

a fishy tale of

BIG BRAINS

Early humans may have gotten smart by eating seafood, **MARNA CILLIERS** learned while visiting newly discovered ancient caves in Mossel Bay. Evidence suggests this coastal haven may be the birthplace of modern man.

It is hard to imagine that the southern Cape, a popular holiday destination, with its mild climate and white beaches that stretch for kilometres, is now considered to be the birthplace of humankind. Abundant remains of shellfish consumed by early humans some 170 000 years ago were discovered in the caves.

It seems that the rich marine life of the bay is the essence of the story that is only now being unravelled by international scientists.

According to the presently accepted theory of the recent African origin of modern humans, all people alive today evolved from a core population of around just 600 individuals who lived on the African continent between 200 000 and 100 000 years ago. The Mossel Bay Archaeology Project has shown that the Southern Cape coast was most probably the point where modern behavioural patterns first emerged about 164 000 years ago, with humans taking shelter in caves tucked along the coastline.

THE FIRST CAVEMEN

The focal point of our journey are the massive caves under the Cape St Blaize lighthouse and others dotted high up along the coastal cliffs under Pinnacle Point.

While conducting routine archaeological surveys for the development of the golf resort, evidence was uncovered in a series of caves that cut deep into the sea-facing cliffs that fish and shellfish formed a staple diet of early man in the area. Often referred to as the miracle health discovery of the 21st century, it is believed that the Omega and Omega 3 fatty acids gained from fish oils and shell fish, known as brain food, contribute to intelligence and growth of the human brain. The protein diet played a pivotal role in enlarging the brain and intelligence of early humans.

“Under the leadership of Professor Curtis Marean, a paleoanthropologist of the Institute of Human Origins at the Arizona State University, and Dr Peter Nilssen of the Iziko

The lighthouse at Cape St Blaize is one of only two manned lighthouses remaining on the South African coast. The other is at Cape Columbine on the West Coast.

South African Museum, a systematic re-search project was launched that yielded results of international significance," explained Rob Phillips, an executive committee member promoting the heritage of Mossel Bay.

"Using a wide range of analytical techniques, it became evident that these caves were occupied between 170 000 and 40 000 years ago by Middle Stone Age people." Nowhere in the rest of the world could any evidence of modern thinking man be found prior 45 000 or 50 000 years ago.

Further excavations done at Blombos Cave near Stilbaai reported that humans lived and occupied the area around 75 000 to 80 000 years ago, hence the international significance of these new findings that shed light on another estimated 80 000 years earlier.

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A SUITABLE HOME

According to Professor Marean, the combination of climate, vegetation and geography in the Mossel Bay area provided the perfect living conditions for the population of about 600 individuals, who were the progenitors of modern humankind.

These early *Homo sapiens* required tools and implements with which to hunt, cook, build and live. They made these tools out of stone, bone and wood and learned to embed blades into handles to create complex tools, something that requires high levels of intelligence and logic.

It is believed these early modern thinking men and women survived the ice age in the Mossel Bay area by eating roots, seeds and the fruit of the diverse plant species. Shellfish was an important source of protein and crucial to their survival.

Some remained in the area, and the rest moved up into Africa and into Europe and Asia, through the Bering Strait into the Americas and beyond. This probably makes The Bay of Mussels the original home of mankind.



1 2



Interact with the researchers doing the excavations at Pinnacle Point on Facebook – search for Origins of Modern Humankind.



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1. The beautiful scenery of Mossel Bay may have provided the backdrop for the beginning of modern human kind. / 2. Archeologists have begun to search for further evidence of human evolution in the caves of Mossel Bay. / 3. Mossel Bay is one of a handful of places in the world that offers shark cage diving. / 4. Fred Orban (facilitator of the Route of Modern Behaviour Foundation), Andrew Hall (representative of the Directorate: Western Cape Heritage) and Professor Curtis Marean meet at the Pinnacle Point excavation site where evidence was discovered that early man occupied the area between 200 000 and 100 000 years ago. / 5. A plaque commemorates the site of the post office tree used by early voyagers to leave letters for one another.



