

OSTRICHES AND GEOTOURISM: THE EVOLUTIONARY PATHWAY OF A SMALL TOWN TOURISM DESTINATION IN SOUTH AFRICA

Christian M. ROGERSON 

School of Tourism & Hospitality, College of Business and Economics, University of Johannesburg,
Johannesburg, South Africa, e-mail: chrismr@uj.ac.za

Jayne M. ROGERSON* 

School of Tourism & Hospitality, College of Business and Economics, University of Johannesburg,
Johannesburg, South Africa, e-mail: jayner@uj.ac.za

Citation: Rogerson, C.M., & Rogerson, J.M. (2024). OSTRICHES AND GEOTOURISM: THE EVOLUTIONARY PATHWAY OF A SMALL TOWN TOURISM DESTINATION IN SOUTH AFRICA. *Geojournal of Tourism and Geosites*, 55(3), 1337–1344. <https://doi.org/10.30892/gtg.55334-1306>

Abstract: Small towns are a critical tier in the settlement hierarchy. For many small towns tourism is a vital sector of local development. This paper contributes an historical perspective on small town destination development. Using archival sources the paper provides a window on the evolutionary development of one small town tourism destination in South Africa. The case study is Oudtshoorn in the Western Cape. During the late 19th century and early 20th century Oudtshoorn experienced phases of economic boom and bust which linked to international fashion and the trade in ostrich feathers. The imprint of this era is manifest in the town's landscape of 'feather palaces'. In terms of early 20th century tourism growth it is demonstrated geotourism was a critical driver with the asset of Cango Caves. In the period after the Second World War, the local tourism economy diversifies with the revival and reorientation of ostrich farming which incorporates ostriches as tourism attractions. The evolutionary pathway of this small town changes such that its local tourism economy is anchored on the dual foundations of its geotourism and ostrich attractions.

Keywords: destination development, small town tourism, historical approach, Oudtshoorn, geotourism, ostrich feathers

* * * * *

INTRODUCTION

Small towns are a critical tier in the settlement hierarchy as they provide a link between large urban centres and rural areas (Hinderink and Titus, 2002; Bański, 2022). A significant proportion of the world's population continue to reside in small towns which are drivers of local development and centres of public and cultural life (Nel and Stevenson, 2019). Mayer and Lazzeroni (2022: 1) consider that small towns are a "generally underappreciated urban type".

Nonetheless, following a period of relative neglect there are signs that research on small towns is returning to the foreground of the research agenda of urban scholars (Korcelli-Olejniczak, 2022). Bański (2022) argues that small towns are a key topic for scientific enquiry and increasingly the focus of a broad and multi-stranded literature with relevant works contributed from the fields of geography, planning and spatial management. The role of tourism in small towns is one dimension of that emerging international scholarship.

In South Africa Donaldson and Majiet (2023: 1) pinpoint that since the early 2000s there is observed "a gradual increase in scholarly attention to small town studies". Key research issues in the extant literature relate to local economic development, infrastructural challenges and tourism development. During the past 20 years of research issues around tourism development in small town South Africa have spawned an extensive body of research (Donaldson, 2007; Rogerson, 2016; Donaldson, 2018, 2021; Rogerson and Rogerson, 2021a; Donaldson, 2023; Rogerson, 2023). Arguably, according to Rogerson and Rogerson (2021b) tourism research on South African small towns must be understood as falling within the neglected 'other half' of urban tourism scholarship as it relates to the Global South. For Donaldson (2018, 2021) the leading themes of research on small town tourism concern second homes, festivals and events, nature-based tourism and rural dynamics as well as tourism's vital role for driving local development.

In their review of the 'state of the art' of small town research in South Africa Donaldson and Maiiet (2023) identify the need for a greater consideration of the histories and social dynamics of small towns. This echoes the plea made by Mabin (2021) for scholars to pursue a deeper consideration of the unwritten histories of small town South Africa. Although most writings on small town tourism in South Africa are concentrated around contemporary and policy-related issues a small group of research investigations address aspects of tourism's past for certain small towns (Davidson, 2000; Rogerson, 2019; Rogerson and Rogerson, 2019, 2020; Drummond et al., 2021, 2022; Rogerson and Rogerson, 2023, 2024). Historical investigations contribute greater depth to our understanding of the evolutionary changes and transformation of destinations which is a research issue of importance in international tourism scholarship (Sanz-Ibáñez and Clavé, 2022). Dredge (2001:

* Corresponding author

281) observes that “an historical context provides important insights that cannot be gained by contemporary analysis”. As is stressed therefore by Sanz-Ibáñez and Clavé (2022: 861) “it is of utmost interest for tourism scholars, practitioners, decision makers and professionals to understand how tourism destinations evolve over time”.

