

San Heritage Centre launches on Heritage Day

About an hour outside of Cape Town, the new !Khwa ttu Heritage Centre - a unique place of learning and sharing, owned and run for and by the San - opened its doors on Heritage Day, Monday, 24 September.



!Khwa ttu Heritage Centre launch: Petrus Vaalbooi with Founder Irene Staehelin share a moment

The building itself is embedded into the land lines of the ridge looking towards Yzerfontein and the Atlantic Ocean. Soon, the surrounding indigenous vegetation will completely cover the canopy, which represents a shelter where people gather to learn and to share.

It addresses the hopes and dreams of San all over Southern Africa: it is a place to tell their story in ways of their choosing, a place of dignity where their voices can be heard and the past can be remembered for a better future; a place to tell you who the San are.

!Khwa ttu "brings back the pride in the people, it brings back the dignity in the people, because they are telling their story in their own way. It comes from within them," explains Leana Snyders, director of the South African San Council.

Cultural restitution

The San here welcome visitors. Their pride in sharing their culture is inspiring and, of course, poignant. !Khwa ttu is located in an area that was once part of the vast territory of the !Xam Bushmen, who were systematically rounded up and exterminated in the late 18th century. Surviving groups of San, were hunted, researched then left to their plight, marginalised and ignored.

A vast quantity of scholarship has been carried out on the San; very little has ever been made available to the subjects of that research. The !Khwa ttu Heritage Centre seeks to address that and to serve !Khwa ttu's mission of cultural restitution.

"There is no group in mankind that has been written about more than the San, the Bushmen people. And where are these books? They're in the libraries, in the universities. They're not in the possession of the people," says founder Irene Staehelin. "So what we want to do here is restitute those stories, those films, that knowledge, those images, and then the Bushman people can decide: 'Yes we accept this and this and this, and this we would rather not take for our heritage.' It's for them to decide."

With its immersive, multimedia "egg" room, digital archive, engineering, geothermal temperature control, and essentially contemporary architecture, the Heritage Centre depicts old wisdom combined with new technology for a sustainable future. Exhibitions are designed to be dismantled eventually and moved to !Khwa ttu's satellite outposts in the remote San villages.

Conservation and skills training

The focus here is on heritage conservation and providing training and adult education - including skills in tourism, entrepreneurship and community-based development - for rotating groups of the San youth.

As part of the skills training offered, the management of !Khwa ttu has taken a derelict farm and turned it into an inspiring destination for visitors. Over the past 20 years, the San, management and trainees have rehabilitated the land, reintroduced eland, zebra and various other animals, laid hiking and mountain-bike trails, established a restaurant and an array of accommodation options. Activities include tours by a San guide, complete with tea ceremony, and click-punctuated story-telling; tourists can also discover The Way of the San, as well as how to track animals.

More than just history

"The !Khwa ttu San Heritage Centre is a great deal more than a collection of artefacts and historical photos. It's a pioneering initiative that embraces the principle of community curation, led by San consultants from across Southern Africa and academics. The exhibitions, San-led trails and guided experiences are designed to engage the body and senses as much as the mind," explains Michael Daiber, general manager of !Khwa ttu. "They demonstrate the skills and knowledge of the San people, while also telling the archaeological story of the origins of the modern mind on the Southern African coastline."

The activities offered at !Kwah ttu go some way towards making it self-sustaining, but more importantly they give the San trainees invaluable exposure and experience in the tourism industry.

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