

Muizenberg as a Visitor in the 1940s – Daniel Cramer

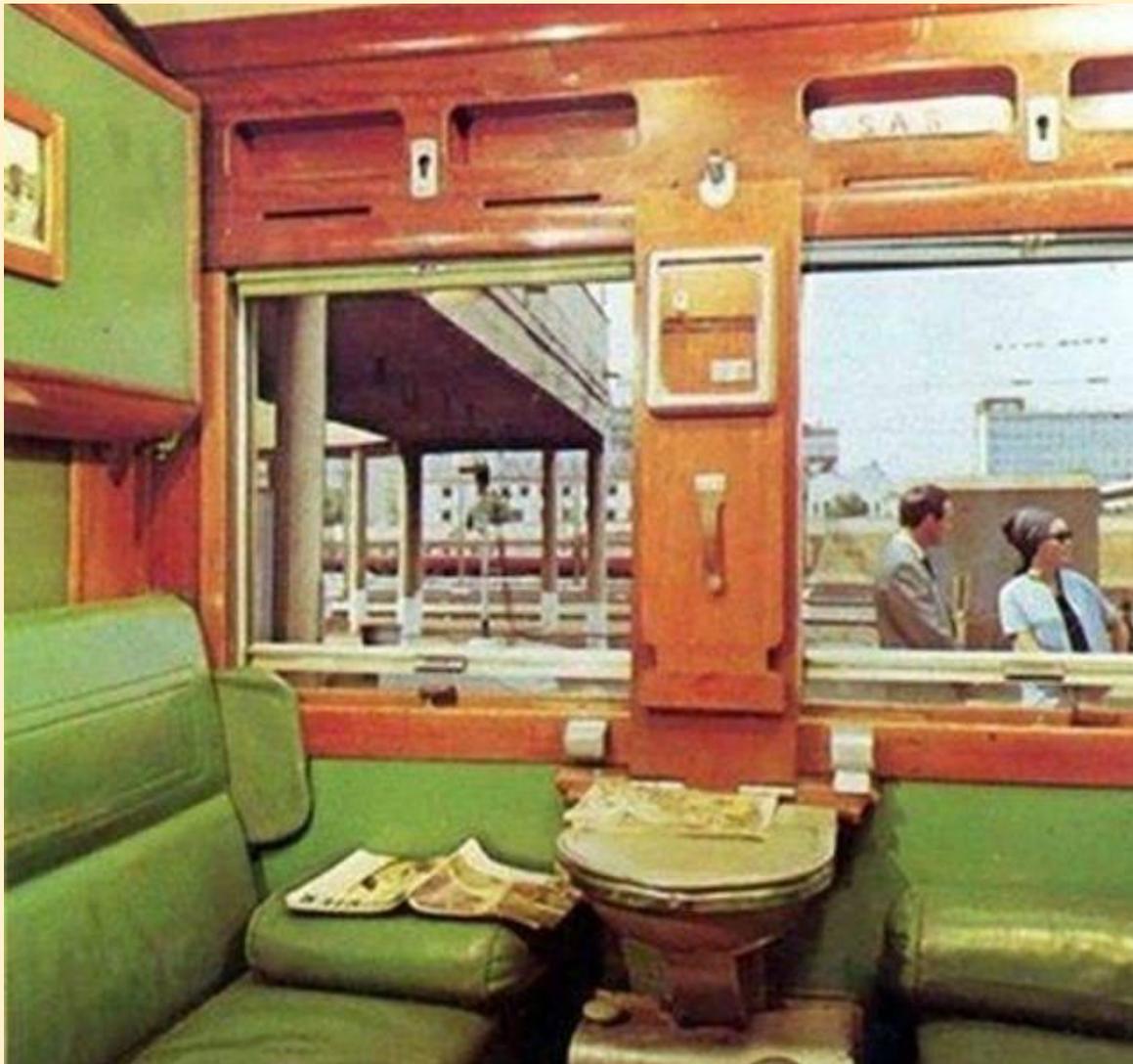
Daniel Cramer now of Welwyn, near London, wrote in December 2023:

Holiday visits – As a Johannesburger 1941 – 1944.

My memories of Muizenberg are based mainly on what was an annual pilgrimage by train from Johannesburg to Cape Town during the Christmas school holidays (plus one recuperative holiday after a misdiagnosed illness) between 1941 and 1944.

My parents, sister (Salome b.1936) and I (b.1933) lived in Johannesburg during the Second World War from 1939 to 1945. I was 12 when the war ended and at Athlone High School. Before that, I was a pupil at the Jewish Government School in Doornfontein. We returned to the Cape at the end of 1945.

