

Episode 68: Robben Island

Summary

Nick and Wendy talk about visiting the famous Apartheid-era prison on Robben Island, near Cape Town in South Africa, and being guided by an ex-prisoner.

Transcript

Nick: Today Wendy and I are coming to you from Cape Town in South Africa. And we've been here for more than a week already, because there's just so many things to see and do in this city.

Wendy: Yeah, we don't normally stay this long in a single destination, but, yeah, we've had ... every single day here's been jam-packed¹. We've been so busy, uhh, going on hikes, there's so many amazing hikes that you can do and so many different parts of the city, and each part is different. So we've really had a wonderful time exploring Cape Town.

Nick: So what we want to talk about today is just one specific place that you can go to in Cape Town, and it's Robben Island. So it's an island that used to be a prison, maximum security prison, and of course it's most famous for having political prisoners there, and in particular, Nelson Mandela.

Wendy: Yes.

Nick: So he was imprisoned for about twenty-seven, twenty-eight years, and he spent eighteen of those years at ... uhh, on Robben Island, in the prison there. And of course he wasn't the only one. There were many other ... hundreds of political prisoners there, and also other types of prisoners.

Wendy: Yeah, in the beginning, it was a mix of convicted, umm, prisoners who had been convicted of a crime, and then political prisoners, who were there because they were acting out against the government. And, uhh, in the end, they ended up separating them, so they built a separate convict prison that was just for those who, you know, had committed other types of offences, not political offences. And then the Robben Island prison, the one that we visited, the one that's really famous, uhh, that was only for political prisoners later on.

¹ jam-packed: completely filled

Nick: And so the political prisoners were all released in 1991 and the last of the other prisoners were released, or were transferred, rather, not released, to a different facility in 1996. And so it's no longer an active prison and so now it's a World Heritage site and you can visit it. And it's a very popular thing to do for visitors who come to Cape Town. So you take a boat over there, and then once you get there, there are two parts to the visit: one where you go to the prison, and another area where you go around the island, umm, on a bus, and then you get taken to some of the other things that are on the island. Umm, our friend Ted who we're staying with and who's been a guest on our podcast, he said that a lot of the other guests that he has don't really think Robben Island is that great compared with some of the other attractions of Cape Town.

Wendy: Yeah, which I find kind of surprising, because we both found it to be very moving² and very worthwhile. It's true that the entrance fee is a bit pricey³ by South African standards, so maybe people feel like they're not getting their, you know, money's worth or something out of the ticket. But I was really glad that I visited.

Nick: Yeah, I think regarding the entrance fee, I mean it's a complicated site to visit. You have the boat trip, then you have a guided tour of the prison, then you have this bus trip around the island and that's guided as well, so there's quite a lot of things going into it. Umm, it's not just simply going into an entrance of a museum and then coming out. So there's a lot of people involved in it and things like that. I also think, I mean, Cape Town is such a beautiful city and there are just these amazing natural sites - the Table Mountain, uhh, the Cape Point and the Cape of Good Hope - and so maybe that's why people think Robben Island is not so great. I mean, it's not a visually amazing sight.

Wendy: Mmm, that's true. I mean, it's a prison. Prisons are generally pretty drab⁴ and dreary⁵ and ugly and I would say that that's true of this one as well. Uhh, but of course it's not ... you don't go there to admire the beauty of it. You go there to learn about the history and to understand this very important and very recent period of South African history.

Nick: Right, and that's one of the things that's so fascinating about South African history is that it is living history for so many people who lived through it. And to think that it happened in our lifetimes, umm, is really interesting, but to be able to talk to people who lived through it is really amazing. And so it's just ... it's a good time to be here, I guess, in that way, to be able to understand this kind of thing. I mean, I'm very into ancient and medieval history and of course that's just what you read about in books and you don't get to talk to people who were participants in it.

² moving: evoking strong emotional feelings

³ pricey: expensive

⁴ drab: lacking in colour or cheer

⁵ dreary: dull, gloomy, causing sadness

Umm, but we had that experience at Robben Island, because when you go into the prison, you're guided by an ex-political prisoner.

Wendy: Yeah.

Nick: And the guide that we had, his name was Kgotso, and he was very, very good.

Wendy: He was excellent, yeah. He told us his story of, you know, the kind of activism that he was doing and how he got caught and arrested and what it was like then living in the prison and what that ... what the whole experience was like. And then getting released as well.

Nick: So he told us that the prisoners were separated into different groups. Firstly, the prisoners were only male and only non-white - the political prisoners, that is. And so within that, there were three different groupings. The first grouping were the so-called 'coloureds'. And this is a bit complicated to explain, but in South Africa, everybody knows that there are white people and black people, but there are also coloured people who often have an Asian heritage or background. They're a mix between Indian and Malaysian and Indonesian people, uhh, and so they don't fit into the stereotype or the idea that people have of South Africa as this black and white country.

Wendy: Yeah, it's not that at all. And in fact it is also known as the Rainbow Nation, because, you know, you do have lots of different shades⁶. There are people of mixed race, which is what the coloureds are. Uhh, that's how that term is used in South Africa.

