



TABLE MOUNTAIN, SOUTH AFRICA
Photograph by Ilonde van Hoolwerff/Shutterstock



LESSER KNOWN SITES

Sacred Places of South Africa

TOM BILLINGE

“As opposed to many other countries’ sacred places, those of South Africa are not constructed by man, they are part of the land itself.”

“Let’s take a look at some of the less well-known spiritual sites that have been revered by its people...”



MENTION SOUTH AFRICA IN THE CONTEXT of sacred sites and you will likely hear the name Adam’s Calendar. This site has been a hot topic since the site’s discovery, close to a maze of other ancient stone ruins, in 2005. With dating for the site placing it between 75,000 and 200,000 years old, the ‘African Stonehenge’ is a controversial site and also a magnet for ancient alien proponents and alternative historians. Rather than join in this already heated debate, let’s take a look at some of the less well-known spiritual sites that have been revered by people such as the San and Venda for generations.

TABLE MOUNTAIN

Towering above Cape Town, Table Mountain is a powerful presence and a place of gathering since ancient times. It remains a place of prayer for many diverse groups of people today. The iconic flat-topped mountain has been important to the Khoikhoi people since they moved into the region around 2000 years ago. These Khoisan people are related to the neighbouring San, but were settled farmers, rather than hunter gatherers when the Dutch arrived in the Cape. The Khoikhoi, who share their religious beliefs with the San, called the mountain Hu-Gais, meaning ‘veiled in clouds’. The ever-present cloth of cloud was considered to be the spirit of Tsui-Goab, the supreme creator deity who makes it rain and gives life.

Table Mountain is also known by the Xhosa people as Umlindi Wemingizimu; the Watcher of the South. The myth surrounding the mountain says that the god Qamata began creating land, which upset Nkanyamba, the great sea dragon. They began to battle and Qamata’s mother, the earth goddess Djobela, sent four giants to help him. The four

giants each protected the corners of the world from the sea dragon. When enough land was formed, the giants died and turned to stone. The greatest of them became Umlindi Wemingizimu, known to us as Table Mountain. The mountain remains a magical place to this day with many gatherings to pray for humanity, the planet and to unify human consciousness.

BUSHMANS KLOOF

The Cape area is full of important sacred sites of the Khoisan. Located in the Cederberg mountainous region, Bushmans Kloof has been a San gathering place for countless generations. The San, as opposed to their Khoikhoi relatives, are bushmen. Their people have lived on and around the Karoo from long before the Bantu people, including the Xhosa and Zulu, came to South Africa. The Karoo is a vast semi-desert region that only the San could inhabit, as they had the bush wisdom of their ancestors to allow them to survive in it. All around the Karoo and within its mountain ranges, the San people created rock art to reflect their landscape, and record their ancestral knowledge.

At Bushmans Kloof, on the western edge of the Karoo, the San communed with the spirit world.

The area is abundant with resources like food and water and is part of an ancient migratory path for elephants. The San lived in the mountains for 120,000 years and created more than 130 rock art sites in the area. The rock art is around 10,000 years old in parts of Bushmans Kloof. The San would have danced into a trance to connect with their ancestors and gods. Sadly, the San of the area were wiped out and by the early 20th century, none survived in Bushmans Kloof.

CATHEDRAL ROCK

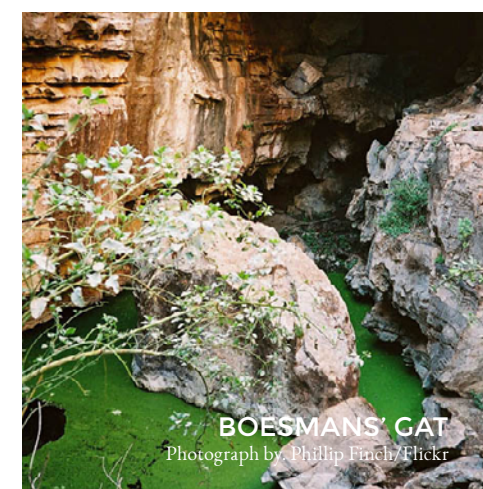
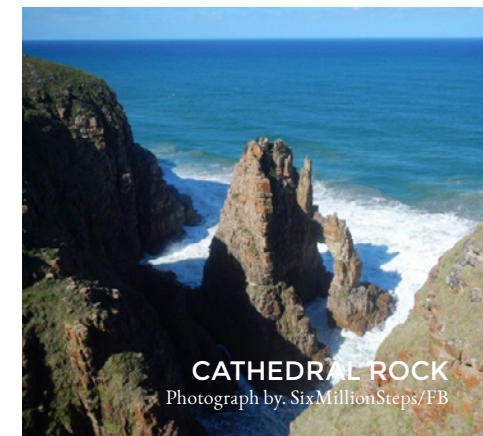
Another highly significant San site on the Cape is Cathedral Rock in Keurboomstrand. The incredible arch of natural rock is located near the mouth of the Matjies River on the sea front. Archaeological evidence indicates that the site was extensively used by the San. The deepest shell midden in the world was found next to the arch, along with red ochre pigment, pottery and beads. Cathedral Rock was an ancestral place for the San; they would have come here and instantly connected with their people and the earth.

