

PORTUGUESE HERITAGE WOVEN INTO SOUTH AFRICA'S RICH CULTURAL TAPESTRY

Whether you're savouring Pastéis de Nata (custard tarts) at Belem Bakery or Bem Bom or indulging in a mouth-watering seafood platter or peri-peri chicken at Parreirinha, 1920 Restaurant or Troyeville Hotel, it is evident that Portuguese culture – especially in the form of its cuisine – is firmly entrenched in South Africa.

Heritage month provides the opportunity to explore the Portuguese community's roots in South Africa, which have a long history dating all the way back to 1488 when explorer Bartolomeu Dias became the first European mariner to round the southern tip of Africa. He named it Cabo das Tormentas – Cape of Storms – after its wild storms and rough seas and opened the way for a sea route between Europe and Asia.

In 1497, another Portuguese explorer, Vasco da Gama, rounded the Cape on his way to India. His first sighting of land was in early November 1497 when the ship reached what is today known as St Helena Bay in the Western Cape. The crew weighed anchor to look for fresh water and conduct a few repairs. Here, they met the Khoikhoi for the first time. In December, the ship stopped off at a spot where the fishing was good. Da Gama called it Ponta de Pescaria, an area that is today known as the Durban bluff.

It was only in the early 1900s that a small stream of immigrants from Madeira began to make South Africa their home. Their numbers increased significantly in the years following World War II and consequent economic uncertainty in Portugal. Many of these Madeiran's were skilled in horticulture and commerce, largely settling in and around Johannesburg where they established small businesses - mainly fruit and vegetable shops as well as take-away outlets. The largest influx of Portuguese to South Africa occurred in 1975, following the independence of Angola and Mozambique. Portuguese-speaking families tended to cluster in specific neighbourhoods, notably the south of Johannesburg where housing was more readily available. The area soon became known for its Portuguese eateries and cultural festivities, the most renowned being the Lusito Land Festival.

Lusito Association spokesperson, Noemia Contente, says the festival started as a fundraising venture for the Lusito Association, which was founded to help Portuguese parents of children with disabilities. "Today, the festival fulfils the same function, with 100% of funds raised going to the Lusito Association, which manages and maintains the Lusito School for differently abled children."



While South Africa's Portuguese population has largely integrated into all spheres of South African society, they continue to celebrate their Portuguese heritage and traditions. In addition to restaurants boasting delicious Portuguese cuisine, they have established successful sports teams such as the Lusitano Football Club.

The Lusito Land Festival is undoubtedly the largest celebration of Portuguese cuisine and culture in South Africa. It is held annually in April over two weekends and includes everything Portuguese, from artists and food, to ceramics and wine. Originally located in Johannesburg South's Wemmer Pan, the festival moved to Cayman Road in Alewynspoort in 2017 to accommodate a growing footprint and increasing number of visitors.

Contente says the festival represents an opportunity for the Portuguese community to honour its European roots, but also to celebrate its South African-ness. "Portuguese families are more integrated into South African communities than ever before and Portuguese traditions are finely woven into South African culture, and what better way to celebrate this than by joining us at Lusito Land."

