

THE CURIOUS APPEAL OF



MATJIESFONTEIN

She loved Matjiesfontein's imperial charm, its Karoo simplicity and its many tales. During her 28-year working life, Elizabeth transformed the Marine in Hermanus, the Cellars-Hohenhort in Constantia and the Plettenberg in Plettenberg Bay into some of the best hotels in the country.

For a place of great historical significance, Matjiesfontein is a very small village. It takes about five minutes to walk through the entire village and at its centre lies the Lord Milner Hotel. The most striking part of Matjiesfontein and its hotel is that it feels more like a living museum. Most of its buildings date back to the 19th Century and in 1975 the entire town was declared a National Heritage Site. During the 1899 Second Anglo-Boer War, 12 000 British troops and 20 000 horses were stationed at Matjiesfontein, which at this



The late Elizabeth McGrath, one of South Africa's great hospitality legends who only started her career when she was in her 60's, fell in love with Matjiesfontein. Towards the end of her life, Elizabeth and her team acquired the management contract of the Lord Milner Hotel in Matjiesfontein, which allegedly became like her favoured grandchild. Under Elizabeth's supervision, the Lord Milner Hotel elegantly refined itself, whilst maintaining its quirky character. **STORY BY FRANKI BLACK**

point had become something of a British outpost connected to the rest of the world by railway. Today there are a few additional museums and an alarming number of ghost stories, but Matjiesfontein still has much the same look and feel as it must have had in those days.

TOWN TOUR

After a scenic 2.5-hour drive from Cape Town, we were welcomed to Matjiesfontein by Johan Dippenaar, Manager of the Lord Milner Hotel. He introduced himself as the manager, the fire chief, the mayor, the doctor and the police officer of Matjiesfontein. "We only have 320 permanent



LOCAL IS LEKKER - MATJIESFONTEIN

residents living in Matjiesfontein, so we fill many roles,” he explained. Next we were introduced to the local barman, tour guide and musician: Johnny, a well-known figure to anyone who’s been a visitor to Matjiesfontein. Boasting an impressive girth and a top hat, he set the jovial traditional tone with an impassioned version of “Daar kom die Alibama.”

Johan orientated us with a walking tour of the hotel grounds and the town. The gardens of the Lord Milner felt as welcoming as an oasis in a desert. Cacti stood tall next to a clear reservoir and a cool turquoise pool sparkled next to a

Lounge once frequented by statesmen such as Cecil John Rhodes. Based on Matjiesfontein’s colourful and colonial past, Dean’s book gives a detailed account of how this unassuming hamlet became world-renowned by 1897 thanks to the ingenuity of a young Scotsman named James Douglas Logan.

Dean started his talk by assuring us that the story of Matjiesfontein could be turned into the next Downton Abbey. It started in 1890 when Logan arrived in Matjiesfontein as a 19-year old, working-class Scotsman with few belongings. By the time he turned 26, he’d turned Matjiesfontein from virtually

to Matjiesfontein. Even the famous South African author, Olive Schreiner, settled in Matjiesfontein for a two-year period. Logan’s publicity stunts stretched far and wide. He made the British Tabloids by having the English cricket captain of the time arrested on a ship in Cape Town. Apparently he failed to pay his full board to Logan. Word also has it that Logan was behind the fall of Rhodes’s government. The jewel in Logan’s crown was the Lord Milner Hotel, which he completed in 1899. This coincided with the outbreak of the South African War. As a result, Logan’s first official guests were British soldiers who he welcomed with open arms.



windmill. The contrast between the stark Karoo landscape and the luxuries of the hotel grounds added to the curious appeal of Matjiesfontein. En route, we came across the travelling chapel – a 26-person chapel often used for weddings – and the town courthouse. In 1901, General Gideon Scheepers, an Afrikaans war hero, was controversially sentenced to death at this courthouse. Across the road from the courthouse, we visited the Transport Museum for a glimpse of its impressive car and train carriage collection. Some of these date back to the 1930’s.

