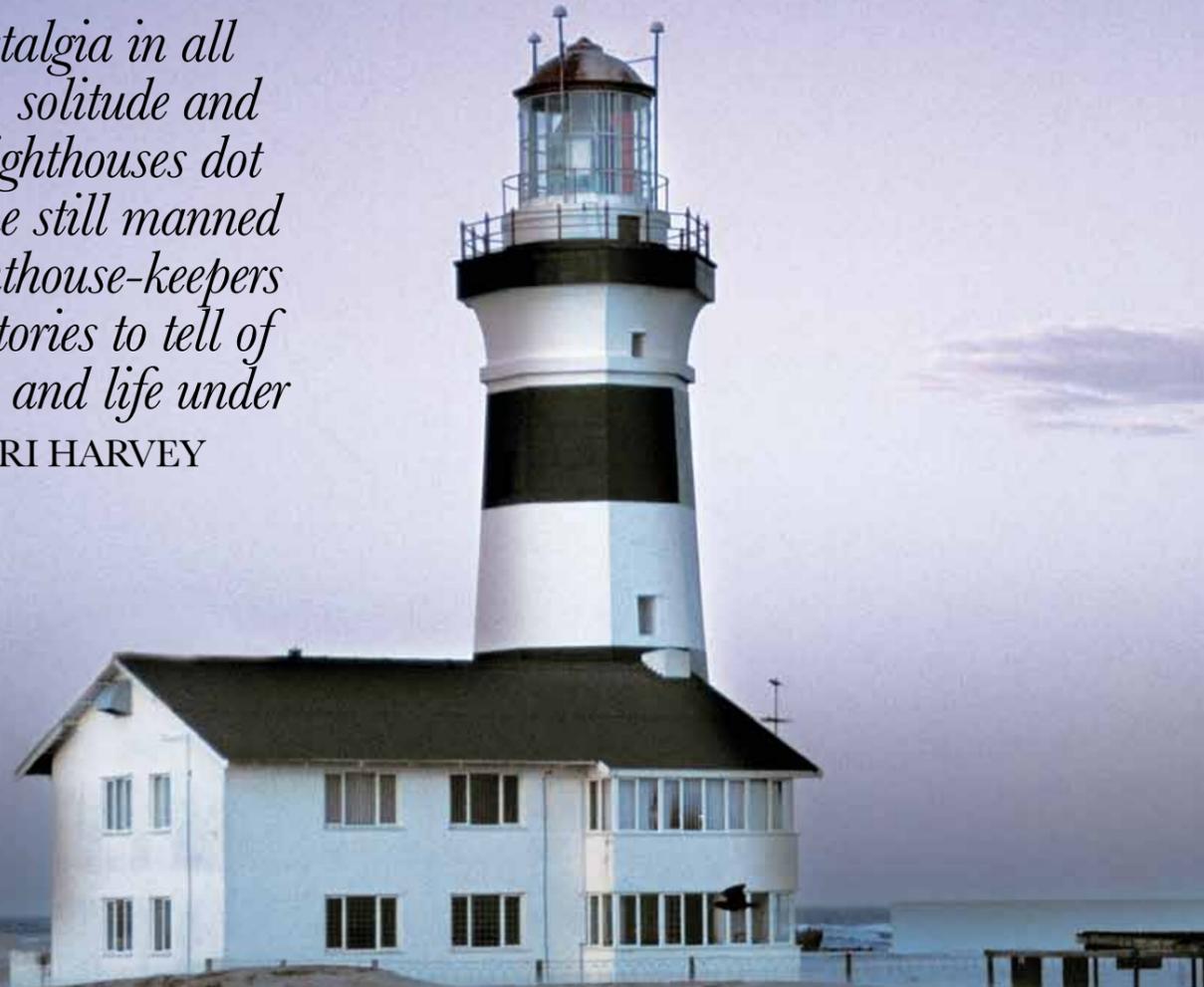


Lights FANTASTIC

They evoke nostalgia in all who love the sea, solitude and stories of old. Lighthouses dot our coastline, some still manned by traditional lighthouse-keepers with enchanting stories to tell of shipwrecks, ghosts and life under the light. by KERI HARVEY



Standing tall and stoic, Japie Greeff is the proud lighthouse-keeper at Cape Columbine on the West Coast. Alerting ships to a rocky coastline often shrouded in fog, Cape Columbine's is the first light seen along the West African coast by ships coming from Europe, and it has been shining since 1936.

"Paternoster, I believe, was named by shipwrecked sailors who made it safely to shore, because in Latin it means 'our father', so the sailors were saying prayers of thanks," says Greeff.

