

Misty Mountain

(213 JT - Portion 11 - a portion of portion 10 of the farm Rhenosterhoek)

A Brief History of the Farm and the Hotel (with special interest sections in red)

The 68 hectare property known as Misty Mountain is situated on the Long Tom Pass Road (R37) and at the top of the Rhenosterhoek Valley, some 24 kilometers southwest of the forestry town of Sabie, Mpumalanga Province. Aptly named Misty Mountain because of the mist that hangs over the property in the summer months, the farm is a portion of the greater Rhenosterhoek farm (valley), which in its heyday, was 3000 hectares large. Large parts of this region are covered with exotic pine plantations, established in the early 20th century. Like most valley regions in Mpumalanga Province, there are traces of human settlement in the Rhenosterhoek Valley dating back many centuries. The history of settlement in the area suggests that communities of the Middle Stone Age lived in the Rhenosterhoek Valley some 40 000 years ago.

The Nel Spruit, which rises on Misty Mountain and passes through the Rhenosterhoek Valley, tells the story of the manner in which that water catchment of the Crocodile River integrated and shaped destinies of humans in the region. Some 5000 years ago, the San people were present in the region. The environmental footprints of these hunter-gatherers and foragers were light on the African earth. Consequently, the traces of their local presence were amongst the first to be obliterated into the valleys, marshes and rock cliffs as successive waves of human settlers moved in to work the land and exploit the natural resources as an extension of their industrial prowess.

There is evidence that the Iron Age people moved into the area as early as 500AD. Over the past 1500 years, pastoralists, agriculturalists and iron workers frequented the Rhenosterhoek valley. Remains of Iron Age pottery in a cave near Hendriksdal tell the tale of people who spent time in a shelter, possibly with their livestock, as recently as two centuries ago. Perhaps the most notable heritage site in the area is Klipbankspruit (next door farm to Misty Mountain) where an Iron Age community had been resident in this valley with abundant water supplies. The stone-terraced site, possibly dating back to the 15th century, is spread out over a surface of several square kilometers. This set-up suggests that human industry/skill was at a premium in a community where agriculture and livestock farming provided a livelihood to a substantive and complex community. The site was most probably vacated, as was the case with similar stone-terraced areas near Lydenburg, in the early 19th century. Probably due to the slightly warmer climate at Klipbankspruit, there are clear traces of human settlement dating back to the Iron Age in that area. The same cannot be said of the Rhenosterhoek Valley, where the cool mountain environment and occurrence of frost and cold temperatures in the winter, probably resulted in the scant traces of ruins of human settlement.

As mentioned, the Rhenosterhoek Valley (of which Misty Mountain is part) abuts the Long Tom Pass. This main road between Sabie and Lydenburg meanders through mountainous valleys and the edges of the Drakensberg Escarpment in a similar way than it did more than a century ago when travelers in wagons, stage coaches and on horseback explored the impressive fauna and flora of the region.

The first permanent European residents in the area were Voortrekker settlers who trekked from Natal and Potchefstroom to settle around Ohrigstad in the mid-1840's on land that had been purchased from the African ruler Sequati. They were forced to vacate Ohrigstad before 1850 as a result of the threat that malaria posed to the health of local residents. Other factors, namely the uncertainty about the peaceful intentions of the local African communities and the internecine political fighting between members of the community, also influenced the decision to trek. The Voortrekkers first moved to Krugerspost and then to a new site on the Highveld known as Lydenburg.

It was during this period that the Voortrekkers became familiar with Rhenosterhoek. Other farms in the greater Rhenosterhoek area, notably Olifantsgeraamte and Rooywal were selected and registered by Voortrekker families in 1850 as a second settlement phase out of Ohrigstad. This coincided with the settlement of the new town of Lydenburg in 1850. Farms started changing hands and it became clear that

the land east of Lydenburg, en route to the Lowveld and also the Portuguese Coast at Delagoa (of which Rhenosterhoek was part) now acquired greater value.

At about this time that the famous Portuguese trader and elephant hunter, **João Albasini**, was alleged to have run the Old Trading Post, the ruin of which lies on Misty Mountain, just near the main road. **João Albasini** was born in Lisbon, Portugal on 1 June 1813. Beside the fact that his father was a sea captain, little is known about young Albasini's youth. In 1831, when João was 18, his father left him in charge of a trading post at Delagoa Bay (in present day Maputo, Mozambique). It was here that the Tsonga people nurtured his hunting skills. After learning on antelope he soon became a skilled elephant hunter and traded ivory with interior peoples.

