthouses play seems less critical. But they are still important navigational beacons by day, too.” This is why every lighthouse is completely different in shape or colour, and each light within a 250km stretch has a different, coded flash frequency. Even the foghorns have uniquely coded blasts for ships to hear when they can’t see the lighthouse beams in the fog. This is also precisely why **CAPE POINT** has two lighthouses. The first one was built too tall and was

### LIKE TO STAY IN A LIGHTHOUSE?








Ten of South Africa’s lighthouses are open to the public. *Cape Columbine* at Paternoster on the West Coast, *Green Point* in Cape Town, *Slangkop* at Kommetjie, *Danger Point* near Gansbaai, *Cape St Blaize* at Mossel Bay, *Great Fish Point* near Port Alfred, *Port Shepstone*, *Hood Point* near East London, *Cape Agulhas* and *Cape Recife* near Port Elizabeth can all be visited and climbed during set entrance hours. But to experience the ‘isolation’ of lighthouse life, go to *Cape Columbine*, *Kommetjie*, *Danger Point*, *Cape St Blaize* and *Great Fish Point*, all of which offer self-catering accommodation under the beam of the light.

For more information on the lighthouse route call 021-449-5171 or email [lighthouse.tourism@transnet.net](mailto:lighthouse.tourism@transnet.net)

Cape Agulhas: reaching into wild and treacherous seas, this rugged shore of beauty is Africa's most southerly point



## SA LIGHTHOUSE FACTS

-  **LIGHTHOUSES ON ISLANDS:** Dassen Island, Bird Island, Robben Island.
-  **TALLEST LIGHTHOUSE:** Slangkop Punt at Kommetjie, at 33m and made of steel. Its light extends to 55km. The tallest lighthouse in the world (106m) is in Yokohama, Japan.
-  **SHORTEST LIGHTHOUSE:** Cape Seal at Plettenberg Bay, at 6m (but it has the highest elevation of all our lighthouses, at 144m above sea level).
-  **OLDEST LIGHTHOUSE:** Green Point, built in 1824.
-  **NEWEST LIGHTHOUSE:** Groenriviermond, West Coast, built in 1988.
-  **BRIGHTEST LIGHTHOUSE:** Cape Point, at 10 million candelas (candlepower), and visible for 59km.
-  **ONLY LIGHTHOUSE ON A ROCK:** Roman Rock, off Simon's Town. Its rocky base is visible only at low tide, and it was manned until 1919.

constantly shrouded in fog, so a shorter tower was built to shine below the fog layer.

Still, lighthouse technology has come a long way since the literal 'fire tower' of Pharos in Alexandria, in Egypt, the first known lighthouse, which was built in 250 BC. Then, fires were made on top of towers, but were later replaced by oil lamps and gas lamps, followed by paraffin- and diesel-powered lights. Andries says that—before his time—the oily tails of fat-tailed sheep were used to fuel lighthouses in South Africa, and in the early days he used to have to wind up the light every few hours to keep the prisms rotating. Lighthouse

lights are actually stationary, and rotating reflectors give the illusion of revolving light beams.

**ROBBEN ISLAND** lighthouse actually followed the Pharos example, before it was transformed into an iconic white building marking a World Heritage site. **GREEN POINT** in Cape Town was our first stone-and-mortar lighthouse, and **CAPE AGULHAS** lighthouse marks the southernmost tip of Africa. It was a particularly important beacon along our coastline because in the old days, compasses malfunctioned in this region, which is why the Portuguese sailors aptly named it 'Cape of Needles' and were especially vigilant when in

the area. The stocky red-and-white lighthouse also boasts a lighthouse museum, and stands surrounded by the fynbos of the Agulhas National Park.

"I'm staying right here," says Japie, standing in the shadow of the Columbine light. "And when I retire, I dream of moving just down the hill to Paternoster. From there I will still be able to see the lighthouse shining bright over the West Coast. That will make me happy." **GT**

*For a multifaceted insight into every aspect of lighthouses, read Lighthouses of South Africa by Gerald Hoberman. R599.95 at all good bookstores.*