

Mansion. A handful of houses in the abandoned town São Martinho dos Tigres are noticeably bigger and smarter than the rest. They belonged to the fishing companies' senior staff.

Ghost island

An island off a barren stretch of the Angolan coastline was deserted by its inhabitants when the Angolan Civil War broke out about 40 years ago. Here's a look at the abandoned Ilha dos Tigres.

WORDS & PHOTOS: DOLF ELS

The fog is thick and every wave pushes a spray of white foam over the bow of the rubber duck. In the foggy haze, a yellow church tower materialises and then more buildings as we get closer. The pastel colours get brighter. It looks like a mirage hovering above the surface of the sea.

Even when the boat beaches in the shallows, I have the feeling that I might blink and find it was an optical illusion, so unreal is this deserted town with its imposing church building and houses from the bygone Portuguese colonial era dotting the yellow desert sand.

Everyone getting off the boat is quiet – the only sound is the whoosh of the waves. Silence is what greets the visitor to this deserted town by the name of São Martinho dos Tigres. Its once active fishing community left their homes one October, 40 years ago, and never came back.

Not many people now visit the island, as it's remote and difficult to get to. You have to drive halfway across the notorious Doodsakker, a treacherous stretch along the coast in southern Angola that's only accessible at low tide, and you have to tow a boat while doing it.

Rico Sakko, the owner of Flamingo Lodge just south of Namibe, has been to the island a number of times. This time he is showing a few of us this desolated place.

Far from civilisation

The narrow, 37 km-long island lies parallel to the coast, about 10 km offshore. It was once a spit connected to the mainland, jutting north into the sea, until it was separated about 52 years ago when some of the sand washed away. The nearest town is Tombua in Angola's Namibe province, 100 km to the north. About 90 km to the south is the tiny settlement of Foz do Cunene at the mouth of the Kunene River, which forms the border with Namibia.

The island creates a sheltered bay between it and the mainland, called Baía dos Tigres, or Tigre Bay, because of black stripes against high yellow sand dunes. The warmer water of the bay attracts a rich marine life, and fishers have known this since the 1860s.

The lack of fresh water on the island was a problem, and it had to be brought in by ship or via the dangerous route along the coast. The settlement started to flourish in the late 1950s after a pumping station was built at Foz do Cunene on the Kunene River and a pipeline laid on to the island to



Mirage (left). The town with its prominent church sprawls over the long, thin island. From afar it looks as if it's floating on the sea.

Fishing community. Colourful coats of arms are still visible on a few of the buildings (below). These were probably the offices of fishing companies that had factories on the island. In the back street is a row of matchbox houses on high, grey-blue pillars (below left), the homes of fishermen and their families.

pipe in fresh water. By 1960, more than 1 500 people lived on the island, among them about 300 Portuguese.

In 1962, a heavy storm cut the inhabitants off from the mainland and destroyed the pipeline. Overnight, São Martinho dos Tigres became an island town.

On the southern end of town you can't help but notice the Roman Catholic church building first, once adorned in a sunny yellow with a large crimson cement cross in front. The Latin words "*Hic Domus Dei*" (House of God) are inscribed on a white arch over the entrance.

The sunny yellow has faded and peeled in many places. Everywhere around the white-trimmed arched windows the plaster peeks through. The once-colourful cross is now a dark cement; just at the foot you can still see the crimson paint.

It doesn't, however, mar the dignity with which this House of God guards over the town.



The scars from vandals

Inside, vandals have left their mark. Rico says when he was here the first time 15 years ago, the church still had gleaming dark pews. And when you rang the bell in the tower, the sound would ring out over the town.

Someone tied a rope to the bell, ripped it out with his fishing trailer and sold it as scrap metal. The church pews were shipped off and sold. On the spire, the weather vane is still there – a Portuguese sailing vessel.

The town's remarkably broad main street is actually an air strip, built with concrete blocks in 1957 so light aircraft could land and take off on the island.