The aim in this paper is to augment the limited scholarship on the evolution of small town tourism destinations. Specifically, the focus is on the historical evolutionary pathway of Oudtshoorn in South Africa’s Western Cape. In terms of research methods an historical approach using archival sources is applied. The merits of undertaking archival research in tourism are elaborated in several papers for example in works by MacKenzie et al. (2020) and Nasab et al. (2022). In addition to a review of existing literature dealing with the history of Oudtshoorn the research draws from primary documentary sources from the National Library depot (Cape Town). The collection of the South African Railways and Harbours (SAR and H) is used extensively as throughout the first part of the twentieth century this institution assumed a formative role both in building an infrastructure for tourism development as well as publicising South Africa’s tourist attractions (Foster, 2008). Indeed, as Foster (2008: 212) points out, the many booklets and guidebooks which it commissioned “were often the first systematic descriptions of many parts of the country”. The time period under investigation is from the formal establishment of the town in the early 1860s to the close of the 1930s.

LITERATURE CONTEXT - OUDTSHOORN IN THE PRE-TOURISM ERA

The town of Oudtshoorn is the major urban centre of South Africa’s Little Karoo, a semi-arid region where first (white) settlement dates back to the 1750s (Coetzee, 2005). It is an example of what has been styled a ‘hinterland’ settlement which was ‘washed by the sun’ (Gupta, 2024). The topographical and geological characteristics of this region tended to leave it isolated from the socio-economic developments occurring within the wider context of the Cape Colony (Goetze, 1995). It was only in the early 19th century that the district experienced economic change and development which accompanied settlement growth (Coetzee, 2000). A critical underpinning for this economic change was improved access to the area through a rudimentary infrastructure of road communications. According to Goetze (1995: 11) “the subsistence economy practised throughout most of the Colony changed to become a market orientated economy, and the foundation was laid for further socio-economic development”.

In 1863 the town of Oudtshoorn was proclaimed. Following the minimal economic development which marked the Little Karoo into the 1860s, a period of rapid change occurred. By the 1880s Oudtshoorn was styled the ‘pantry of the Colony’ as the district had emerged as an important producer of cereals, vegetables and fruits (Goetze, 1995: 13). At the heart of economic change was however, the economy of ostrich feathers. Coetzee (2000: 4) points out that “the introduction of ostrich feathers into the *haute couture* of Europe, which created a demand for which Oudtshoorn was uniquely able to cater” (Coetzee, 2000: 4). Local farmers turned over their land into ostrich farms and started the production of lucerne neither of which required the amount of manual labour as wine or wheat farming. As Buirski (1984: 16) points out “lucerne, unlike crops such as wheat, requires no annual ploughing and sowing – when cut, grass-like it simply grows again, and that ostriches too require little regular attendance”. Taken together the introduction of lucerne with feathers “provided an unrivalled commercial combination” (Coetzee, 2000: 4). Nevertheless, as ostrich farming supplanted the existing labour-intensive bases of local agriculture – wine, wheat and tobacco farming - in late 19th century large numbers of white *bywoners* were forced off the land (Buirski, 1984).

Ostrich feathers were at the core of transformation which occurred in the local Oudtshoorn economy. Prior to the 1860s ostriches were wild birds and in South Africa hunted for their feathers by the indigenous Khoisan communities and later by early white settlers (Stein, 2007). In 1863 there occurred the first domestication of ostriches in the Cape and development of hatcheries for controlled breeding (Kekana et al., 2023). Demand for ostrich plumage as a luxury item had grown from the aristocracy of Europe throughout the 18th century and early 19th century. But it was only in the 1880s that ostrich feathers were widely adopted by the fashion world. As elaborated by Stein (2007: 779) the decade of the 1880s represented “the first of three decades in which women’s hats were worn large and elaborately trimmed; for women of status, the addition of plumage from ostriches, hummingbirds, bird of paradise, herons and other wildbirds was increasingly *de rigueur*”. By 1878 the Oudtshoorn district was one of the richest in the Cape Colony and as local commerce expanded the town began to attract a flow of Jewish immigrants – many of them small traders - coming from Lithuania who settled in the town (Coetzee, 2005). At the zenith of the feather trade approximately 300 Jewish families emigrated from Lithuania earning the town the acronym “The Jerusalem of South Africa” (Seligman, 2007).

