

Between Stone and Silence: Rewriting the Castle of Good Hope

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In central Cape Town, the Castle of Good Hope is widely regarded as a tourist attraction; however, it also contains complex and difficult histories linked to South Africa's colonial past that remain subject to ongoing debate. Behind its thick stone walls, the Castle operates both as a museum and a site of memory, where curators emphasise that the contemporary role of the institution is no longer to uphold a singular historical narrative, but rather to present multiple, sometimes competing interpretations alongside one another. Visitors move through the yard and walls that were once used for military drills, imprisonment, and punishment, spaces that have since been redefined as areas of reflection and interpretation rather than instruments of colonial authority.

At the Castle of Good Hope, museum staff describe a deliberate shift away from a singular colonial narrative. The site is organised into sections covering military, artistic, architectural, social, and contemporary themes. One curator explains, drawing on institutional leadership guidance, that "the good, bad and the ugly must all be told transparently." He further argues that suppressing colonial European history would not contribute to reconciliation; rather, it would intensify contestation within public memory. Through exhibitions, published works, and public dialogues, the Castle seeks to reframe what was once a largely celebratory account of Dutch rule into a more nuanced and critically engaged historical record.

Historians say interpretations of the Castle have changed significantly over time. Earlier scholarship often focused on military and political narratives, but newer research incorporates archaeology, architecture, precolonial histories, and oral traditions that were previously excluded. This expansion of sources has shifted the site from a static monument into an evolving space of inquiry shaped by academic and public collaboration.

A tour guide at the Castle says he remains neutral and historically accurate when leading tours for visitors from different backgrounds, believing anything else would betray the past. Referring to the idea that "history is told by the victors," he explains that this makes it even more important to present facts without distortion or bias. According to him, many visitors arrive with expectations shaped by textbooks, documentaries, and travel narratives, which influence how they interpret the site and its history. He has witnessed reactions ranging from anger and shock to sympathy and curiosity, often shaped by group dynamics and personal perspectives. Visitors frequently ask how South Africans feel about the Dutch colonial legacy, how indigenous people were treated within the Castle's walls, and what life was like before the arrival of the Dutch. He notes that these discussions often become emotional as tourists connect the Castle's history to broader themes of conquest, displacement, and resistance in South Africa.

A visitor from Brazil says she arrived knowing only the Castle's military significance and location in Cape Town. After the tour, she describes feeling surprised by the depth of colonial violence associated with the site. It helped her understand racial division and suffering, and she calls the experience enlightening. For her, the Castle functions less as a tourist attraction and more as a place of historical reflection.

Community members and activists argue that stories of enslaved and indigenous people remain underrepresented. They say emphasis is still placed on the building itself rather than the human suffering tied to it. One activist says families whose ancestors suffered within the Castle deserve fuller recognition and acknowledgement. She argues that neutrality should not erase depth or silence difficult truths. Another concern is whether local communities are meaningfully included in decision-making processes. Activists suggest the Castle should become a space for dialogue, education and recognition rather than passive remembrance alone.

Historians note that interpretations of the Castle have evolved through partnerships with academic institutions, expanding research into previously overlooked areas such as precolonial life and oral traditions. Institutions such as the Camissa Museum help address gaps in the narrative by foregrounding stories of displacement, labour, and cultural survival. Curators emphasise that public engagement events and dialogues are essential in bridging the divide between academic research and lived experience. However, tensions persist around funding, representation, and the appropriate ways in which violence should be presented in public spaces. The Castle thus functions as both a museum and a contested forum in which interpretations of the past are continually negotiated. As evening falls over Cape Town, its silhouette against Table Mountain serves as a reminder that history is not fixed, but constantly reinterpreted. The work of telling these histories remains ongoing, shaped by debates about power, memory, and belonging in South Africa. In this uncertainty, the Castle of Good Hope remains a site where history is not only preserved but actively questioned, inviting visitors to engage with layered pasts that continue to shape the present and the country's evolving identity.

Inside the Castle, curators also describe the challenge of presenting multiple truths without collapsing them into a single simplified message. They explain that exhibitions are constantly revised as new research emerges and as public expectations shift. In some cases, previously celebrated colonial figures are reinterpreted through evidence that highlights their role in systems of oppression. The tour guide adds that neutrality is not about avoidance but about accuracy, and he sees emotional reactions as part of the educational process. He says international visitors often bring political questions, while local visitors focus more on personal or ancestral connections. For many visitors, the Castle disrupts expectations of South Africa as only a modern tourist destination, revealing deeper historical layers. Activists argue that reconciliation requires more than inclusion of facts; it requires centering voices that were historically silenced. They emphasise that without a bigger structural change in interpretation, the Castle risks reproducing old hierarchies of storytelling.

The Castle's role in Cape Town's urban landscape also contributes to its symbolic weight. It stands between modern commercial districts and historically marginalised

neighbourhoods shaped by apartheid spatial planning. This proximity reinforces debates about whether heritage sites can ever be separated from present inequalities. Some scholars argue that the Castle functions as a living archive, where history is actively produced rather than passively stored. This idea challenges traditional museum models and pushes institutions to engage more directly with community memory and testimony. Ultimately, the Castle of Good Hope remains a site where competing histories coexist without resolution. Its stone walls contain both silence and testimony, absence and evidence, power and resistance. For South Africa, the ongoing work of interpreting the Castle reflects broader struggles over memory, identity and justice. As debates continue, the Castle stands as a reminder that history is not only what is remembered, but also what is still being contested.

Walking through the Castle today, visitors often move between exhibition rooms that juxtapose military artefacts with narratives of displacement and survival. This layering creates a sense of dissonance, as different histories are placed in conversation within the same physical space. Curators say this is intentional, designed to prevent any single narrative from dominating the visitor experience. Yet they acknowledge that interpretation is never neutral, and that every curatorial choice shapes understanding. For some visitors, this complexity is overwhelming, while for others, it is necessary for confronting difficult histories. Education programs at the Castle also attempt to engage schools and community groups in these layered narratives. Through workshops and guided discussions, facilitators encourage participants to question how history is constructed and remembered. These efforts reflect an ongoing attempt to transform the Castle from a symbol of colonial authority into a space of shared reflection. In doing so, it remains both a reminder of violence and an invitation to imagine a more inclusive historical consciousness.

Standing at the intersection of past and present, the Castle continues to shape how Cape Town understands itself. Its contested histories reflect broader national debates about land, memory and belonging in post-apartheid South Africa. As curators, guides, historians, visitors and activists continue to interpret its meaning, no single narrative fully contains it. The Castle, therefore, remains a space of tension, learning and unresolved memory that resists closure, inviting ongoing reflection from those who pass through its gates and those whose histories are still being uncovered and reinterpreted today in the present time.