After seven years in Delagoa Bay, Albasini had built rapport and trust with the Shangaan people inhabiting the area. In 1845, Chief Magashula gave him land on the Sabie River which now forms part of the Kruger National Park. Here Albasini and his followers built a settlement known as Makashula Kraal. He was the first white person to settle in the Lowveld. The ruins of his brick-built house are not far from where the Hippo Pools are located, near Pretoriuskop in the Kruger National Park. In 1845 he became the first Portuguese person to trade with the voortrekkers led by Andries Ohrigstad and in 1847, and the first to open a shop.

In 1849, when this settlement was abandoned because of fever, he moved with his considerable following to Lydenburg. It seemed that, wherever there was trade to be had to/from Delagoa Bay (Maputo), Albasini would set up a trading store and preside over a transient rabble of hunters, gold panners, transport riders, Voortrekkers and hangers-on. It seems likely then, that Albasini would have run the Old Trading Post on Misty Mountain between 1849 and 1853. He married Gertina van Rensburg and the family moved on with their followers in 1853 to the Spelonken at Zoutpansbergdorp, presently known as Schoemansdal in the Soutpansberg district. Here he set up another trading post. He later joined the settlers at Ohrigstad. It was here that he built a model farm, Goedewensch (good wish), built a fort on this land and officially became the Chief of the Magwaba. The word magwaba means uncivilised, uncultured and foolish, and is a derogatory word for Shangaan people. Through the links he had established in South Africa, the Portuguese government in 1858 appointed him Vice-Consul for the Transvaal Republic. His period as Chief and Vice-Consul was eventful. He built a store, supervised the local inhabitants and maintained trade between the Republic and Portugal. He also established a postal service between the Delagoa Bay and the Boer Republic. In 1859 the Transvaal Republic government appointed Albasini as Native Superintendent in Zoutpansberg charged with the collection of a poll tax. This he did with the help of a force of some 2 000 Pedi. When Modjadji, the Rain Queen of the Lobedu, defied him, Albasini set off with a commando against her people and brought back cattle as booty and about 400 children as slaves.

On the death in 1864 of the Venda paramount chief, Ramabulana, the Transvaal authorities supported Albasini's protégé, Davhana, the disinherited son of Ramabula. However, the Venda thought that Davhana had poisoned his father and rallied in support behind another prince. This man, Machado, harassed the people of Schoemansdal to such an extent that most pioneers had evacuated by 1867. Twenty families opted to remain. Machado burned down the settlement, but Albasini and his company of pioneers stuck it out in the fort on his farm and were able to assist the trekkers when they returned to take up tracts of land the following year. On 10 July 1888 he died there and was buried opposite what is now the entrance to Albasini Dam.

The early white residents passed through the Rhenosterhoek valley on regular hunting trips to the Lowveld during the winter months. This was also one of the preferred routes followed by trading expeditions between Delagoa Bay (Maputo) and Lydenburg. As local white residents became more familiar with this region, they identified prime areas for farming activities. The farm Rhenosterhoek (about 3000 hectares) was one such farm in the greater Lydenburg area. According to the magistrate (landdrost) of Lydenburg, Rhenosterhoek farm was surveyed for According to the magistrate (landdrost) of Lydenburg, Rhenosterhoek farm was surveyed for a certain PW Coetser in November 1860. Due to the slow pace of land administration, the title deed for the farm Rhenosterhoek was only registered in 1871 in the name of Pieter Willem Coetser.

Pieter Willem Coetser, the youngest of three Coetser brothers, was an ardent farmer and hunter. Apparently, he was a well-built, strong man. In 1852, he married Sara Maria Viljoen and she gave birth to two sons and a daughter. After her death, Coetser married Anna Alida Badenhorst in 1861. It was no surprise when Coetser selected the farm Rhenosterhoek. Game was abundant in the Rhenosterhoek valley and it was situated on one of the major travel routes between Lydenburg, the Lowveld and Delagoa Bay. Rhenosterhoek Farm was not far from the town of Lydenburg and it had abundant water supplies for farming operations.