A JOURNEY BACK IN TIME

Our visit to Matjiesfontein was beautifully timed to coincide with the launch of historian Dean Allen’s book, *Empire, War & Cricket*. As the sun set red over the Karoo, we gathered in the hotel courtyard for sherry and made our way to the Royal

nothing into an impressive Victorian village complete with a railway refreshment station and a health resort specialised in treating people with chest ailments.

As a doctor focused on analyzing society through the lens of sport, Dean’s interest was particularly sparked by the fact that Logan arranged some of the first international cricket matches to be played on Matjiesfontein soil. According to Dean, Logan was a keen showman and well aware that cricket – the game of the empire – was an important tool with which to earn Matjiesfontein an international reputation. He worked his magic and by 1895, the English Cricket Team played one of their first games in South Africa in Matjiesfontein. Logan became a household name overnight. Dean described Logan as a pugnacious railway man who attracted personalities such as Barney Bernato, Lord Randolph Churchill (Winston’s father) and Rudyard Kipling

TIP BOX:

Stay at the Lord Milner:

This historic town hotel offers 15 classic double and single rooms, spacious villas, suites and garden cottages. Be sure to sign up for a 10-minute tour aboard the Beefeater Red Bus.

Tel: +27 (0)23 5613011

milner2@mweb.co.za

www.matjiesfontein.com

History Tour:

Dean Allen offers package and specialist historic tours of Matjiesfontein on an on-demand basis. He can also be booked for motivational talks and lectures.

Topics range from teamwork to sport in business.

dean@deanallen.co.za

www.deanallen.co.za

Empire, War & Cricket (R290) is available at Exclusive Books nationwide. sjoubert@penguinrandomhouse.co.za

Logan died in Matjiesfontein in 1920, but his legacy lives on. Tweedside, Logan’s 13-bedroom house, still stands mostly unchanged on Matjiesfontein’s main road and all the other buildings in town are somehow connected to Logan. It was only in 1968 that hotelier David Rawdon bought the Lord Milner Hotel and revived the town of Matjiesfontein to what it is today. In 2013 the McGrath Collection signed a management contract with the Rawdon family and took the Lord Milner Hotel to another level.

THE GHOSTS OF MATJIESFONTEIN

After Dean’s presentation, we settled in for dinner at the hotel’s dining room. Head chef Tronette Dippenaar presented us with a traditional South African meal of herb-

LORD MILNER HOTEL



STEP BACK IN TIME AND BE INDULGED IN THE SUMPTUOUS SURROUNDS OF YESTERYEAR



ON THE FRINGE OF THE GREAT KAROO, THE LORD MILNER HOTEL APPEARS AS IF OUT OF A CONJURER'S HAT: AN AUTHENTIC TRIBUTE TO VICTORIANA. AND THE HEART OF MATJIESFONTEIN VILLAGE. THE LORD MILNER IS A GRADED THREE-STAR HERITAGE SITE HOTEL AND OFFERS 15 CLASSICALLY FURNISHED LUXURY, STANDARD AND SINGLE ROOMS IN THE MAIN HOTEL BUILDING. ADDITIONAL ACCOMMODATION INCLUDES THE DOUGLAS COTTAGES, RESTON VILLA, OLIVE SCHREINER COTTAGE, OLD MARIE RAWDON MUSEUM COTTAGE, SWIMMING POOL SUITE AND THE MATJIES MOTEL ROOMS. IN TOTAL THERE ARE 49 ROOMS THAT CAN ACCOMMODATE UP TO 100 PEOPLE.



LORD MILNER HOTEL • MATJIES MOTEL • LAIRDS ARMS BAR • COFFEE SHOP • FARM STALL
• RESTAURANT • GIFT SHOP • MARIE RAWDON MUSEUM • TRANSPORT MUSEUM • SWIMMING POOL
• TENNIS COURT • MOUNTAIN BIKES

Tel: 023 - 561 3011 email: milner2@mweb.co.za web: www.matjiesfontein.com



and-cheese soufflé, slow-braised Laingsburg lamb shoulder and malva pudding. Johan grew increasingly mischievous over dinner and I knew what was coming: ghost stories. Unlike many hotel managers in South Africa, Johan does not stand back when it comes to scaring guests with tales about resident ghosts.