Between 1860 and 1910 Buirski (1984) records that the wealth of the Oudtshoorn district expanded at a faster rate than anywhere in the Cape Colony. In particular, the decade of the 1900s was a period of economic boom anchored on the wealth generated by the production and sale of ostrich feathers (Stein, 2008). As argued by Simon (2007) the Jewish community of Oudtshoorn became deeply embedded in the economy of ostrich farming and most especially the feather trade. Ostrich feather plumes were in highest demand during the first decade of the 20th century as they were popularized by the millinery industry and some types made affordable for women of all classes (Stein, 2008). Further boosting demand were displays of live ostriches and feathers at expositions and world fairs held at Chicago, London, Paris and Philadelphia (Stein, 2007). Overall, Stein (2008) chronicles how the thirst for exotic ornament among fashionable women in the metropolises of Europe and America precipitated a bustling global trade in ostrich feathers that flourished from the 1880s. Arguably, the white settler small town of Oudtshoorn operated as a historical pocket of what Gupta (2024: 133) terms ‘pivot globalization’ through the industry of ostrich ranching which supplied Europe with trendsetting fashion.

According to Stein (2007) the demand for ostrich plumes to adorn the hats and clothes of elite women in the European and American metropole was the central catalyst for the rise of ostrich farming. Until the collapse of the

feather market in 1914 ostrich feathers were the primary product of ostrich farming (Kekana et al., 2023). The ostrich population in the Oudtshoorn district boomed from the small beginnings of the early 1860s to reach 776 000 by 1913 (Stein, 2007). In that year when the global price of ostrich feathers peaked “the plumes were ranked fourth in value among commodities exported from the Union of South Africa, following gold, diamonds and wool” (Stein, 2007: 778). With booming international demand for ostrich feathers local farmers responded by restructuring their production away from grain, viticulture and tobacco instead to exploit the area’s suitability for ostriches. Environmental factors, most importantly the climate of the Little Karoo were highly favourable to the production of the finest feathers (Stein, 2008; Kekana et al., 2023). The physical landscape of the town of Oudtshoorn evidenced the area’s newfound wealth. Gupta (2024) highlights that the town was marked by the construction of its grand ‘feather palaces’ built in sandstone, symbols of the boom in the feather trade. In addition, the thriving settlement boasted several fine churches including a Dutch Reformed Church built 1879 which had a 3000 person seating capacity (Goetze, 1995). The town’s first hotel – The Queen’s Hotel – opened in 1880. Arguably, during the period of the booming trade in ostrich feathers it is likely that business travellers, merchants and feather dealers, dominated the clientele of this colonial accommodation establishment.

By 1911 there emerged the first signs of problems for the ostrich industry with the overproduction of feathers as well as competition from California (Seligman, 2007). The fickleness of fashion was made clear after 1912 when American and French buyers were losing interest in plumes and the ostrich feather market collapsed because of the whims of women’s fashion. In 1913, the year of the highest prices for feathers, fashion started to shift. According to Seligman (2007) this was, at least in part, the result of the rising popularity of open motor cars the speed of which was not conducive to wearing clothes or hats adorned with feathers. The outbreak of hostilities of the First World War further accelerated the collapse in the feather market with the consequence of warehouses in London full of ostrich feathers but with no buyers (Seligman, 2007). The local farming community around Oudtshoorn was plunged into despair and compelled to restructure the operations of the agricultural economy (Le Roux, 2013). As described by Seligman (2007) the loss of the feather market caused the economic fortunes of Oudtshoorn and its district to decline radically. The crash in feather prices in 1914 resulted in a further flow of impoverished farmers away from the land. With its distressed local economy, the town of Oudtshoorn suffered population losses. During the period 1911-1921 Buirski (1984: 16) records that “the population of the district fell by 5.6 %”. In the words of Gupta (2024: 134) Oudtshoorn seemingly was “quietly receding into oblivion”.