The influence of the Voortrekker pioneers was partially eclipsed in the 1870's with the discovery of gold in the area. In 1871, the Lydenburg Gold and Prospecting Company was formed. Within 2 years, a certain GR Parsons, a director of the company, had found traces of gold on the farm Geelhoutboom (now known as MacMac) and near Graskop. Prospectors and speculators drifted into the region and created an entrepreneurial environment in which land deals were popular. By 1877, the Eastern Transvaal goldfields had made significant inroads into opening up the little explored Mpumalanga frontier to prospective European immigrants to the country. Many entrepreneurs also negotiated land concessions for fixed periods from the government in order to prospect for gold.

The search for gold did not bring about the desired development in the Rhenosterhoek vicinity. Instead, gold mining operations were booming at Kaapsche Hoop, Barberton and Pilgrim's Rest. The land concessions to entrepreneurs on the Escarpment area (of which Rhenosterhoek forms part) did have a lasting influence, albeit at a different level. It ensured a more consistent presence of sheep farmers trekking on their annual excursions between the Highveld and the Lowveld. Sheep farmers from the Belfast/Machadodorp area, ever since the 1860's, trekked in the winter months with their sheep over Lydenburg and then Mauchberg (named after the German teacher and amateur geologist, Karl Mauch (1837-1878), who in 1865 arrived in Natal from where he set out on several journeys of discovery throughout southern Africa, mostly on foot. During his journeys, he made careful geological and geographical surveys, studied the flora and fauna and discovered gold in the Transvaal, including the Witwatersrand. He made maps of every region between Kimberley in the south, Marico in the west, the Soutpansberg in the north and Delagoa Bay in the east. His map of the old Transvaal was correct in every respect and even indicated where coal would one day be mined), through to Graskop and down to Bushbuckridge. At the start of summer they would trek back along the same route. It is interesting to note that the title deeds for Misty Mountain include a paragraph that gives farmers trekking rights for their sheep through the farm - the right to "inspan" them on the property.

African people had always been resident in the vicinity of Rhenosterhoek. In neighbouring kloofs and up to Lydenburg, there were many resident African communities. In Rhenosterhoek at the time of white settlement in the region, most African residents were of Swazi descent. It appeared that the Coetser family had good relations with the Swazis and preferred them as workers and labour tenants. It seems that at the time of the Coetser family settling on Rhenosterhoek, they brought with them, apart from some Khoi labourers, some Swazi families who had probably participated with them in hunting, trading and farming activities. When mining operations started in the vicinity of Pilgrim's Rest, the white settlers of the area and Rhenosterhoek had to become more accommodating to their labour force. The chances were that if they did not treat their labour force well, these people would seek employment opportunities on the mines in Pilgrim's Rest.

In the earlier years, the Coetser family practiced mixed farming, keeping livestock and working the lands, on the farm Rhenosterhoek. Over the years and generations, they were also known to run a maize mill, do transport riding for the mines at Pilgrim's Rest as well as their farming operations. As the family grew, so the farm was subdivided into smaller sections to accommodate the growing number of Coetser families in Rhenosterhoek. By the end of the twentieth century, at least five generations of Coetsers had lived on Rhenosterhoek on one portion or another.

The harvesting of indigenous timber wealth is probably as old as the first human settlements in the region. However, the rate of cutting out timber accelerated sharply after mining operations started in the region in the 1870's. By the time the goldfields of the Witwatersrand opened in the 1880's, timber was

transported to Johannesburg, where it was not only used for the mining industry, but for building and construction as well. When deep level mining started on the Witwatersrand in the 1890's, the demand for timber increased further and supplies from all over Mpumalanga flowed in to Johannesburg. The well-watered kloofs and valleys of Rhenosterhoek had substantial quantities of indigenous timber. By the start of the twentieth century, one of the leading private forestry initiatives in the region was the Transvaal Gold Mining and Estate Company Limited (TGME), the mining company that was formed in 1895 to consolidate the mining operations on the Escarpment. Shortly after the Anglo Boer War (1899 – 1902), at the site of small mining operations of TGME at Elandsdrift, not far from Rhenosterhoek, local miners started planting wattle plantations. Firewood had also become hard to come by at this time. Local African women were cutting down protea trees and burning them for charcoal. A local miner, EL Millar, saw the wattle venture as an opportunity to provide into a growing demand for energy sources.