It divides the town in two. On the one side is the church, a cinema, a building with fish oil tanks and a water tower. On the other side is a school, a hospital, a post office, a bakery and administration buildings. From the air strip a street winds past the cemetery with its small

Ravages of time (above & above right). The weather vane on the church spire is a caravel, a Portuguese sailing vessel used in exploration voyages in the 15th and 16th centuries. The church has been vandalised.

No more road or air traffic. (below). The town's broad main street is an air strip built out of concrete blocks. Once a week, a plane landed her with supplies such as fresh meat.



"THERE IS STILL A FADED BEAUTY, BUT THE PAINT IS PEELING..."

chapel to the factories on the furthest point of the island.

Walking around the town, it is soon clear where the affluent company bosses lived – in large yellow and pink houses with stoeps and the remains of trees and shrubs. The fishermen and their families lived on a back street in a long row of cottages, once painted a butter yellow. They all look alike, perched on grey-blue pillars and with a steep set of stairs leading to the front door.

There is a low-roofed pink building with a row of doors, probably the living

quarters of single workers.

The police office is down the street from the church, but the small jail with its two cells was built in the shadow of God's House. To the inmates, the tolling of the bell must have been a deafening punishment for their sins.

In its heyday, the town's warm splashes of bright pink, yellow, blue and green must have contrasted beautifully with the desert sand. There is still a faded beauty, but the paint is peeling and in the place of colourful doors and window frames are gaping holes in the walls.

You can still see where people gardened in spite of the shortage of water. In one place there are scores of stunted trees in neat rows – someone must have planted an orchard!

In front of houses and along the streets are the withered remains of ornamental shrubs and here and there a tall tree's

dried branches stick out above a house, testament to residents' perseverance in keeping trees alive for a long time.

The boy who grew up on the island

What was it like to live on such a barren, deserted island? On the internet I find Carlos Relva, who lived here with his parents until the age of 12. He now lives in Sine on the Portuguese coast, about 130 km south of Lisbon.

Carlos writes in an e-mail that the island was paradise for a child, and those were care-free years. Every Sunday, he and his brother and his parents would attend mass at the big yellow church. In the afternoons he and his friends would catch crabs on the beach, play with his Rhodesian ridgeback Sultan and climb trees. They often watched movies at the cinema.

Carlos's father Antonio Simao Lopes, now 73 years old, was the skipper on >



Sick bay (above). Patients were admitted to this hospital, where a nurse looked after them. A doctor came to the island once a week and those who were seriously ill flew back with the doctor to Moçâmedes (now called Namibe).

Stacks (right). The factories where thousands of tonnes of fishmeal were produced are on the northern part of the island. Their long, thin chimneys are visible from afar.



the fishing boat the *Star Dalva*. Their catch went to the three factories on the island, of which two made fishmeal and one canned octopus. Tonnes of fish was also dried here.

The few streets in town were sealed with a mixture of fish oil and sand, Carlos says. He remembers there were only four oldish Land Rovers on the island, which belonged to the fishing companies. Once a week there was great excitement when an aircraft swept in from Moçâmedes (now Namibe) with post and supplies, coming to a halt near the school.

Life on the island

Carlos says one Sunday the pilot was chatting to a passenger when he came in to land and forgot to lower the landing gear. Fortunately people on the ground noticed it and shouted and gesticulated. Metres above the ground he realised what was happening and lifted the nose again. He landed safely shortly afterwards.

One of the most important things the aircraft brought was a supply of fresh

meat. Otherwise, the islanders ate fish and other seafood, Carlos says. There was a shop where they could buy cooldrinks, snacks and fruit, as well as a bakery.

The island had a primary school, and in 1973 Carlos had to transfer to a school in Moçâmedes, about 230 km away. He remembers that the school had a pond in the front garden, in which a seal once made itself at home.

The pond is still there. Carlos once sat in one of these classrooms, watching his teacher writing on the blackboard that is still there. The first time he walked through the school, Rico says, schoolbooks were lying around.

Diagonally across from the church is the hospital with its pink walls, long stoep and distinctive red cross on the gable.