Nick: And so, anyway, the coloureds were separated from the blacks, and then, within the blacks, there were people considered leaders. And they were also separated. So obviously Mandela was one of these leaders. And the leaders were in a different cell block. They actually had private cells. Very small cells - umm, it's still a prison, after all - but they had private cells, whereas the other people who were non-leaders, such as Kgotso, our guide, were in a kind of dormitory⁷ type of prison cell, right?

Wendy: Right, so there were up to sixty men living in one cell together, one large cell, and they were sleeping in bunk beds, one on top of the other.

Nick: Yeah, I mean it's a large cell compared with the small private cells but it's still ... for sixty people, it's a very small space.

Wendy: Yes, yes, that's very true.

⁶ shades: variations of colour

⁷ dormitory: a room with lots of beds, such as in a youth hostel (or a building with a lot of bedrooms, such as on a university campus)

Nick: And even ... there were strange things that he told us. For example, that the clothing they were given was different if they were black or coloured. And just weird things like that that don't seem to make any sense or have any real reason behind them.

Wendy: Yeah, I guess it was just the whole ... just part of the whole Apartheid structure where you did have all these different ways to separate and differentiate between people of different races.

Nick: And so Mandela was moved from Robben Island prison to a different prison for health reasons in 1984 and that was the year that Kgotso came to the prison. So he was there for seven years and in 1990, Mandela was released. In 1991, all of the other political prisoners on Robben Island were released. And so, as you said, he talked about being released, and they took the boat back to the mainland, and him and his fellow ex-prisoners, now, the first thing that they did was to climb Table Mountain in Cape Town.

Wendy: Yeah, because they had been seeing it all along⁸. Every day, you know, they could look across and see this beautiful mountain, uhh, but they couldn't reach it. And they decided that that was the first thing that they wanted to do as soon as they were given their freedom.

Nick: And so there are quite a few of these ex-prisoners now who are guides at the prison. I actually asked Kgotso if that was still painful for him, to go into his very cell and tell people about it. He said it used to be painful when he first started giving tours, because he's now been giving the tours for fourteen years, and so now it's not painful for him anymore. Umm, but it's also interesting that eight of the ex-prisoners who are now guides live in a village on the island.

Wendy: Yes, it's a very small village, and originally when the prison was in operation, the village was for the prison guards. Uhh, for ... and their families as well. And now you do still have a few prison guards who are also living in the village and living together in harmony with the prisoners who they used to guard. So that was something that Nelson Mandela himself ... that was his concept, his idea, and something that he really wanted, uhh, to make happen. And now it's happened, which I think is really beautiful.

Nick: It is, and so Kgotso himself is not one of these eight who live there. He lives in Cape Town and he commutes⁹ across to the island to give his tours, but yeah, I still think it must be surreal for these other eight people to live on the same small island with the same view that they had as prisoners but now being free men.

⁸ all along: throughout, the whole time

⁹ commutes: travels to and from work every day

Wendy: Yeah, umm, yeah. I'm not sure that I would want to do it but, uhh, they seem to be happy. I'm sure that they do get a lot of satisfaction from their jobs and from being able to, you know, shed light on¹⁰ this terrible period of history and tell their stories.

Nick: Yeah, and it certainly made a big difference for us and we really appreciated being able to hear that perspective.

Wendy: Absolutely.

¹⁰ shed light on: to illuminate

Comprehension Questions

1. What were the two possible reasons that Nick and Wendy gave for some people not enjoying Robben Island as much as they did?
2. What were the three different groupings of political prisoners on Robben Island that Nick explained?
3. What did Kgotso and his fellow prisoners do as soon as they were released?

Exercises

Use the words and expressions in the footnotes of the transcript to fill in the gaps.

1. This isn't a black-and-white issue. There are lots of _____ of grey in between.
2. He's been unhappy in his job _____. He just didn't tell anyone until this week.
3. The restaurant was nice but it was a bit _____ for what it is. I think there are other places nearby that are better value.
4. The bus was already _____ but it kept stopping anyway and more people kept getting on. I was standing up and I could barely move my arms because there were so many people.
5. The movie was very _____, especially at the end. I cried several times.
6. We tried to make a booking at the hostel but they didn't have any private rooms and the only option was to stay in a _____.
7. She lives in Toledo but she works in Madrid so she _____ every day on the train. It's not ideal but there aren't any jobs for her in Toledo.
8. The police are trying to figure out what happened but they don't have much of an idea yet. They need some witness who can _____ what happened.
9. He prefers to wear _____ clothing - greys, browns and blacks. He doesn't have any brightly coloured clothes.
10. The weather in the UK is often very _____. It's cloudy, foggy and wet.

Discussion Questions

Discuss these questions with a partner or in the [English in 10 Minutes Listeners group on Facebook](#):

1. Do you think you would enjoy visiting Robben Island? Why or why not?
2. If you had been imprisoned on Robben Island or elsewhere, what would be the first thing you would do after being released?
3. What are your memories of, and feelings about, the Apartheid era in South Africa? What emotions does Apartheid stir up in you?

Answers

Comprehension Questions

1. That it's expensive and that it's not a beautiful place, unlike many of the other attractions in and around Cape Town.
2. The coloureds, the blacks and the black leaders.
3. They climbed Table Mountain in Cape Town, which they could see every day while they were imprisoned.

Exercises

1. shades
2. all along
3. pricey
4. jam-packed
5. moving
6. dormitory
7. commutes
8. shed light on
9. drab
10. dreary