

Anthropology of Experience: Touring the Past at Robben Island

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ABSTRACT This paper has a transdisciplinary orientation and is located in both anthropology and tourism studies. It draws on the seminal theoretical work of the post structural anthropologist Victor Turner and brings to the study of tourism, the concepts of performance, memory and 'experience'. The paper focuses on what the world has come to know as the place of incarceration for Nelson Mandela, and now declared a World Heritage Site and museum, established as the blurb goes, 'as a poignant reminder to the newly democratic South Africa of the price paid for freedom'. The paper looks at the construction of the site of Robben Island Prison Museum, in Cape Town South Africa as a performance space for the reliving and experiencing of a collective shared past and history and probes how visitors to the site, experience the space. Methodologically the paper uses narrative analysis of tourists' sharing stories of their visits in small focus type groups and in one-on-one interviews. It also draws on a thematic analysis of the visitor entries in a Visitors Book spanning a six month period of visits. The paper attempts to show that the site and constructed heritage product (or tour), emerges as a 'liminal space' where different racial categories of visitors, who have had differently shaped life histories, might be made to 'experience' a shared past of denial and oppression. Liminality speaks to a dislocation of structure and hierarchies, and by drawing on the ethnographic interviews of a randomised sample group of local and international visitors to the site, the paper shows that the visitor is placed into a liminal space by the manner in which the tour space is constructed and experienced.