My father would turn up at the Johannesburg main railway station just as soon as December railway tickets to Cape Town became available. If he was unable to join us in the annual pilgrimage to False Bay, he would book us a couchette for three. If he was able to join us it would be a compartment sleeping four. These were beautifully appointed in gleaming wood and



green leather upholstered seats and backs. There were green leather bolsters (that young boys enjoyed throwing out of the windows on their way to Habonim Camps). Windows were raised or

lowered on leather straps. In between the seats, there was a wash basin with a metal cover. Inside this on either side, were little tap levers that you pressed for hot and cold water. When you pulled the plug, the water drained onto the railway track. Over the basin you could lower a large table with a fold out leg and arms for comfortably eating ones packed meals.

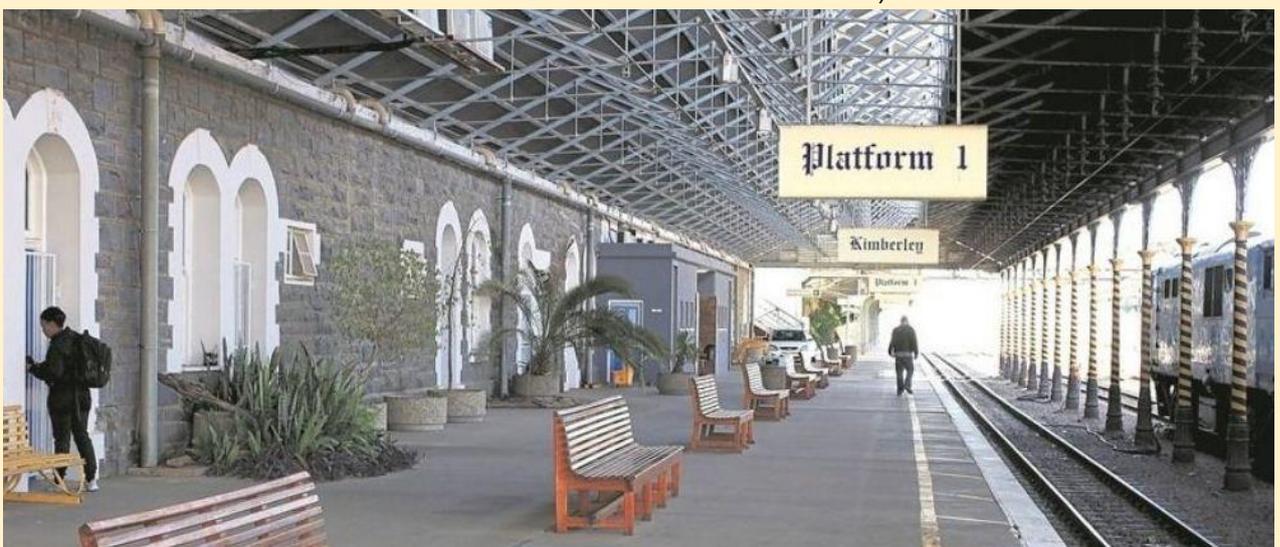
Food was a problem. Because my mother kept a strictly kosher home and we took a large, packed hamper with us. My mother, who had a heart condition was permitted white flour to bake bread, so Salome and I were able to indulge during the trip. Anyone old enough to have lived during that period will remember that there was only brown/wholemeal bread and government (brown) sugar while butter was in short supply. White bread was a hugely desired luxury. In retrospect these were more healthy options.

The trip was lengthy, either a day and two nights, or two days and one night, depending on the time of departure. The couchette seat converted into a tier of 3 bunk beds at night. The compartment could sleep four or six depending on if you travelled first or second class. (Third class was for non-Europeans).



At night one of the coloured staff (he was known as the 'bedding boy') would turn up with a beige canvas bag for each bed with white sheets and pillows and navy blue blankets. Very early in the morning the catering steward (a job reserved on SAR/SAS – South African Railways Suid Afrikaanse Spoorwee – for white men – usually Afrikaners) would knock on the door shouting 'Koffie, Koffie'. The smell of the coffee and the train trip are totally linked memories. (I and many others have spent years trying

to find coffee that tastes like our SAR/SAS memories but to no avail.)



The stops at Kimberly and De Aar broke the monotony of the trip. Here we would hear the tap-tapping on the train wheels, checking for cracks while the steam engine took on water and coal, and maybe the dining car also took on fresh catering supplies.

Crossing the Karoo was especially boring if it was during daytime.