After World War 1 (1914 – 1918), the mining company started diversifying and limited wattle plantations were established. So was the beginning of the “Green Gold” rush in the area, and by 1927, TGME had 1457 hectares of plantation under wattle. In the years to come, commercial forestry operations became an important element of the activities of TGME. In various areas around Rhenosterhoek, embryonic mining operations made way for forestry. This wave extended onto the farm Rhenosterhoek and remains the major economic activity in the valley today.

The Coetsers also identified the opportunity not only to grow timber, but to mill it as well. Hendrik Coetser started saw milling activities in the Rhenosterhoek valley and began by cutting indigenous timber thereby providing basic subsistence requirements to the local community. Many years later in 1953, CJC Steenkamp started a saw mill in Rhenosterhoek and this mill was the first of its kind to start comprehensive saw milling activities in Rhenosterhoek. At one stage, Steenkamp employed nearly 150 people. Steenkamp sold the mill in 1978 to Dick Latré, and it was decommissioned shortly thereafter apparently because there had been a significant drop in the market price of timber. There is still a massive sawdust mound where the mill used to be. Today, the Herring family operates a significant saw milling operation (started in 1986) on Portion 6 of Rhenosterhoek.

As mentioned earlier, the Coetser family slowly subdivided the original from Rhenosterhoek into portions as the family grew larger. Similarly, the portions began to change hands outside of the Coetser family over time as some family members moved out of the area. Today, only one portion of the original farm Rhenosterhoek remains in the Coetser family.

Misty Mountain, Portion 11 (a portion of portion 10) remained in the Coetser family until 1951, when it was sold AD Mentz, a bank manager from Sabie. Mentz held the property until 1966, when he sold it to Robert Sheard. At the time that he bought Misty Mountain, it was essentially a timber farm with one farm house on it. Being in the computer industry in Johannesburg, Mr Sheard had done well during the conversion period from the imperial system to the decimal system and this allowed him to buy Misty Mountain for a sum of R26 000. Misty Mountain became a weekend getaway for the Sheard family as they escaped the pace of Johannesburg life. In 1974, Robert and Ann Sheard relocated permanently to Misty Mountain and started a self-catering holiday resort known as Misty Mountain Chalets. The location was ideal for visitors from Johannesburg and Pretoria and the resort grew in popularity. The fact that it was situated on the Long Tom Pass (arguably one of the most scenic mountain passes in South Africa) was a great advantage. **The Long Tom Pass (R37) which links Sabie with Lydenburg, reaches a summit of 2169m and is one of the highest major roads in South Africa. From Sabie the road climbs more than 1000m before descending 670m to Lydenburg. The road sweeps smoothly over sharp climbs and descents and it is difficult to appreciate that this pass was once a fearsome natural obstacle. There are many points of historical interest along this route.**

The Long Tom Pass was built between Lydenburg and Sabie as an alternative route for the wagoners of the 1800s to get through to the Mozambican port of Lourenco Marques (now Maputo) for trading purposes. It took the wagons 10 days to get from here to the coast. The road was tarred in 1956 and now, it's a simple matter of hours to get to Maputo - border post protocol included - if you go via the Long Tom Pass. The pass takes its name from the Long Tom canon used by the Boers against the English during the Anglo Boer War. This was the British name for this Boer-operated field artillery that fired a 38 kg shell

for 10 kilometres and was the bane of British generals and their brigades. The Long Tom Pass was the scene of a running battle between the Boers and the English in September 1900. A replica of a Long Tom canon stands along the pass (2,5 kilometres from Misty Mountain).

Other interesting points on the Long Tom Pass include:

Olifantsgeraamte (the farm name): At the Nelspruit turnoff, now a forestry estate, Olifantsgeraamte was accordingly named from the many elephant skeletons that were found at this location. The hunters chased the elephants into the steep gullies, cornered them and then shot them.

Koffiehoogte: The first road between Lydenburg and the coast was known as Delagoasberg road. It was constructed over the Mauchsberg in 1873 by the old South African Republic (ZAR). The name Koffiehoogte (see the sign board on road side some 8 kilometers from Misty Mountain) appears to stem from the transport riders, who stopped in this area to allow their animals to rest and to brew coffee for themselves.