OUTDSHOORN – THE EARLY EVOLUTION OF A TOURISM DESTINATION

In the decade following the formation of the Union of South Africa in 1910 a strengthening and diversification of the local economic base of Oudtshoorn were needed in order to revive the locality’s flagging fortunes. At this time the tourism base of Oudtshoorn town was limited. The entry for Oudtshoorn in the national guidebook of hotels and tourism attractions of South Africa produced in 1911 underlined its undeveloped tourism base. Instead emphasis was given to the town’s wealth linked to agricultural activities and especially to ostrich feathers. It was described as follows:

“The district around Oudtshoorn is the richest and most prosperous of the Cape Province... Through the use of irrigation, the valleys have become extraordinarily fertile and so greatly increased the growth of lucerne and other suitable crops. Tobacco planting, brandy and vinegar making, is very popular. Fruit, vegetables, and many of the cereals are largely grown, but the chief industry carried on is that of ostrich farming, the district being peculiarly favourable to these birds, and a visit to one of the farms is most novel and edifying, and the profits made by individual farmers during the last few years have been enormous” (Cape Times, 1911: 137)

The slow development of the town as a visitor centre was observed in particular as compared to the nearby town of George. Oudtshoorn was styled as “still the old world town it was in the early forties” (1840s) (Cape Times, 1911: 137). The guide book struggled to portray the town as a tourist centre with significant assets for tourism development. It was described as follows: “The streets are lined with trees and the houses and different stores are well and solidly built. There is a handsome Dutch Church, built at a cost of £23000, also English, Roman, Catholic, Wesleyan and Independent Churches, and two Jewish synagogues. The town also possesses a large Drill Hall and a Public Library.

The water supply, brought from the Zwartberg Range, is excellent. The Rust-en-Vrede Falls, whence it is derived are well worth a visit” (Cape Times, 1911: 137). Railway access to the town for potential visitors was flagged as a critical infrastructural constraint. The guidebook concluded, however, in optimistic tone that: “The air of the town and neighbourhood is perfectly healthy, and as soon as the railway from George and the South-Western District is completed, it will soon become a popular winter resort” (Cape Times, 1911: 137).

What emerged as the major tourism asset and driver for Oudtshoorn tourism was the spectacular geotourism attractions of Cango Caves which became internationally famous. The caverns at Cango Caves, it was claimed, “are only comparable with the Mammoth Caves of Kentucky, U.S.A” (South African Railways and Harbours, 1923: 285). According to Cigna and Forti (2013) the Cango Caves represent one of the first developments of cave tourism outside of Europe. Craven (1992) documents the discovery and earliest development of these stalactite caves for tourism purposes. It is stated that Cango Cave was discovered around 1780 “probably by the local foreman roadmaker while searching for road metal” (Craven, 1992: 27). Access to the locality was bad so that “visitors must have been few” and the first documented visit recorded in 1806 (Craven, 1992: 27). In 1820 a local tenant farmer bought the land around the cave but with a servitude in the title deeds that excluded the entrance to the cave. The entrance had to be left undisturbed and was considered as public property and to allow road access to the cave. In their international overview of geotouristic features Cigna and Forti (2013: 12) pinpoint the historical significance of this 1820 document as “it is probably the first attempt in the world to legislate for cave protection”. Craven (1992: 29) observes that notwithstanding its inaccessibility

Cango Cave did manage a small flow of visitors during the 19th century with considerable publicity attached to “the gubernatorial visits of Sir George Gray in 1860 and of Sir Henry Barkly in 1873”.

**New Cape Central
Railway, Limited,**

FOR THE BEAUTIFUL SOUTH-WEST OF CAPE PROVINCE BY

The Garden Route

Daily Service by through Saloons (with Sleeping Accommodation)

Between Cape Town, Oudtshoorn, and Port Elizabeth.

From Capetown to Robertson, Ashton (for the Montagu Baths), Swellendam, Bafetsjagts (for Barrydale), Riversdale (for Ladismith and Still Bay), Mossel Bay, Great Brak River, George (for the Wilderness, Avontuur, Knysna), Oudtshoorn, and Port Elizabeth. Dining Cars attached to all through trains between Capetown and Port Elizabeth (via the N.C.C.R.), Montagu Radio-Active Hot Springs and Sanitorium, half an hour by motor from Ashton Station.

The Finest Health and Holiday Resort in South Africa.

Map showing New Cape Central Railways and Connections.

For Particulars and Brochure of the Railways, apply to
THOMAS COOK & SONS, Strand Street, Cape Town, and Smith Street, Durban;
STATIONMASTERS, South African Railways; Baths, Montagu; or Fred Dawson,
General Manager, N.C.C.R., Robertson Station. Tel. Ad.: "GEM," Robertson Station.

