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Author: GENEVIEVE SERRA genevieve.heunis@inl.co.za

ROBBEN ISLAND TO UNDERGO R150M UPGRADE

Public tours will be suspended for more than two months

GENEVIEVE SERRA
genevieve.heunis@inl.co.za

IN WHAT has been described as a sad sight by many visitors, the Robben Island Museum (RIM) is set to regain its former glory through a R150 million renovation approved by the Department of Public Works and Infrastructure.

The long-awaited refurbishment, which has been a decade in the making, will lead to suspended tours for nearly three months, marking a significant moment in the preservation of South Africa's rich historical narrative.

Robben Island has a long and significant history in South Africa, from the 15th-20th centuries of Portuguese, Dutch and British colonisation, and the apartheid era.

As a National Site of Memory and United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation, (Unesco) World Heritage Site, Robben Island, stands as a living heritage symbolising the resilience of the human spirit and

the triumph of democracy and freedom over oppression and racism, RIM said.

Late last week, RIM council chairperson, Professor Saths Cooper, announced operational changes aimed at enhancing service delivery at the museum.

Cooper also delivered the good news that Robben Island will host delegations from around the world as South Africa becomes the first African country to host the G20 later this year.

Hosting G20 dignitaries at Robben Island is deeply symbolic, allowing the world to witness the legacy of those who sacrificed everything for freedom and the country that rose in their honour.

"In preparation for this historic event, Robben Island Museum will suspend all public tours from June 16, until September 1 to perform necessary maintenance and renovations," said RIM.

"The decision to suspend tours was not taken lightly. Robben Island remains one of South Africa's most

treasured national heritage sites, attracting hundreds of thousands of visitors annually. While this temporary closure may disrupt some plans, it prioritises safety, preservation, and long-term benefit.

Visitors are welcome to learn more about the history of Robben Island by visiting our exhibition at the Nelson Mandela Gateway at the V&A Waterfront."

While addressing the media, Cooper said it was a long road waiting for the much needed revamp.

"What we are attempting to do is restore the site to ensure that the living heritage there is protected."

While the Island hosts over 1500 visitors daily, Cooper said operationally, it was suitable to shut down tours during the winter period, which sees many cancellations due to inclement weather.

He added that red tape and navigating through various departments also placed delays and pressure on the upgrade and renovation.

"To mediate all of these does take a lot of bureaucracy and time and from the period of 2014, there has not been a concerted effort to repair and refurbish Robben Island and to preserve it for future generations," Cooper said.

"Given that South Africa hosts G20 in November... we felt we should take advantage of the winter period and do a shut down in order to effect these changes which are necessary and long overdue and required to retain the tangible heritage, in the way that Unesco and all of you want it to be.

"We will be having people from different spheres working on the island to make sure these changes take place so it would not make sense to continue to have visitors to the island while workmen and women are in the space and construction (going on).

"Staff will continue with their work. We do not have a large number of staff but it will change after this period.

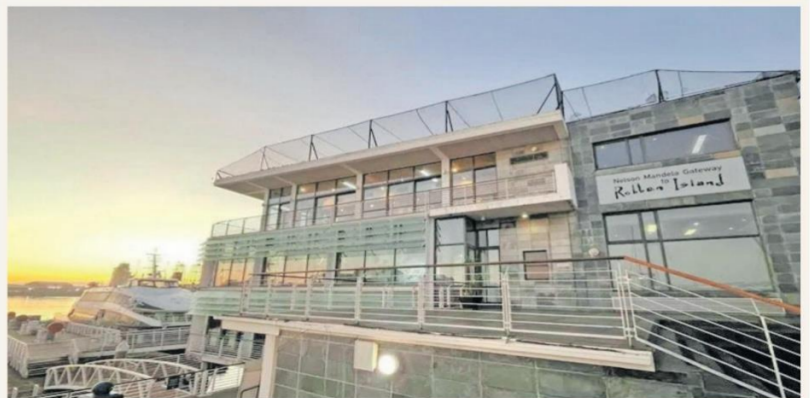
"Some staff will be taking leave." In February, the Department of Public Works and Infrastructure said

the approval had been given the green light for Robben Island Museum's upgrade following its thumbs up by Deputy Minister Sihle Zikalala, who carried out an oversight visit with a delegation which included the Ex-Political Prisoners Association.

During 2023, Zikalala visited the site to respond to concerns over the deterioration of buildings, cemeteries, gardens, recreational facilities, waste management services, and the blue stone quarry, which was placing the island at risk of losing its heritage status.

A portion of the finalised upgrades includes the desalination plant as well as the reservoirs fitted with the new filtration system to improve the quality of water.

"We look forward to welcoming visitors back on September 1 with renewed purpose, enhanced facilities, and an enriched visitor experience that reflects the significance of Robben Island as a global symbol of freedom and resilience," said RIM.



THE temporary closure of Robben Island from June 16 to September 1 aims to facilitate essential maintenance and renovations necessary for the preservation of this iconic site. | IAN LANDSBERG Independent Newspapers