

# Cape Cross Seal Reserve

## A rich, rough history

Visitors to the Cape Cross Seal Reserve are first hit by the intense heat of the desert and then, as they move closer to the seals, the cold, off-shore winds. This is the nature of Namibia's coastline – wild and raw – much the same today as it was in 1486 when the Portuguese explorer, Diego Cão, planted a *padrão*, or stone cross, into the sand, establishing Portugal's claim to the territory.

Two years into the voyage and after planting the *padrão* at Cape Cross, the crew returned home, but without Cão. He had disappeared and all documents relating to this expedition were lost in a fire. All that remained was a stone cross and questions.

Walking around Cape Cross today, there are glimpses into the past that also raise questions, such as why are there two crosses here?

In 1893 Captain Becker of the German cruiser *Falke* found Cão's *padrão*, more than 400 years after it was erected. Realising its historic value, Becker removed and shipped it to Germany where the German Kaiser ordered a granite replica of the *padrão*. The replica was erected at Cape Cross in 1895.

In 1980 the National Monuments Council placed another replica of the cross on the exact spot on which Cão's original *padrão* stood. Recognising that history has several voices, it was decided that both crosses would remain.

Near the two crosses, is a 'seal stone' with an English summary of the Latin and Portuguese texts from the *padrão*; an engraving of a caravel and the coats of arms of the national monuments council; a long flat stone



with German, Afrikaans and Portuguese inscriptions; and Cão's coat of arms engraved on an oval stone.

Driving towards the seal colony on the left of the road, there is an unnatural, curved line running between a granite outcrop and the edge of a saltpan. What is it and why is it there?

The line is what remains of the first railway track in Namibia – 21 km of track used to transport guano and seal skins to ships in the bay. For nine years the guano industry thrived, and though it was extremely profitable, there were great costs. Between 1899 and 1901, a total of 92 men – half the workforce – died due to the harsh living conditions.

Today the bay where ships once brought in their provisions is a saltpan, and all that remains of the guano industry is rusted pieces of metal and a graveyard near the reception office at Cape Cross.

## Did you know?

After 400 years, the search is still on to answer what happened to Diego Cão. Right now, archaeologists are working in Southern Namibia's Sperrgebiet National Park, uncovering gold coins and other tantalising clues that might help answer the question of what happened to Diego Cão.

Guano is an Inca word for a mix of eggshell, feathers, decayed corpses and bird excrement; not what you'd necessarily consider a beautiful combination, but so valuable that it's called 'white gold' and is still harvested from platforms off Namibia's coast.

In the logbook of the German cruise ship, the *Möwe*, is the first recorded sighting of Cape fur seals off the coast of Southern Africa in 1884.

[www.met.gov.na](http://www.met.gov.na)



## Environmental Care Code

Please adhere to the following:

- Do not feed or throw objects at the animals.
- Stay on the walkway and keep to existing roads and tracks.
- Do not litter.
- Please do not remove any plant, animal or mineral material from the park.
- Please adhere to the rules and regulations as printed on your park permit.

Have fun!

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