

# How things have changed in 20 years



FACE OF THE PAST: Detail from Voortrekker Monument.

PICTURES: ARJA SALAFRANCA

## Arja Salafranca embarks on a historical tour from Vlakplaas to the Lilliesleaf Farm in Rivonia

TIME turns full circle. The last time I visited the Voortrekker Monument I was a 16-year-old on an obligatory visit. Afrikaner history was high on the agenda at my apartheid government-era school, and each year we learnt the same things, just in more and more detail. And so, of course the day came when we were taken on the official school tour.

Some 20 years on. Nelson Mandela has been released, apartheid has died, we've had a new democratic government for 15 years, and there are now tours to townships and the Voortrekker Monument.

Historical tourism is big business and visiting that monolithic monument is now on the agenda for many tourists visiting this country, as well as locals keen to explore the past.

Robin Binckes organises tours for foreigners as well as locals, individuals and

corporate groups. I had been invited on his "A taste of history" tour which takes in a visit to the Voortrekker Monument, Vlakplaas Farm, lunch in Alexandra township and a visit to Lilliesleaf.

As we neared the Voortrekker Monument he remarked that no one wanted to come here, and he was right: the place is rich with connotations, white power and privilege.

That was certainly my feeling as a 16-year-old bitterly opposed to the system I found myself growing up in, and I was not interested in seeing this place.

This time my curiosity was piqued with my own privilege of years and experience. And time changes you and changes the way you perceive things. My first impression must have been similar to what I thought then, and probably what strikes most visitors. The monument is impressive. It sits high on a hill overlooking Pretoria. It's no longer as

forbidding and sinister as it might have been back then, but it still evinces respect.

Binckes is a skillful storyteller, and while we were all locals in the group, and so familiar with the monument from many years of school, the lessons had faded.

He painted the picture well, recounting the day in 1938 when the first cornerstone was laid. Initiated by the Broederbond, patriotic fervour gripped the country and even English speakers like writer Alan Paton felt it. The trek was re-enacted, and when the wagons reached Durban, Paton enthusiastically climbed aboard one, says Binckes.

But he was quickly evicted. This was no place for English speakers. Back in 1938 the Young Voortrekkers lit torches from the "Flame of Civilisation" which had been brought from the Cape, and still burns downstairs in the museum. They camped on the hill where the monument would stand, praying and singing, the scene described as a "river of light", celebrating, waving lamps and torches.

The building is said to be shaped like an axle, the kind a wagon's wheel sits on, referring to the wagons the trekkers used to escape domination by the British in the Cape.

But in a touch of irony, Binckes also pointed out the other influences dominant in the design: the railing incorporates Zulu spears, there are wildebeest sculptures embedded above the entrance, in reference to the Zulu king who called his soldiers "wildebeest". Come closer, and there are criss-cross lines denoting water, taken from a design at the Great Zimbabwe ruins.

Once inside, I found the space cold and forbidding. The floors are marble, the interior cavernous, rising up to yellow stained glass windows.

And then, all along the walls, the magnificent friezes depicting the history of the Afrikaners. And looking below, a small museum is found on the lower floors, and a stone plinth. On December 16, of course, the sun shines directly on the plinth, commemorating the Day of the Vow, the day they made their famous covenant with God.

The friezes were made in Italy, shipped back to South Africa and are said to represent the largest example of such work in the world. The story starts from the commencement of the Great Trek in 1835. The faces of those in the friezes were modelled on photographs of descendants of the trek.

There's even a depiction of the young Paul Kruger, who cut off his own finger at 16 after having been bitten by a snake.

And on through the years: the murder of Piet Retief at the hands of Dingane, clubbed to death. They did not die a "man's death" by edged weapons because the Zulus regarded them as nothing better than common criminals.

Binckes' storytelling comes

alive and illuminates these panels as he describes the Battle of Blood River. You can see the Zulu warriors, 10 000 or more, who were defeated by a relative handful of trekkers. The Zulus advanced, hissing threateningly, using their shields to appear more numerous. And the trekkers, led by the charismatic Andries Pretorius, "the Obama of his day" smiles Binckes, referring to this man's popularity, fought back. Not one Voortrekker lost their life and they vowed that from then on that this day, December 16, would be celebrated as part of their pact with God.

Downstairs, the museum is a sorry affair. Dimly lit, and rather meagre, it is clearly in need of an update. Exhibits show the lives of the trekkers through static displays of huge leather family bibles in leather, purses, slates which the children used to write on (paper was difficult to get while on the move) as well as toy dolls made out of cloth and a wooden frame.