TRAVEL ADVISORY

- > **Beaches** – The area has 24 kilometres of white-sand beaches – and the only north-facing beach in South Africa.
- > **Cape St Blaize Lighthouse** – The lighthouse has been a beacon to navigators since 1864. It is one of only two manned lighthouses on the South African coast today. Montagu Street (The Point), tel 044-690-3015
- > **History** – The Dias Museum complex is the largest of its kind in the Southern Cape. The Maritime Museum has a life-size replica of the caravel in which Bartholomew Dias rounded the Cape. Don't miss the Cultural Museum, the Shell Museum and Aquarium, the ethno-botanical garden with Braille Trail, and the famous Post Office Tree. 1 Market Street, tel 044-691-1067, <http://www.diasmuseum.co.za>
- > **Adrenaline** – Bungee jumping; bridge swinging; abseiling; scuba diving, whale and dolphin watching; quad bikes and yachting. www.visitmosselbay.co.za
- > **Shark cage diving** – White Shark Africa, corner of Church and Bland Street, Mossel Bay. tel 044-691-3796, www.sharkafrica.co.za
- > **Boat trips** – Romonza Seal Island trips and boat-based whale watching. Romonza office on the harbour, tel 044-690-3101, www.mosselbay.co.za/romonza
- > **Game viewing** – See four of the Big Five game species, ride an elephant, take a horseback safari or helicopter ride at Botlierskop Private Game Reserve. This is a unique African experience with diverse habitats and 26 different species of wildlife, including the rare black impala. **Botlierskop** – Private Game Reserve, tel 044-696-6055, www.botlierskop.co.za
- > **Hiking** – The Oyster Catcher Trail starts in a Khoi San cave at the old fishing village in Mossel Bay and ends with a boat trip across the Gouritz River. Tel 044-699-1204, forban@mweb.co.za, www.oystercatchertrail.co.za

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THE WATERING PLACE

In more modern times, the area became historically famous as a trading post between the first Portuguese explorers and the local San people after first Bartholomeu Dias (in 1488) and then Vasco da Gama (in 1497) landed at what is today Pinnacle Point. Dias had been appointed to search for a trading route from Europe to India by King John II of Portugal, and by the time Da Gama reached the area it was already marked on maps as Aguada de São Brás – the Watering Place of St Blaize.

He recorded the disaster and left a letter in an old shoe, which he hung from a milkwood tree

Over a delicious seafood platter, Rob Phillips fills me in on the fascinating history of the area. Of the three groups of indigenous people – the Gouriqwas, the Outeniqua, or Attaqwa, and the San – the Khoi and San are believed to be descendants of those early humans in Africa. The San were hunter-gatherers, while the Khoi, also called Strandlopers, were herdsmen and fishermen. They literally walked the beaches in search of food and had an excellent practical knowledge of healing herbs. They were often called upon to help sick sailors left in their care.

Da Gama bartered successfully for cattle with the local Khoi people in what can be regarded as the first commercial transactions in the country. Mossel Bay can rightly claim to be the first international trade centre in Southern Africa.

BAY OF MUSSELS

In 1501, another Portuguese navigator, Pedro d'Ataide, lost much of his fleet in a storm and sought shelter in Mossel Bay. He recorded the disaster and left a letter in an old shoe, which he hung from a milkwood tree near the spring from which Dias had drawn his water. This letter was found by João da Nova, the explorer to whom it was addressed. The tree, which is still standing at the Diaz museum complex, served as a post office for decades thereafter and today remains one of the

town's biggest historical attractions. Given the water sources and potential for replenishment of meat in trade with local herdsmen, this bay became a key destination and safe harbour along the southern coastline. The origin of the name Mossel Bay as it is known today, the Bay of Mussels, had to do with the ascendancy of the Dutch shipping merchants in the late 16th and the early 17th centuries. The



mussels and oysters along the shore had been a welcome addition to the limited diet on which ship's crews were expected to survive in those days.

Visiting laid-back Mossel Bay, it's hard to imagine that this unassuming little holiday town on the Garden Route is in fact the ancient home of all of humanity. Next time you stop over or breeze through on your way to somewhere bigger and brighter, spare a thought for our hardy ancestors who figured a pot of mussels was a smart idea. 🚩

THIS PAGE: Four of the Big Five game species can be seen at the Botlierskop game reserve – a short drive from Mossel Bay.



WHERE TO EAT

- > **Sea Gypsy Cafe** next to the harbour wall.
- > **Quay 4** in the harbour, tel 044-690-5496, www.seagypsy.co.za
- > **Kaai 4 Restaurant**, for traditional South African fair, in the harbour, tel 084-258-1713, www.kaai4.co.za

- > **Delfinos Restaurant** specialises in seafood and pizza, on Point Road, The Point, tel 044-690-5247, www.delfinos.co.za
- > **Kingfisher Restaurant**, for seafood, ostrich steaks and ribs, Point Village, The Point, tel 044-690-6390, www.pointvillage.co.za
- > **Cafe Havana**, traditional Cuban tapas, 38 Marsh Street, tel 044-690-4640, www.cafehavana.co.za

WINETASTING

- > **Boplaas** – follow the Klein Brakrivier off-ramp, tel 044-213-3326

WHERE TO STAY

- > **Point Village Guesthouse and Holiday Cottages**, 1 Bland Street East, Point Village, tel 044-690-7792, book@pointguesthouse.co.za, www.pointguesthouse.co.za
- > **Point Village Hotel**, 5 Point Road, Mossel Bay, tel 044-690-3156, stay@pointvillagehotel.co.za, www.pointvillagehotel.co.za
- > **Point Caravan Park** on Point Road, tel 044-690-3501