Like children at a school camp, we huddled around the table and listened to Johan. “A few years ago, one of our female guests came down to reception at about 1am with her baby,” said Johan. “She complained to our receptionist about a noise coming from the room next to hers. Our receptionist promised to sort out the problem and the woman returned to her room,” Johan continued. At this point, I was getting goose bumps. “Our receptionist checked all the rooms and all seemed in order, so he walked to the woman’s room to reassure her. When he stood in front of her door, he suddenly realised that there was no one booked into that room! The woman and her baby were in fact ghosts!”

Johan pulled out all the stops and showed us a photograph sent in by a former guest. It shows Johnny sitting next to two little girls. One of the girls is looking up at a ghostly figure (clearly visible) standing behind the other girl! By now we were ready for a big glass of wine, but first Johan took us on a night tour of the Marie Rawdon Museum, one of the largest privately-owned museums in the country. Situated in a large building with underground cellars, the Marie Rawdon Museum is a treasure trove in which one could spend days. There’s a room dedicated to old cameras, binoculars, jars and dated dentistry tools. Downstairs in the cellar, we found a stuffed crocodile perched next to war trumpets and Union Jacks. Iron railway lights hung from the ceiling. The deeper we went, the spookier it became. A wooden cross loomed on a wall, mannequins stood robed in white and portraits of Victorian faces stared back at us from gloomy enclaves. One room was filled with porcelain dolls and wooden clowns. We shrieked and bee-lined for the bar.

The next morning we met up with Dean for an amble along Matjiesfontein’s quiet main road. To our delight, we came across

TIP BOX:

Catch the Train! The Shosholoza

Meyl (+27 (0)11 774 4555) leaves the Cape Town Station every day at 10am, Matjiesfontein-bound. One-way tickets cost R80 and estimated time of arrival is 3:30pm.

Catch the Train! Rovos Rail

For a luxurious experience opt for a journey on the Rovos Rail. Matjiesfontein is included on itineraries from Cape Town to destinations in the north.

Tel: + (27) 12 315 8242

www.rovos.com

reservations@rovos.co.za

Thank you!

Franki Black was hosted by the **McGrath Group**.

a dusty cricket pitch where a group of local guys were playing the colonial game. Tronette was busy supervising a braai on the sideline and a throng of gentlemen clapped as a four was hit. “There simply is no place in the world like Matjiesfontein!” exclaimed Dean. ☺

EMPIRE, WAR & CRICKET
IN SOUTH AFRICA
BY DEAN ALLEN

The fascinating story of how James Logan, the founder of Matjiesfontein, was instrumental in developing the game of cricket in South Africa at a time when the country was heading towards war with the British Empire.

In *Empire, War & Cricket in South Africa*, readers will learn how one of the first international cricket matches between South Africa and England took place at Matjiesfontein; explore the controversial 1901 South African cricket tour to England in the midst of the Anglo-Boer War; read the amazing story of how Logan once had the captain and manager of England's cricket team arrested as they boarded their ship home; and discover Logan's close relationship with Rhodes and how their 'shady dealings' brought down the Premier's first government.

Illustrated throughout with photographs and documents, *Empire, War & Cricket in South Africa* is a unique social and political history of the workings of the British Empire in South Africa during the late 19th century; a well-researched and fascinating biography of the man who gave us Matjiesfontein; and an entertaining and at times unbelievable story of cricket's origins in South Africa.

INCLUDES UNIQUE PHOTOGRAPHS AND DOCUMENTS FROM THE LOGAN FAMILY ARCHIVES.

Visit www.randomstruik.co.za or www.deanallen.co.za for more.

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