The most exciting event of the trip was the adding of a second steam engine to enable the train to negotiate the pass at the Hex River mountains. We then descended through the beautiful orchards and vineyards on the way to Cape Town.



A member of the family would meet us at Cape Town railway station and help us with our luggage and to travel on the cross-peninsula train to Muizenberg.



In Muizenberg (Muizenberg station above)

Once in Muizenberg we would either stay in a rented self-catering cottage together with my aunt and our cousins or stay at the Imperial, a kosher hotel run by the Kosower family (or was it the Krafchiks?) We had three meals a day plus tea.



I have no memory of the food but it must have been adequate as my mother was a good cook and I don't remember any complaints. What I can remember is my mother had white bread. She was given a ration of white flour because of health and the hotel staff catered for her needs. (Now we know wholemeal would have been healthier.)

My sister and I were too young at that time to frequent the 'Snake Pit' which was just behind the beach huts (we called them 'bathing boxes') in the picture below.



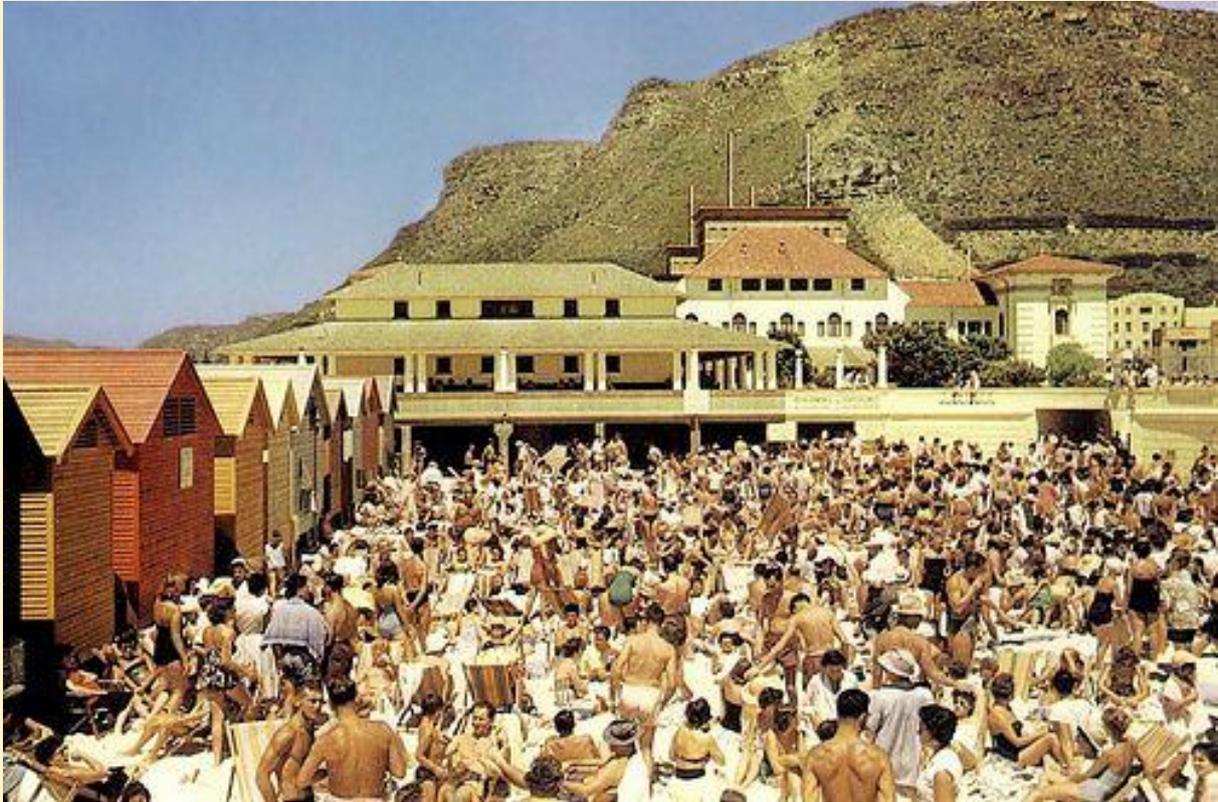
We did however have access to a family-owned bathing box for changing into and out of our swimwear. I strongly recall the smell of damp and drying woollen swimming costumes, the feel of the sand all over the floor and also the dank area underneath the concrete Pavilion where one could rent beach chairs and surf boards. The Pavilion also housed the Milk Bar whose milk shakes and ice creams were the highlight of many a holiday.

The Beach Pictured below is the 'Balmoral Beach of an afternoon in the 1950s, sheltered from the Southeaster by the double row of bating boxes.



