



DOME DRIVING TOUR

Special: Including Battlefields

Few South Africans realise that the Vredefort Dome - the world's oldest and largest visible meteorite impact site, just south of Johannesburg - has shaped the modern history of the country. Not only is the crater with the Dome at its centre a geological wonder, but its geography at the heart of the "ring of gold" has determined South Africa's political economy.

A tour of the battlefields in this area is not only fascinating but throws light on the immense importance of the conflicts that have taken place over many centuries. The region is less well known for its battles than Northern Kwa-Zulu/Natal but more significant for its long-term effects.

FOUR MINUTES

The asteroid (or possibly a comet) that hit here two billion years ago brought deep-lying strata containing gold to the surface. The impactor struck with the force of an estimated four trillion Hiroshima-sized nuclear bombs, blowing a hole some 70 km deep in the Earth's crust. Out of this hole erupted molten granite - the "basement rock" that formed the original continents - which, as a rebound from the impact, formed the short-lived Dome. Within four minutes the whole episode was over, leaving a crater that stretched from beyond where Johannesburg is today to Welkom or further - a distance of more than 300 kilometres. This makes the crater larger than the more famous Chixulub crater in Yucatan, Mexico, where an impactor 66 million years ago caused the extinction of the dinosaurs.

It is the outside of this crater that marks the ring of gold mines from which South Africa's major wealth has been drawn. Gold attracted financiers and engineers, miners and farmers, lawyers and bankers, soldiers and missionaries, foreign artisans and local workers, to the boomtown of Johannesburg. It also led to the adoption of the

exploitative migrant labour system which had begun at the Kimberley diamond fields was carried over into gold mining. The system of apartheid carried racial segregation to an extreme, provoking internal unrest and finally leading to sanctions and the collapse of white rule.

The crater lies at the heart of all these historical events.

CRUCIBLE OF CONFLICT

From the crater came the discovery of gold and the subsequent gold rush and struggle over ownership of the land.

Even before gold was found, the lie of the land was very attractive to migrants from north and south. The Dome area comprised the mountains of the Dome Bergland (first ring surrounding the core), the Vaal River, and excellent grazing. It drew invaders from near and far. The mountains made a good refuge, and the well-watered plains were ideal for cattle and sheep. Further back in time, there is evidence that the "first people" - as the Bushmen called themselves - inhabited a cave shelter for up to 30 000 years. The incursion of the Matabele chief Mzilikazi in 1815 and the arrival 17 years later of the Voortrekkers sparked the first battles of the Great Trek in this region. Eventually the Matabele were expelled into Zimbabwe and the Transvaal Republic came into being.

Thereafter it was the untold wealth of the world's greatest deposits of gold that shaped the socioeconomic and political destiny of the country from the 1880s onwards. The Anglo-Boer wars of 1880 and 1899-1902 were initially fought over issues of independence but later over possession of the goldfields. Ethnic and industrial conflict continue through the early 20th century with rebellions against the pro-British rule of successive governments. In 1948, white nationalists came to power and in 1960 a massacre occurred at Sharpeville, within the Dome, when police opened fire on a crowd protesting against the pass laws for blacks. During the insurgency against apartheid the ANC attacked Sasolburg, also within the Dome. Resistance to the ANC government after 1994 continued to simmer with plans to blow up the Vaal Dam in order to start a white rebellion.

The crater has never been a peaceful place.

TOURS

All of this history is compressed into a tour, with handouts to take away. *See the Itinerary attached.*

BLAST! tours do a special Dome Geology and Battlefields tour for those who wish to learn not only about the impact but about its geopolitical outcomes for the people of Southern Africa. The tour is normally two days, covering a vast extent from the battlefield of Vegkop in the Free State to Sharpeville in Gauteng. A shorter day tour extends our normal introductory geology route through the Dome and to include local battlefields. Research into the Dome battlefields has taken two decades. Visitors receive a booklet about the geology, archaeology and history of the area, and a further handout on the battlefields. Led by Prof Graeme Addison - a writer on popular science and local history - the 9-hour 1-day tour starts at 8am and ends at 5pm, traversing some 110km by road. Visitors should have high clearance cars and if possible 4x4s in order to enter some of the more rugged sites of interest.

PRICE

Price of the tour is R795pp, with discounts for groups over 4 to R725pp. The price does not include refreshments or lunch (which can be taken at facilities along the way), the use of our 4x4 if required (R11,23per km), and entry to certain private areas (usually R75pp). A full quote is issued on request.

BOOKINGS

To book please confirm your numbers, date, duration of tour, types of vehicles, and fitness for (optional) walks of up to 500 metres on some rugged ground. We send a quotation and, once accepted, an invoice for settlement in advance.

See our Terms and Conditions with the quote.

Thank you for your interest.

PROF GRAEME ADDISON

Registered National Tour Guide

BLAST! TALKS AND TOURS

Based at Otters' Haunt in the Dome

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ITINERARY

07h45 ARRIVAL AND SIGN-IN

08H00 INTRODUCTORY BRIEFING:

- Demonstration of an impact
- Short walk and talk to explain Vaal/Dome geomorphology
- Map description and rock samples
- Illustrated talk and videos

09h15 - Short break

09h30 - History of the "Crater of Conflict"

10h30 - Teabreak

10h45 - Depart on drive.

11h15 - Visit Leeukop quarry to see pseudotachylite rockface and enjoy a vista of the Dome heartland (Steep 10min walk to top of Leeukop, optional).

12h15 - View the Battle of the Vaal terrain and monument to fallen Voortrekker families.

12h00 - Drive on and view the Vaal at Skurweberg corner, evidence of the river's role in eroding the Karoo overlay to expose the local Witwatersrand.

13h00 - Stop at Thabela Thabeng for lunch and discussion. A good little display centre occupies some of the time as the guide explains further details of the Dome story.

14h00 - Drive on to the museum, mine claims office and jail at Venterskroon, the "Pilgrim's Rest" of the Dome. A model of the Dome and the first geological map (1927) can be viewed.

14h30 - If entry can be obtained, we will visit the extensive gold mining tunnels at BirdSong Farm. Stretching over hundreds of metres along the mountainside, the gold mine is evidence of poor yields, very hard living, and failed expectations. It is also dangerous ground which requires great caution.

14h30 -16h00 - Whether or not we are permitted entry to BirdSong we will continue to the British heliograph station overlooking the mountains, plans and road pass between Parys and Potchefstroom.

16h30 - The tour ends with a drive over the Schoemansdrift bridge. Here the greatest of the Boer generals, Christiaan de Wet, bamboozled the English when he the river with President Steyn. They succeeded in making their way to meet President Kruger and the Transvaal Boers in order to plan the guerilla war.

17h00 - The drive past Vredefort brings us back to Parys.

END