



Eastern Cape, Frontier Wars History Tour with Alan Weyer

by Stephen Kennedy



We enjoyed lunch overlooking the Great Fish River at Adam's Krantz, Double Drift Nature Reserve.

Photo: Mary Cole

What a wonderful way to make the compelling history of 1800's Eastern Cape and the Frontier Wars come alive! On a perfect March weekend, a group of 16 of us, under the tutelage of local well-known history aficionado Alan Weyer, set out in high-clearance vehicles to explore the rugged terrain that was the scene of so much turmoil throughout the 19th Century, as Dutch farmers, British soldiers, remnant San peoples, and AmaXhosa came into contact, and often conflict, with one another.

The tour started with a setting of the scene, as we gathered beneath the Settlers Monument overlooking historic Grahamstown while Alan gave us an overview of the complex history of the region we were about to traverse, a history replete with names that would become localities on the map — Cradock, Grahamstown, Makhanda, Harrismith, Durban...

Setting out through the Ecce Heights and into the Great Fish River Conservation Area, we stopped for a look at Fort Double Drift. Standing within this remarkably well-preserved fortification above the Fish River, one could easily, albeit uncomfortably, imagine the life those British soldiers must have led in this remote, harsh area, dressed in their woolen red uniforms as they patrolled the surrounding bushveld. Alan again provided comprehensive commentary, explaining the positioning of the various forts in the British line of defence as the western boundary of land the colonial government claimed shifted between the Keiskamma and Kei Rivers. At the next fort on the tour, the abandoned Fort

Wiltshire, within the now Sam Knott Nature Reserve, we were reminded that we were indeed in a nature reserve as our presence attracted the interest of a passing black rhino. An orderly but hasty retreat ensued!



Fort Double Drift. Photo: Mary Cole

Getting further into the Amatola Mountains, we spent the night at the gracious Katberg Mountain Hotel. An old, iconic resort hotel, the Katberg remains a tasteful establishment surrounded by lovely gardens and grounds that bespeak a bygone era. After an abundant buffet

meal, Alan reviewed the history of the surrounding Kat River Settlement, a mixture of Khoi and Griqua families whose rebellion against the colonial government in 1850 broke down a buffer between the British settlers and the Xhosa, both groups eager for more land for their cattle and now also sheep.

The next morning, we stopped to have a look at Fort Armstrong, the principal defence post of the Kat River Settlement discussed the previous evening and an important link in the series of forts built along the eastern frontier. We then travelled to Fort Beaufort, passing Fort Hare University on the way, to see the Martello Tower that once housed a nine-pounder gun with an arc of 360 degrees. These structures were customarily used for coastal defenses, so one so far inland was unusual.



Martello Tower in Fort Beaufort.

Photo: Ian Currie



Taking a peak inside Fort Armstrong. Photo: Mary Cole

A highlight of the second day was a picnic stop at Burnshill, the site of a mission station at the main approach into the Amatola Mountains and close to the Great Place of Chief Sandile, who was in the process of building an alliance of all the various Xhosa tribes beyond the border. Here, in graphic detail, Alan recounted the disastrous military decisions of Henry Somerset who, preparing for war, organized a three-mile-long supply train, including fine china and wine for the officers' mess. Somerset then took most of his men to search for enemy Xhosa, leaving his base and vulnerable supply train poorly defended. The obvious result happened, allowing the Xhosa to strip the British force of their supplies before the first shot had been fired, the worst humiliation the British had suffered in South Africa up to that time. Hearing of these events while sitting in the exact locale in which they occurred, looking in one direction to where the wagon train was attacked and in the other to where Somerset led his men, made us feel as if we were part of the story.



Listening to Alan explaining the drama that took place in the region of Burnshill and Fort Cox. Photo: Ian Currie

We next stopped at Debe Nek, the site of the Battle of Amalinda, where the Senior Chief of the Xhosa, Ngqika, was defeated by his uncle Ndlambe in a bloody battle that lasted twelve hours and in which hundreds were killed. The large furrows, created by giant earthworms and up to a meter or more deep, in which Ndlambe hid his warriors awaiting the advance of Ngqika's men, are still visible. Then, following a drive through Peddie and a viewing of the Cavalry Barracks in Peddie, we all returned to Grahamstown, where the Albany Club graciously opened their doors for us late on a Sunday afternoon to have one final discourse from Alan, accompanied by a farewell toast and drink.

It was a spectacular weekend for the sixteen of us, some of whom knew each other and some not, but bound together by our interest in our region's history. Alan Weyer, who has won awards, including the SA Tourism's Tour Guide of the Year Award for his guiding, was the icing on the cake for this trip. He is not only extremely well versed in the relevant history, but he is also an excellent raconteur who presents the history in a conversational and often humorous (remember, he is one half of Boet and Swaer!) manner. He reminds one of David Rattray, chronicler of the Zulu Wars, in that he doesn't take sides but presents the known facts objectively. Sometimes one finds oneself rooting for the British, sometimes for the Xhosa, but that subjective feeling is left up to the listener.

At the end of our journey together, many of us, inspired to learn more, are now intent on taking on the seemingly Herculean task of reading Noel Mostert's *Frontiers*, all 1292 pages of it!



The Officers' Mess in Fort Beaufort. Photo: Ian Currie