Cape Columbine is set high on a hill overlooking the chilly, boulder-strewn Atlantic Ocean, and it's one of just 15 lighthouses along our coast that is still manned. Lighthouse-keeping is a dying profession, with most of the 45 lighthouses dotted along the coastline fully automated. But when you do meet a lighthouse-keeper, they have more than a few stories to tell.

Now retired at Cape St Francis, Andries de Jager was a lighthouse-keeper for 40 years at 13 different lighthouses. He remembers when ox wagons carried diesel to the lighthouse along the beach, and mail was delivered by horse cart to Cape St Francis. In those days, the light had to be wound up every few hours to keep the prisms turning, and three lighthouse-keepers worked in shifts to keep things going. Today St Francis is fully automated and has claimed the title of the tallest masonry tower on our coast since 1878.

While this piece of coastline is strewn with shipwrecks, De Jager was actually in the lighthouse office when two supertankers – *Venpet* and *Venoil* – collided off Cape St Francis in the late '70s. "From the lighthouse, you could see the black smoke rising above the horizon as the tankers were burning," he says. And from Cape St Francis, De Jager assisted with the rescue and salvage operation by relaying messages to Port Elizabeth.

Near Port Elizabeth, Cape Recife beams its light to warn ships of the submerged Thunderbolt Reef nearby. Still, the *Kapodistrias* ran aground in the shadow of the lighthouse in 1985.

Bird Island, just off Port Elizabeth, today boasts a striking red tower with a white cross on it. This was once one of the most remote lighthouses along the coast, and lighthouse-keepers used carrier pigeons to send messages to the mainland, while food and supplies were delivered by boat every few months. Now Bird Island light is fully automated, and the island is home to over 160 000 Cape gannets,

plenty of African penguins ... and a legendary ghost story.

It is said that lighthouse maintenance teams don't like sleeping overnight on Bird Island, because they are often bothered by a ghost, believed to be the wife of a lighthouse-keeper of old. They say she pulls their blankets off as they sleep, and chilly draughts blow through the room even when the windows are shut. The story goes that Mrs Hansen suffered depression from living in isolation, and in 1908 her body was discovered in a well near the lighthouse. Many believe her spirit still wanders there and some claim to have seen the ghostly figure of a woman on Bird Island.

The lighthouse towers of Cape Recife and Cape St Francis are also said to be haunted, because of the inexplicable noises that are sometimes heard in them.

"There's no problem at Cape Columbine," smiles Greeff, and for the 30 years he's been a lighthouse-keeper up and down the coast, he's never encountered a ghost. But he does have other stories to tell, like when the *Jolly Rubino* was blown up in 2007 after it ran aground off KwaZulu-Natal in 2002. Greeff was there.

While ships and boats have GPS for navigation now, small craft – like the tiny wooden crayfishing boats of the West Coast – still use



'Maintenance teams are often bothered by a ghost, believed to be the wife of a lighthouse-keeper of old'

LIGHTHOUSE FACTS:

- ISLAND LIGHTS:** Dassen, Bird, Robben
 - TALLEST:** Slangkop Punt, Kommetjie, at 33m
 - SHORTEST:** Cape Seal, Plettenberg Bay, at 6m
 - OLDEST:** Green Point, built in 1824
 - NEWEST:** Groenriviermond, built in 1988
 - BRIGHTEST:** Cape Point, with a reach of 59km
- Roman Rock off Simonstown is built on a rock visible only at low tide – and was manned until 1919.



lighthouses as marker beacons. Then, for Greeff, there are daily weather reports to do and ongoing maintenance to keep Cape Columbine sparkling. The light prisms take ages to polish the brass-work requires constant upkeep, as does the tower and paint-work. Being so close to the sea means lighthouses take a beating from the weather.

South Africa is one of just a few countries in the world that still have manned lighthouses, and many of them are now open to the public to glimpse the nostalgia of lighthouse life: Cape Columbine; Cape Agulhas; Cape St Blaize in Mossel Bay; Danger Point near Gansbaai; Great Fish Point; Hood Point near East London; and North Sand Bluff and Port Shepstone in KwaZulu-Natal. Around Cape Town, Green Point,

Robben Island and Slangkop lighthouses are open to the public, too, during set hours.

Robben Island, today with an elegant white tower, was the site of the first “fire tower”-style lighthouse along our coastline, in the style of the 250BC Pharos lighthouse of Alexandria, Egypt – little more than a tower with a fire lit on the top of it. One of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World, Pharos was levelled by an earthquake in the 13th century.