Devil's Knuckles: It is not certain where the 'knuckles' originated from. In 1873, a German, Dr Cohen indicated on a map he had made with a pedometer between Delagoa Bay and Lydenburg, the name Devil's Kop. It seems fairly certain that the name was given to these sharp prominences on the watershed by the early settlers. The 'knuckles' were extremely difficult to navigate as they consisted of a narrow ridge or watershed between the precipitous valleys on the north and south connecting the escarpment on the west with that on the east. Signs of the original road can still be seen around and over the 'knuckles'.

Old Harbour Road: Originally named the Delagoasberg road, covering a considerable distance of the pass. Sections of this old road can be seen at several places from the tar road.

Long Tom Shell Hole (Bomgat): Made by one of the shells fired from a Long Tom canon by the retreating Boers against the advancing English army.

Die Geut (Shute or Gutter) also known as The Staircase: A very steep descent which was difficult to negotiate. Ruts can still be seen in the landscape, which were scored by the locked wheels of the heavily laden wagons when they were slid down the steep gradient.

Blyfstaanhoogte: Another steep section where progress was so slow that the wagons seemed to be standing still.

Whisky Spruit: The most popular origin for the name was that the water was reputedly so good, that it made an excellent drink; regardless of the quality of the whisky.

By 1974, the Sheards had built 12 self-catering chalets and trading store that serviced not only the guests at Misty Mountain, but the local forestry community as well. Misty Mountain became a destination for visitors to Mpumalanga and particularly those that wanted to enjoy the impressive views down the Rhenosterhoek valley towards the Lowveld. On a clear day, one can see Pig's Peak (Swaziland), some 100 kilometres as the crow flies, from Misty Mountain. Misty Mountain also became a stop-over point for those tourists heading to/from the Kruger National Park. In the early 1980's, the Sheard's added a couple more chalets and also purchased the 208-hectare neighbouring timber farm (Portion 8 of the farm Rhenosterhoek) in 1986 for R125 000. In 1987, Misty Mountain was declared a South African Natural Heritage Site due to the prevalence of certain rare and endangered fauna and flora on the property, most notably the endangered Blue Swallow. Misty Mountain is also truly "on the watershed" with three rivers, the Nels, the Sabie and the Houtbosloop rising on the property. It goes without saying that the drinking water at Misty Mountain is fresh, pure and clean.

In 1995, James Sheard (Robert and Ann's son) and his wife Lisa moved to Misty Mountain to take over the running of Misty Mountain from the senior Sheards. By late 1996, a new restaurant and entertainment complex had been built and the following year, all the existing chalets were renovated. In

2000, 10 new studio chalets came on stream and a conference/function centre was completed 2 years later. Another 4 studio units were built in 2004, bringing the capacity of Misty Mountain up to 84 beds. In 2011, the old farmhouse was renovated and put into the hotel stock as a self-catering offering, adding another 10 beds to the capacity. Misty Mountain now offers a variety of leisure activities as well (guided quad biking, trout fishing, walking trails and bird-watching). Over the years, improvements have been ongoing culminating in the first crop of organic vegetables from our organic vegetable garden being used in our restaurant in mid-2009. Today, Misty Mountain employs 36 people compared to 8 in 1995. The timber plantations on Misty Mountain continue to be a source of income to the farm, but the hospitality side of the business is now, by far, the most significant.

Much has changed in the South African hospitality industry since the early days of 1975. Vacation trends have moved away from one long annual holiday in one place to many shorter holidays during the year in a variety of places. Globalisation has made international travel easier and whereas in the old days, most of the guests at Misty Mountain were South Africans, the market these days is fairly evenly split between domestic and international visitors. Most of the international visitors use Misty Mountain as a first stop into or the last stop out of the Panorama Region from/to Johannesburg and heading towards/back from the Kruger National Park and private games reserves. The domestic visitors use Misty Mountain as a weekend/holiday retreat and as a base to explore the Panorama region. We trust that you will enjoy your stay at Misty Mountain and hope that this background to the property and the area will contribute to your understanding and enjoyment of the Misty Mountain and the Panorama region.