

Robben Island Lighthouse

When Jan Van Riebeeck first landed at the Cape in 1652, he soon realized that Robben Island presented a significant hazard to ships heading into Table Bay from the north. To alleviate the danger, he ordered that a huge bonfire be lit on the highest point of the island whenever incoming ships were sighted before nightfall. Situated 30 meters (98 feet) above sea level on the southern side, this little hill became known as "Vuurberg" ("Fire Hill"), and it was the first ever navigational aid in South Africa.

The plan to erect a permanent lighthouse on the island was originally proposed in 1859, and a working drawing was created by John Scott Tucker. His design incorporated a tapered octagonal tower with seven floor levels, but when construction began, in 1863, this was modified slightly and a round tower was built. Joseph Flack, Clerk of the Works, completed the lighthouse in 1864, but its inauguration was delayed because of alterations to both the Green Point and Mouille Point lighthouses. The lamp was eventually lit for the first time at 19:14 on Sunday the 1st of January 1865. The name of the location was changed from "Vuurberg" to "Minto Hill", after Dr. James Minto, the surgeon-superintendent during the infirmary period of 1855 - 1862.

The tapered shaft of the lighthouse tower was constructed as an unplastered masonry structure, using hammer-dressed stone sourced from a quarry on the island. A total of 28 horizontal courses are clearly identifiable, and are capped with three carefully dressed granite courses which combine to form a projecting cornice on the underside of the main gallery floor. The tower is 18 meters (59 feet) tall, and painted white with a vertical black "navigation" line on the eastern side. The lantern and dome are painted red.

The Robben Island lighthouse is fairly unusual in that it is fitted with an occulting light (a process where the light is blocked for a period of time, making it appear to flash). It has two light sources – a white light, facing north-west, with a duration of 5 seconds and an eclipse of 2 seconds, and a fixed red navigation light which faces south-east. The lights were first electrified in 1938, and then converted to more modern LED fittings a few years ago.

Robben Island Lighthouse Fact File

LSA Number	11
Name	Robben Island
Province	Western Cape
Location	Robben Island
GPS Coordinates	S33.814701 E18.374134 33°48'52.9"S 18°22'26.9"E
ARLHS Number	SAF-023
Admiralty Number	D5870
NGA Number	25968
Active	Yes
First Established	1865
Commission Date	1 January 1865
Decommission Date	Not applicable
Construction Type	Round masonry tower
Daymark	Tower painted white with a black vertical stripe on the eastern side; lantern painted red.
Tower Height	18 meters (59 feet)
Focal Plane	47 meters (154 feet)
Luminous Intensity	46,000 candelas
Nominal Range	24 nautical miles
Characteristic	Oc.W.R.
Period	7 seconds
Pattern	Lt. 5s, ec. 2s
Pattern Description	White light, 5 seconds on, 2 seconds off.
Manned	Yes
Site Open	Yes
Fenced	No
Tower Open	No
Accommodation	No
Access Method	Boat
Access Notes	TBC