The Tradouw Pass

The Khoisan originally discovered this ancient route. The unusual word “tradau” means “the way of the women” and is believed to be derived from the Khoi words tra, signifying “women” and dau, denoting “way through”. Magnificent galleries of rock paintings in the numerous caves are all that are left from the Khoisan era. The Tradouw Pass is but one of thirteen passes that master road engineer Sir Thomas Bain built in the Southern Cape during the 1800’s and to fully appreciate the character of the Tradouw Pass you have to delve into its vibrant days of yesteryear.

The suggestion of a pass was first raised in 1858. The farmers wanted Port Beaufort (Witsand) at the mouth of the Breede River made more accessible for their produce. In 1867 the Colonial Secretary, Robert Southey, proposed in Parliament that the pass be built, using convict labour, “as soon as such was available”. (The Pass was first named after him, but the name did not achieve popularity and after a few years it reverted to the traditional “Tradouw Pass”.)

Thomas Bain was instructed to do the planning and estimating. The Bain family moved into a lovely old farmhouse, Lismore that belonged to the Barry family. Today the house still stands at the foot of the 14km 315m high Tradouw Pass and still belongs to the Barrys.

In 1869 a work force of many convicts was transferred from the completed Robinson Pass between Oudtshoorn and Mossel Bay. In the end of that year, four kilometers of difficult road, entailing a good deal of blasting, had been completed. The next year the number of convicts was drastically reduced and work slowed down accordingly. In 1873 Bain was transferred to plan and build the railway through Tulbagh Kloof. The qualified foreman, Mr Stephens, was left in charge.

The Pass was declared open on 27th October 1873 by the Governor’s wife, Lady Barkley. Soon after its completion the farming community built a church at the northern end of the Pass and the town that grew around it was named in honour of the Barry family. Barrydale developed into a productive fruit farming area.

In 1974, after years of planning, the Pass was rebuilt, widened in places, hairpin bends removed and completely tarred. 4000 aloes and 2500 indigenous trees and shrubs were planted. In 1980 the Tradouw Pass was re-opened. Look out for places with names like Drupkelder, Piekniekbos and Suurplaat where you can stop and try and spot the ruins of Anglo Boer War blockhouses.

The Tradouw Pass is renowned for its wild flowers in spring, clusters of blazing red aloes in late autumn, breathtaking waterfalls in winter and magnificent swimming pools in summer. As you drive along, enjoy this beautiful Pass and admire Sir Thomas Bain’s genius for carving a pass through such rugged terrain without the help of modern technology.