A wall tapestry depicts idyllic and not so idyllic scenes of trekker life, wagons rolling down steep gorges, wheels coming off. Hurrying out I also glanced at the postcards for sale and was taken back even further in time: black and white photos of the friezes, and others showed the faded colours of the 1960s. In one a woman stands admiring an ox wagon, wearing heels, a tight-fitting skirt and a typical bouffant 60's hairdo.

As we left, we passed a car done up with wedding bells and ribbons. The place is still popular as a backdrop for weddings, but there was a twist in the tale, a curious subversion of the expected. This bride and bridegroom were black – the Monument belongs to everyone now.

And then Vlakplaas. The name is synonymous with darkness and evil. A place where dissidents were tortured, ANC cadres turned into askaris working for the apartheid government. The place is so innocent-looking – a farm set just outside Erasmia, now managed by a man called Louis Smit.

Plans are to turn the place into a place of healing, with a museum, said Binckes. Every December a group of sangomas gathers to pray and heal the land, an initiative started by Thabo Mbeki.

As we drove down the dusty, corrugated road toward the farm, we saw crosses on the hills, put up by Smit to mark the evil that occurred there. Dogs nosed around the gate as we entered. A young woman walked by with a rifle in a protective cover.

Vlakplaas is not open to the public,

but Binckes has an agreement with the government and maintains cordial relations with Smit, letting him know when he will be bringing tourists.

A dog's wooden kennel is ensconced on the verandah of the house, and the young woman we glimpsed quickly disappeared into the main house. Nearby the land slopes towards the Hennops River.

We stood on the foundations of one of the buildings that had been torn down. It was suddenly very cold as Binckes recounted the litany of horrors that took place there.

The first commander Dirk Coetzee's orders were to look for and buy a farm for the government. He found Vlakplaas. All the policemen who worked here had served in the Rhodesian war, a tour of duty that, "had left many bos-befok".

Here, enemies of the state were tortured, turned into askaris, and sometimes killed. Torture methods included the "helicopter" method in which victims were hung from hooks in the ceiling then beaten from side to side. Sometimes a tube was placed over the face, which stopped air supply. Just before the victim was about to pass out they were given air.

"These people were thugs," said Binckes, "yet not highly competent."

The bombs they made to blow up dissidents were sometimes chillingly boorish. When trying to bomb the ANC offices in London, they climbed over the wall to discover they had left the bomb behind on the pavement.

We listened to Binckes describe every day life: "Days were spent partying and drinking." Vlakplaas was 10 minutes by helicopter from Pretoria.

Mornings were spent making up fictitious invoices so they could claim expenses, making up names of informers who didn't exist.

The braai area shows a number of places to braai: one for meat and one, which is just large enough for human bodies, where it's said they burnt bodies then scattered the ashes, which is why there are so few graves on the farm.

The story of Vlakplaas, from the notorious Eugene de Kock, nicknamed "prime evil", to murders which included that of activists Sizwe Kondile and Griffiths Mxenge.