During the morning the beach was in the sun, was clean and, depending on which tide was in, paddling, swimming and body boarding was possible. Yes, there were the older ladies – grannies we called them – who ‘tunked’.

There were incidents that stick in one's mind like being caught in a back-wash when body surfing, and also being badly stung by a bluebottle and being rushed to the chemist near the Balmoral Hotel to have laundry blue applied.



The weather could be changeable. It did not rain during the season but when the southeaster blew (mainly in the afternoons) you would be pelted with sand which the wind whirled up from the beach. This sandblasting, made the beach an uncomfortable place to be. That is when the triangle of the Snake Pit came into its glory. It was protected from the wind on three sides by the bathing boxes (left) the pavilion straight ahead and the raised promenade on the right. It was still in full sun as the shadow of the mountain had not yet reached it. It was filled with near naked oiled and bronzed, writhing teenagers. What an experience for young South Africans.

Although I was too young to be in the Snake Pit (some called it the Snake Park) we were permitted to walk the length of the beach until the entrance to the lagoon during low tide. When I was about 10 a highlight, when doing this, was to help fishermen, who had beached their boat near the vle entrance, to pull in their nets. There were always customers for the fish. There were also wonderful shells to pick up. After a storm there would be thick strands of brown Kelp all over.





The long stretch of beach we would walk on low tide 1940s.

Entertainments

In the evening, the whole population seemed to be enjoying the cooler air by promenading on the raised concrete walkway. It was a slow procession as people stopped to greet folks they knew but had not seen for some time. It could be like a pedestrian slalom. Fortunately, the walkway was quite wide. There was a boating lake and mini-golf behind the beach.