The doctor came once a week by aeroplane, but there was a permanent nurse at the hospital, a good friend of Carlos's father. If there happened to be a serious medical case, the doctor would accompany the patient to Moçâmedes.

Like the other buildings on the island,

the hospital also perches on grey-blue pillars that form arches.

At Kolmanskop in Namibia the Germans built ground-level houses, and it was an ongoing struggle to stop the sand from engulfing the buildings. Here, the Portuguese constructed all the buildings about 2 m off the ground on pillars so the sand could blow underneath.

The spaces underneath the row of cottages where Carlos and the other fishing families lived were later enclosed to create more rooms. When the wind was blowing hard, Carlos says, the sandbanks against their house would make it look like a face with a double chin if you looked at it from the front.

On the northern point of the island the factories' chimneys rise like long, thin fingers above the roofs. This is where fishmeal was produced and exported to countries such as Japan. The buildings with small rooms nearby were probably factory workers' housing.

It's the furthest point of the island and also the widest – nearly 11 km. There was



Storage. The fish oil that was produced on the island was kept in large tanks in this building near the beach, from where it was shipped. The oil was heated in the tanks to make it less viscous and easier to pump to the ships' tanks.

the island even more difficult.

São Martinho dos Tigres's end came suddenly. In 1974, when the Angolan Civil War broke out after Portugal distanced itself from its former colony, there were a few hundred people on the island, among them 50 Portuguese from Olhão in the Algarve region, Carlos remembers.

Together with thousands of other Portuguese in Angola, the community packed up fast that October and took whatever they could to Portugal.

He even had to leave his dog Sultan behind, says Carlos.

The Portuguese living at the pumping station at Foz do Cunene also fled and everything came to a standstill.

Pipe dreams

The Angolan government has entertained several plans for development on the island. In 2002 they wanted to build a prison there. Rico says one of the helicopters in which a delegation was brought to the island crashed into the sea. The interior minister, his deputy and the director of correctional services died in the accident.

Then, in 2009, the government announced plans for a large fishing harbour, an airport, a desalination plant and a plant for the generation of wind power, but nothing more came of it.

There have also been more far-fetched suggestions. About 10 years ago the governor of Namibe province said this remote place could easily be turned into a kind of Angolan Las Vegas or a luxury resort complex.

For now, if you look past the dilapidation and the desolation, you still see the splendour of São Martinho dos Tigres and you wish they wouldn't spoil it by building a modern complex. The ghost town is a monument to the pluck of its former inhabitants.

Additional information:
<http://bimbe.blogs.sapo.pt/114301.html?thread=79741>

“THEY SHELTERED IN THEIR HOUSES, POWERLESS AGAINST THE SEA.”

once a lighthouse here, called the Ponta da Marca Lighthouse, but it was demolished years ago. At the narrower southern end are large lagoons with colonies of flamingos, pelicans and cormorants.

Carlos says that the large ships that came to pick up fishmeal could not moor at the island because there wasn't a harbour. The heavy bags of fishmeal were loaded onto fishing boats by hand and taken to the big ships, where they were loaded with cranes. He often accompanied his father on the *Star Dalva* when they loaded fishmeal.

In the late '50s and early '60s, up to 25 ships per year would call at Ilha dos Tigres to take in nearly 9000 tonnes of fishmeal for export.

The mother of all storms

This inhospitable coastline north of the Namibian Skeleton Coast, known for its stormy March weather, is not easily tamed. You can imagine how terrified the people of the island must have been when a fierce storm, driven by a strong north-westerly wind, hit the sea side of the sandspit on 14 March 1962 with 10m-high waves. They sheltered in their houses, powerless against nature, and some expected the raging sea to engulf the entire spit.

The storm destroyed the water pipeline on the narrow end of the spit, close to the mainland. Almost overnight, the sea broke through and cut off the town. Today, there's a 10km gap and it keeps growing.

For the already remote fishing community, this was a disaster. They were not only more isolated now but also without drinking water... again.

The only solution was to have water transported from the pumping station, conveyed to the island on barges and stored in large tanks. This made life on