Above the apex of the huge stone arch is a hole that aligns with the midday sun and the midnight full moon. That the waters of the sea and river were a cornucopia of seafood made the site very special to the early bushmen. Cathedral rock is a doorway to the ocean. It is a site of fertility and abundance and the evidence points to it also being a burial place, where hunter-gatherers could return their people to the womb of the earth.

BOESMANS GAT

As the name would suggest, Boesmans Gat in the Northern Cape is another San site. The name means Bushman’s Hole and it is one of the deepest submerged freshwater caves in the world. Divers started exploring it in the 1970s and the deepest dive there was 283 metres. The site is particularly amazing because it lies at an altitude of 1500 metres. While some know of the site because of some tragically fatal dives, not many know about the potent symbolic and spiritual meaning the site holds for the San people.

The Womb of Africa, as it is known, requires a descent before even getting to the water, giving the feeling of returning into the earth. A large phallic stone casts a shadow over the pool during the equinox sunset, thereby fertilising Mother Earth. Surrounding Boesmans Gat are a number of rock art sites, including Wonderwerk Gat, a breathtaking ancient cave site that was first used by humans two million years ago. The bushman rock art is thousands of years old and depicts elephants as well as eland, a





LAKE FUNDUDZI
Photograph by: Andrzej Sawa



BUSHMANS KLOOF
Photograph by: Dr. Alan Lipkin/Shutterstock

vitaly important game animal for the San. The entire area surrounding Boesmans Gat is fertile with the energy of millions of years of human occupation.

LAKE FUNDUDZI

The Khoisan people are the original people of South Africa, but there are many other tribal groups, most of which dwell on the eastern side of the country. Groups like the Zulu and the Tsonga only established themselves in the region in the 18th century. Slightly before them the Xhosa people migrated down from the Great Lakes. The Venda, or Vhavenda, arrived from the Congo region sometime around the 9th century AD, making them one of the older groups in South Africa. With a population of less than a million, the Venda are a minority people, but for many years they held a great secret that lay in a hidden valley. Lake Fundudzi is the sacred centre of the Vhatatsindi, or People of the Pool.

The Vhatatsindi, a Venda group, have guarded Lake Fundudzi in Limpopo for centuries and kept it out of bounds to visitors until relatively recently. People can still only visit with the express permission of the chief. The Venda of Lake Fundudzi believe that it is defended by the python god of fertility who must be appeased with offerings. The lake is also inhabited by spirits called the Zwid'ud'wane who are protected by a white crocodile. The spirits of the lake are very

important to the Vhatatsindi and they read the mood of their ancestors, through the colour of the lake's waters, predicting when the rains will come.

The Zwid'ud'wane are half human, mischievous beings who live in the lake and in the Thathe Vondo forest that surrounds it. They expect tribute to be paid to them in the form of beer, bangles, potsherds, stones and tufts of hair. Failure to give offering will result in the Zwid'ud'wane throwing stones at the offenders from the water. The Vhatatsindi are exempt, as they are the guardians of the lake, but all other people, including other Venda, must pay the Zwid'ud'wane. They must be greeted with an ukodola. The name Fundudzi, means 'to bend' and an ukodola salute is performed by bending over and looking at the lake upside-down through one's legs in order to greet the spirits.

As opposed to many other countries' sacred places, those of South Africa are not constructed by man, they are part of the land itself. Aside from adorning the walls of the caves and rock faces with paintings, the ancients of South Africa did not feel the need to build monuments to their ancestors and deities, they saw them in the sacred landscape all around them. This is the powerful lesson to take from the Khoisan, Venda and Bantu peoples. Rather than make their mark on the earth, they have allowed the earth to make its mark on them.

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