

Diamond Area 2 in Namibia

Historical information

The discovery of diamonds in 1908 around Kolmanskuppe resulted in an uncontrollable diamond rush forcing the Government to establish the “Sperrgebiet” between 26-degree (Gibraltar) and the southern border stretching 100 kilometres inland. Prospectors were forced to turn northwards beyond the Sperrgebiet. This resulted in the discovery of diamonds at Spencer Bay in December 1908 and between Meob and the Conception Bay area (Diamond area no 2). This resulted in a total of 5000 diamond claims being registered in 1909 and hopeful prospectors tried their luck at Saddle Hill and Spencer Bay and via Swakopmund and Sandwich Harbour southwards towards Meob Bay. However, the small yields of diamonds from these claims resulted in only a few prospectors being successful in the long term. Transporting of supplies and mine equipment was effected mainly from Swakopmund by ship and the cutter Viking via Sandwich Harbour, Conception Bay and Meob Bay. Various shipping casualties occurred, such as when the Eduard Bohlen intended to off-load mining equipment, was consequently lost at Conception Bay (1909). In the area between Conception Bay and Meob Bay the mining settlements of Holsatia, Charlottenfelder and Grillenberger was established and no form of engine-driven transport was available during the first 15 years. One example of an ox-wagon fitted with special wide iron bands to make transportation in sandy areas possible can be seen north off Grillenberger. This wagon and surfboats at Meob Bay are examples of pre-World War I historical relicts depicting the immense difficult pioneering days in those inhospitable desert conditions. During 1912/1913 a light railway from Conception Bay to Conception Water and an 80-kilometer pipeline linking the settlements were constructed. It is not totally clear as how many pre-fabricated buildings were erected at the various settlements and only the foundations of some of these are still visible today. In November 1914 all people in this area were requested to stop operations and to proceed to Swakopmund up country. This order came as a result of an expected invasion of Allied troops. During 1920 activities recommenced in this area and only four companies operated in this area until De Beers purchased one concession area after another in 1929. From old mining records it is clear that the average diamond found in this area was much smaller than those found south of Lüderitzbucht.

Operators made use of hand-operated movable sieve jigs, and were largely dependent on an Ovambo labour force. Namaqua Diamonds for instance employed between 500 and 600 Ovambos under contract. They were distributed in gangs of 50 over the extent of the mining area. Some of the sieve jigs are today still visible at the old mining settlements. In 1932 the price of diamonds dropped considerably and almost all known diamondiferous ground has been worked over at least once. The small diamonds left in the tailings of earlier workers made productions uneconomic. After World War II a company Industrial Diamonds of South Africa (1945) Ltd. conducted extensive prospecting in the Meob area in which no diamonds were recovered and CDM also abandoned Meob Bay in the early 60's. Today only some remnants of the activities are visible and are deteriorating at an alarming rate. There are a limited quantity of hand-operated mining equipment left, two surf boats at Meob and ox-wagon north of Grillenberger giving some in-sight into the hardships endured by indigenous Namibians and early settlers to Namibia. Saddle Hill became well known in Namibian diamond operations through the efforts of the remarkable Mose Kahan. The unsinkable Mose was born in Königsberg, Prussia and after immigrating to South Africa, he became involved in prospecting and mining. His application for a concession in Diamond area no 2 was successful and he named his claims Saddle Hill Ophir and Atlantis. To reach his claims with food and mining supplies, Kahan had to make his way through shifting dunes with transport available in those years, which was indeed a hazardous undertaking. After World War II Kahan bought some Ford "stompneus" trucks from surplus war stock and fitted them with Dakota DC3 aircraft tyres. With these low-pressure aircraft tyres he was able to bring supplies and equipment to Saddle Hill. However one of these trucks, nick named Suzie as well as a Bulldozer, pulling trailers with supplies and equipment close to the Uri Haugab Mountains unfortunately had to be abandoned in the dunes, today still awaiting the return of a repair crew.