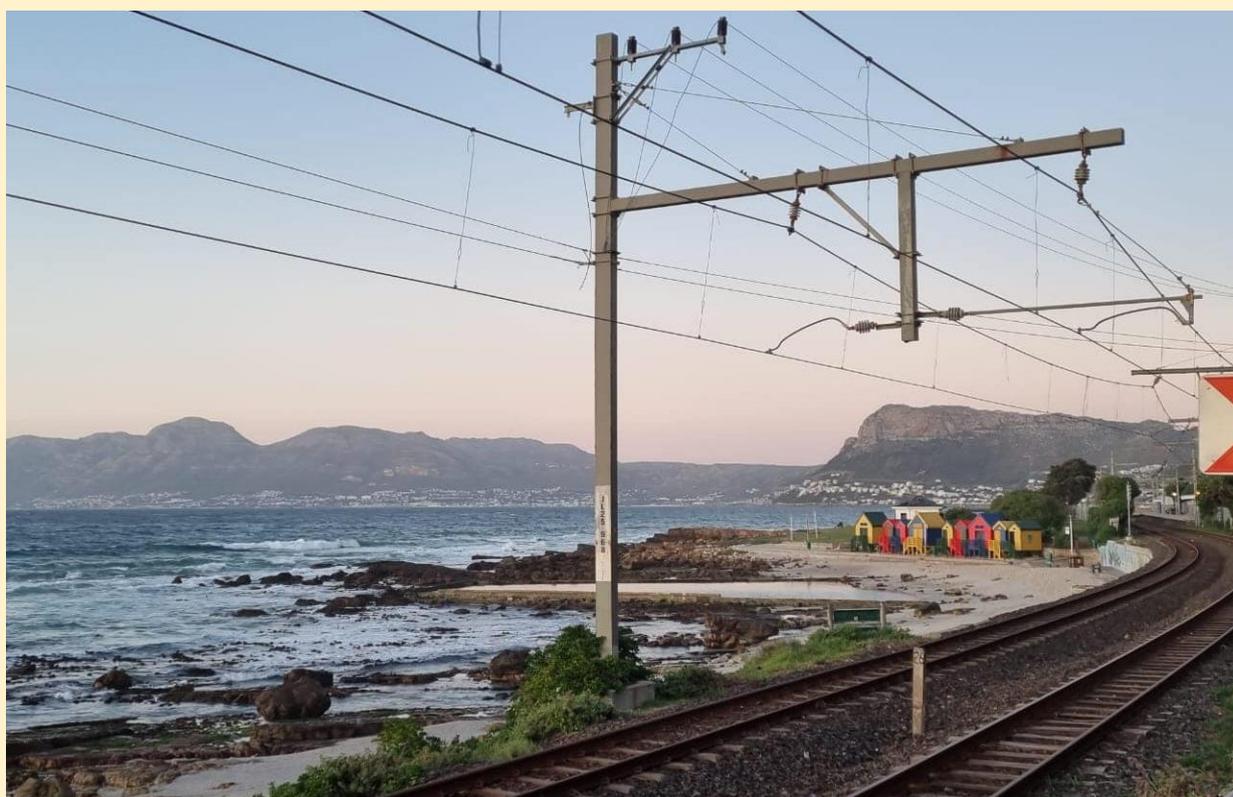


Entertainment was rather limited. There was the Empire bioscope showing run-of-the-mill films. The manager Mr. Philips always wore a tuxedo and black bow tie, whether it was a matinee, Saturday morning double feature or Saturday evening show. On Saturday nights patrons wore a jacket and a tie.

The Cafes

The Muizenberg of my day did not have restaurants but honest unpretentious cafes. After bioscope, older folks would stop off at Norman's Cafe for a hotdog or hamburger. Between the Empire and Norman's cafe was the Maccabi Cafe owned by Tex. the Maccabi cafe was renowned for its pinball machines. It was the hangout for the local ducktails, and we were never allowed in these – not kosher enough! The adults went to the Majestic Café around the corner.

Apart from the cinema the only other entertainment was the Sunday concert in the Pavilion – the Vic Davis variety show with the regular sing-a-long of old favourites such as "Daar kom die Alabama" and "Piet Hein" or Max Collie the Hypnotist. Sometimes a Yiddish and cantorial concert.



A delightful trip was to take the train all along the rocky seafront to the Naval Base in Simonstown. This stunning journey went past St James, Kalk Bay, Fishhoek, Glencairn and Sandown.

We did not need to go looking for our Cape family because the Western Cape effectively shut down between the 25/12 and 10/01 and sooner or later one or other of the extended Maskin/Sandler family would turn up at Muizenberg beach (sometimes only for a day). Of course, not all of them because my uncles in the Cape were in the military (as were many of my father's cousins).

Out of Season

When I was 11, I was misdiagnosed with an illness and my mother and sister accompanied me on a recuperative holiday to Muizenberg at the end of the season. An aunt of mine who had two cousins of similar ages to us and lived in Cape Town joined my mother in renting a house and we spent a couple of weeks in a denuded Muizenberg. It was not a fun place to be for a young visitor, out of season. My parents did not even consider that we rather should go to Durban, which would have been warmer and nearer. Cape Town and Muizenberg, with its beaches, scenery and weather PLUS Kosher hotels was paradise for Jo'burgers.

As a Visitor from the Cape – Day Trips 1945 onwards:

At the end of 1945 my parents returned permanently to Cape Town and a visit to Muizenberg became a day trip either by the excellent train service or when my parents drove their car on Sundays to meet up with family members from Wellington, Stellenbosch, and even Worcester, plus my mother's brother David and his family from Johannesburg when they were down on holiday.

When living permanently in Cape Town my parents would allow me to go to Muizenberg by train during the season from about age 14 onwards, provided I took my younger sister with me. This reduced the attraction but showed how safe train journeys were then. I discovered hot dogs provided at Sack's deli much to my mother's disgust. They may have been kosher but who knew what went into the Viennas? My parents still made the trip to Muizenberg, weather permitting, on Sundays with its regular slow procession of cars along Ladies Mile Road and then along Main Road passed the Spotted Dog Roadhouse.



There were no motorways like today. We lived in Constantia for about 5 years in my late teens onwards - it was not a suburb like today but consisted of wine farms and smallholdings with a resident Coloured population.

(This was sadly not our house but a Constantia wine estate.) When the traffic was high, our



home became a watering hole for the other members of our family making the Sunday journey from Cape Town. Muizenberg was not part of the Cape Town municipality nor was Constantia.

Once I had a driver's licence and I had discovered Clifton beach then – unlike my sister – I never became a habitue of

the Snake Pit, even though like those there I used to oil my body with exotic products like coconut oil etc. (Little did we know). Of course, one used to make occasional trips there to size up the Transvaal talent and even invited some members of the opposite sex to try out the virtues of Clifton beaches.....



The draw of Muizenberg of our early youth had ended for me. That is until I became a parent and a visitor to the Cape when the safety of Muizenberg beach and the warmth of the water on the False Bay side of the Peninsula outranked the

Clifton beaches.

Muizenberg is still a surfers' mecca indeed they held the Guinness World Record of 110 surfers riding the same wave at Muizenberg in 2009 and they have tried to better that record since.

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Visting Muizenberg by Daniel Cramer – edited and illustrated by Geraldine Auerbach MBE, London, December 2023.