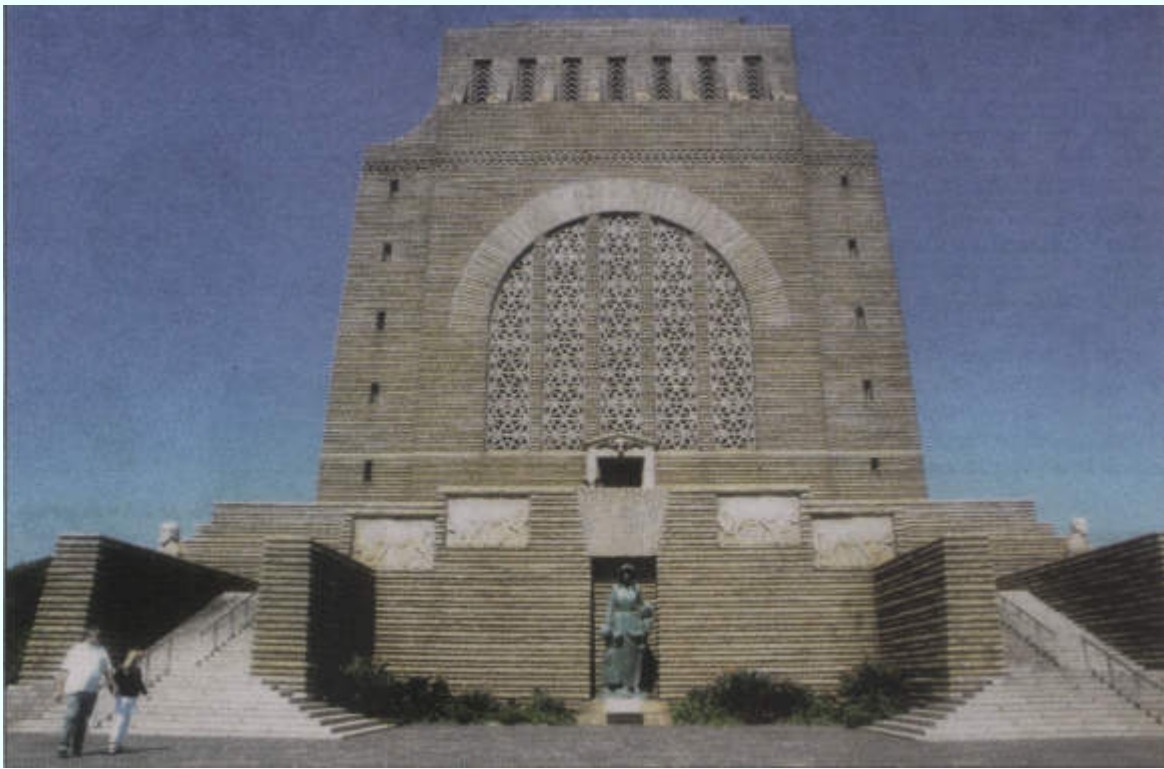
The story of the activists broke in the Vrye Weekblad and has entered our consciousness through news reports, TRC amnesty hearings and books, but it remains chilling.

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EVIL PAST: A deceptively idyllic scene – Vlakplaas.





**APARTHEID PAST: The imposing Voortrekker Monument**

## Turning symbols of domination into symbols of hope

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Watching and listening to Binckes tell the stories was unsettling. In a small cramped room, now a crude bathroom, he pointed at the hooks in the ceilings where tortures may have taken place.

"It's not a great place to visit but we need to remember," said Binckes as we drove away. We could hardly wait to leave. "When I first came here the bones of the pigs they tested the bombs on could still be seen on the grass."

Driving into Alexandra township was, of course, a total contrast – driving from death back into life. Binckes is in Alexandra daily, he is passionately involved in the Friends of Alex project which he started three years ago and aims to help the township's children. Both individuals and corporates can get involved with aid.

We ate at Joe's Butchery – both a local hangout and a place to take visitors to experience braaied meat, pap and a strong dose of chakalaka. Dancers were brought on; a talented group of Alex residents. Binckes waved to friends and a fellow tour guide, a man who is training to become a tour guide.

Binckes proudly showed us the nursery school he has helped build,

as a child played with a homemade toy made out of a milk bottle as the sun slanted down. Echoes of the Voortrekker toys made with cloth and wood more than 150 years ago, past and present colliding in a most unlikely place.

Lilliesleaf Farm in Rivonia is still little known among locals and little visited, it seems. It was deserted when we pulled into the parking lot, and the restaurant was closed, due to re-open the following week. This was, of course, the farm where Umkhonto we Sizwe planned Operation Mayibuye, the plan to overthrow the government.

Now in the middle of bustling Rivonia, the farm has now been turned into a museum and resource centre with a library. In 1963 this really was countryside. Looking at the black and white photos on display the farm looks isolated. Binckes recounted the events leading up to the Treason Trial, a story that has, again entered our consciousness through reports and media, the trial that led Mandela to 27 years in jail.

It's brought to life in the restored farmhouse which shows portraits and handwriting of leading activists, including, of course, Walter Sisulu and Mandela. In addition a 3D dis-

play tells the stories of the meetings and the raids that led to the trial and imprisonment.

A continually running footage contrasts life in the 1960s for black and white: passbooks and well-stocked fridges, servants and separate entrances, guns beneath the pillows and children playing in township dust.

In an outbuilding where raids were planned, everything has been restored to the way it was. A precarious cord hangs, attached to a plug and a running commentary plays the voices of activists.

The sun slanted into dusk as Binckes recounted Mandela's famous words from the dock, the well-known lines acquiring yet more meaning in this place where so many planned and sacrificed: "During my lifetime I have dedicated myself to this struggle of the African people. I have fought against white domination, and I have fought against black domination.

"I have cherished the ideal of a democratic and free society in which all persons live together in harmony and with equal opportunities. It is an ideal which I hope to live for and to achieve. But if needs be, it is an ideal for which I am prepared to die."