Now on a World Heritage Site, Robben Island lighthouse is one of the most visited in the country. Along with the rest of the island where Nelson Mandela was incarcerated, the lighthouse is a beacon and reminder of our long walk to freedom.

Green Point was our first stone-and-mortar lighthouse, and Cape Agulhas lighthouse marks the southernmost tip of Africa, the site of most shipwrecks along the South African coastline. Portuguese sailors called it the “Cape of Needles”, because their compasses always malfunctioned there. Today, Agulhas lighthouse is a national monument and houses a unique lighthouse museum.

Stocky Cape Point lighthouse was initially built too tall, so the light was often shrouded in fog. A new tower was later built lower down

the slope of Cape Point to shine under the fog layer. Nearby Slangkop lighthouse at Kommetjie is built from cast-iron sheets welded together; this is the tallest lighthouse along the South African coast.

On the Cape south coast, Danger Point lighthouse keeps watch over the popular fishing village of Gansbaai – also one of the best whale-watching spots in the country. Cape St Blaize is more enigmatic, named by Bartolomeu Dias after the patron saint of ear disorders. Great Fish Point lighthouse, near Port Alfred, started life as two ship lamps erected on a pole, while Hood Point lighthouse is within the East London city limits.

While lighthouses are synonymous with long light beams cast over the sea at night, they also serve as beacons by day. Every lighthouse has a different structure or colour. Green Point is red-and-white striped, Great Fish Point is black-and-white striped, and Port Shepstone is a black-and-white checkerboard design – just for starters. And no lighthouse within a 250km stretch along the coast has the same flash frequency; so, too, every nautophone or foghorn has a unique coded blast which can be interpreted by ships when visibility is poor.

Greeff says he’s staying put at Cape Columbine until he retires. His is a unique lifestyle. Working hard, living in isolation in extreme weather, and to the rhythms of wind and sea, he lives a life not easily found in the modern world. Yet even when he retires, Greeff says he’s not moving too far. “I love it here,” he smiles. “This is home.” Under the light. ■

SALATO LIGHTHOUSE ROUTE

LUXURY SELF-CATERING ACCOMMODATION IN FIVE SOUTH AFRICAN LIGHTHOUSES:

Cape Columbine, Danger Point, Cape St Blaize, Great Fish Point and North Sand Bluff.

- Tel: 021 449 5171
- email: lighthouse.tourism@transnet.net
- Also see: www.lighthouses.co.za

IMAGES: KERI HARVEY

WINTER WHALE-WATCHING

If you are planning a lighthouse sightseeing trip, why not extend your experience to include the areas that are playgrounds for whales during the winter months? Visitors come from around the world to see these gentle animals mate and calve in our protected waters.

- On the East Coast, humpback whales are most commonly seen – especially by boat – off northern KwaZulu-Natal (St Lucia) between June and November. Visit www.advantagetours.co.za or call 083 487 2762.
- In the Cape, various species of whales can be seen all year round – southern right, humpback, Bryde’s and even killer whales pass by Algoa Bay off Port Elizabeth. Winter and spring are best and penguins and dolphins may also be seen. Visit www.raggycharters.co.za or call 073 152 2277.
- Plettenberg Bay is a favourite spot for whale-watching along the Garden Route – July to January – and dolphins and seals may be encountered en route, too. Visit www.oceansafaris.co.za or call 082 784 5729.
- Further along the Cape coastline, near Gansbaai, there is an opportunity to go whale-watching accompanied by researchers. Dyer Island Cruises is a reputable marine conservation organisation. From June to December, whale-watchers can see southern rights, humpbacks and Bryde’s whales by boat. Visit www.dyer-island-cruises.co.za or call 082 801 8014.
- Gansbaai and Witsand also have excellent land-based whale-watching – as good as Hermanus, which has celebrated its whale visitors for 20 years with an annual whale festival. This year, the Two Oceans Hermanus Whale Festival is from 28 September to 1 October (www.whalefestival.co.za). See plenty of whales in Walker Bay, along with the only whale crier in the world, and enjoy markets, dining and generally celebrating the annual whale pilgrimage to Hermanus.

• The entire Cape coastline is whale territory, and whales can often be seen clearly from land, all the way up the West

Coast. In Paternoster and Langebaan they come in close to shore, while in Lambert’s Bay, southern rights can be seen by boat between July and November. Unique, endemic Heaviside and dusky dolphins can also be seen when out to sea. Call Lambert’s Bay Boat Charter on 073 249 8977.

Wherever you choose to go whale-watching by boat, ensure that the operator is legally registered for whale-watching, as only a handful are.

