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.

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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 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.

The town’s remarkably 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. No more road or air traffic.

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 splash 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 gard- dened 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 Rhino- desian 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 a 575 ft ship.

“THERE IS STILL A FADED BEAUTY, BUT THE PAINT IS PEELING…”
the fishing boat the Star Dalua. Their catch went to the three factories on the island, of which two made fishmeal and one canned octopus. Tonnes of fish was also drier 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, 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 preches on grey-blue pillars that form arches.

At Kolmannskop 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 sand-banks 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 the mother of all storms

Once a lighthouse house, 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 Dalua 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 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 10 km 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 on the island on barges and stored in large tanks. This made life on the island even more difficult.

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