

# Danger Point Lighthouse

Danger Point is a rocky headland located in the Overberg section of the Western Cape, about 9 kilometers (5.6 miles) from Gansbaai by road. The peninsula is aptly named; not only has it been the graveyard of many ships (at least 20 vessels have been lost in the immediate vicinity), it is also the hunting ground of the Great White Sharks that have made this area so famous.

Numerous requests for a navigational aid at Danger Point had been largely ignored by the colonial government, even after the disastrous loss of the HMS Birkenhead in 1852. It was only in May 1892, after a report submitted by renowned British engineer William Tregarthen Douglass, that a commission agreed to the construction of a lighthouse. The contract was awarded to Mr. R. Cochrane, under the supervision of Clerk of the Works John Bruce, and the build was completed towards the end of 1894. The lighthouse was commissioned on the 1st of January 1895. The 18 meter (60 feet) masonry tower was originally painted with red and white vertical stripes, but changed to all white with a red lantern dome a few years later. Most lighthouse towers are round, but Danger Point is octagonal; although this is unusual, 4 other towers in South Africa also have this geometric design. The lighting apparatus consisted of a first-order lens with a six-wick Trinity House burner giving out a triple flashing white light. The lens had 12 panels and weighed 3 tons, and was housed in a lantern room supplied by Chance Brothers and commissioned by William Stokes. A paraffin vapor mantle burner was introduced in 1910, and then replaced with an electric light in 1937. This was updated in 1970 with a 250 millimeter revolving optic employing a 1.5 kilowatt lamp, with a resulting output of 1,700,000 candelas at peak flash intensity.

The history of the lighthouse is irrevocably linked to the wreck of the HMS Birkenhead, a British paddlewheel steam frigate that struck an uncharted rock just off Danger Point at about 2am on the 26th of February 1852. Passengers and crew totaled some 640 souls (the exact number is unknown); most of them were soldiers from 10 different regiments, but at least 7 women and 13 children were on board as well. The ship immediately began to break up and the lifeboats were deployed, but two of them were swamped and one could not be launched. The captain ordered the men to stand fast, and the women and children were loaded into the three remaining boats. This is reputed to be the first time that this "women and children first" protocol was applied, and it has since become known as the "Birkenhead drill". Some of the men clung to the wreckage, but most of them attempted to swim to the shore. Only 193 persons survived, including the women and children; the rest either drowned or were attacked by sharks.

In 1936, a plaque commemorating this event was affixed to the base of the lighthouse tower by the Navy League of South Africa. In March 1995, a memorial was erected in close proximity to the lighthouse, complete with an arrow pointing to the exact location where the Birkenhead was wrecked. A memorial service and wreath-laying ceremony is held at this site on the anniversary date of the sinking each year.

Danger Point does offer accommodation on the premises, in the form of a single self-catering cottage which has been named "Misty Waves". It sleeps a maximum of 6 in 3 bedrooms, and features a living/dining area, a full kitchen, and 2 bathrooms. All bedroom and bathroom linen is provided, as well as satellite television (selected channels). Although the weather can sometimes be inclement, this is a spectacular and unique place to stay, and as a bonus is also an excellent whale watching vantage point.

## Danger Point Lighthouse Fact File

LSA Number	21
Name	Danger Point
Province	Western Cape
Location	Near Gansbaai
GPS Coordinates	S34.630351 E19.302399 34°37'49.3"S 19°18'08.6"E
ARLHS Number	SAF-012
Admiralty Number	D6320
NGA Number	32216
Active	Yes
First Established	1895
Commission Date	1 January 1895
Decommission Date	Not applicable
Construction Type	Octagonal masonry tower
Daymark	Tower painted white; lantern painted red.
Tower Height	18 meters (59 feet)
Focal Plane	45 meters (148 feet)
Luminous Intensity	1,700,000 candelas
Nominal Range	27 nautical miles
Characteristic	L.Fl.(3)W.R.
Period	40 seconds
Pattern	Fl. 2s, ec. 4s; Fl. 2s, ec. 4s; Fl. 2s, ec. 26s
Pattern Description	3 long white flashes every 40 seconds.
Manned	Yes
Site Open	Yes
Fenced	Yes
Tower Open	Yes
Accommodation	Yes
Access Method	Car
Access Notes	All access roads are tarred.