Figure 1. The Location of Oudtshoorn on the Garden Route Railway (Source: South African Railways, 1920)

PHONE No. 6 Telegraphic Address: "BAWDEN" P.O. BOX 19

Queen's Hotel
(FAMILY AND COMMERCIAL)
OUDTSHOORN

NEAR THE FAMOUS CANGO CAVES WHICH ARE
ACKNOWLEDGED BY ALL TO BE THE FINEST IN THE WORLD

This Hotel is Centrally Situated and Under Personal Supervision
THE LATEST AUTOMATIC AND SCIENTIFIC ARRANGEMENTS INSTALLED
ELECTRIC LIGHT AND BELLS THROUGHOUT
HOT AND COLD BATHS

TERMS MODERATE

PUREST WATER SUPPLY IN THE COLONY

Coach Meets all Trains Agents for all Post Carts Motor Garage
Motor Trips arranged for the Caves, and other places
of Interest Cars may be obtained at any time

G. BAWDEN Proprietress

Figure 2. Marketing the Queen's Hotel, Oudtshoorn, 1920 (Source: South African Railways, 1920)

During the last two decades of the 19th century when the town of Oudtshoorn enjoyed both an economic boom and population expansion it was evident that “the number of visitors to Cango Cave increased although no accurate figure is available” (Craven, 1992: 29). The upturn in visitor flow was attributed to the opening of the Swartberg Pass in 1888 which enabled access to the Cave “within 48 hours of leaving Cape Town” (Craven, 1992: 29).

This was secured by a train journey from Cape Town to the rail head at Prince Albert Road and from there a horseback transfer. The development of the railway at Oudtshoorn in 1902 was another trigger event for increasing visitor traffic to the caves. Indeed, the area’s tourism development prospects were greatly enhanced by the completion of the rail link from George to the town on the New Cape Central Railways which made Oudtshoorn identified as part of the Garden Route (Figure 1). A daily train service for the Garden Route now linked Cape Town and Port Elizabeth through Oudtshoorn. The 1911 national hotel guide reported that “one of the staple and natural attraction of Oudtshoorn is the celebrated Cango Caves, which are probably the most wonderful stalactite caves in existence, which are situated about nineteen miles from town. The caves have not, up to the present, been fully explored, although persons have penetrated a distance of over a mile” (Cape Times, 1911: 37).

Over the following two decades the publicity material produced by the South African Railways consistently enthused about the attractions of the Cango Caves. In 1914 these were included even in a guide produced to profile South Africa as a mountaineering destination (South African Railways 1914). It was noted that Cango Caves “is a wonderful place” and “the number of travellers attracted to these caverns of pictured walls during the last few years have been increasing greatly” (South African Railways 1914: 59).

A visit to the caves is supposed to have inspired the writing of Rider Haggard’s famous novel King Solomon’s Mines. Arguably, it was claimed also “These are probably the most wonderful caves known to exist. Were they in Europe or America, their fame would attract visitors from all parts of the world” (South African Railways, 1914: 59). The tour of the caves was celebrated: “As the guide carries his light ahead it is seen that the cave has many huge chambers, and is full of coral-like incrustations of great beauty” (South African Railways, 1914:59). From Oudtshoorn ready access to the caves was now available and could be organized from one of the town’s accommodation establishments, the most important of which was the Queen’s Hotel (Figure 2). Close to the caves another accommodation option was the Cango Hotel, walking distance to the caves (Figure 3).

The "Cango" Hotel
Groot Kraal, THE IDEAL HOLIDAY RESORT Dist. Oudtshoorn

Situated on the Main Road about midway between Oudtshoorn and Prince Albert. A few minutes' walk from the WORLD-FAMED CANGO CAVES.



The Hotel is surrounded by the Grand Rugged Scenery of the Zwartberg Mountains.

Excellent Accommodation.

TERMS MODERATE.

Picnic Parties specially catered for, either at the Hotel or at the Caves.

GOLDBLATT & Co., Proprietors.

Figure 3. Marketing the Cango Hotel at Cango Caves, 1920 (Source: South African Railways, 1920)

The drive from Oudtshoorn to the caves was “about 1 half hours through the Cango Valley along a good road” and through charming scenery” (South African Railways 1914: 59). Much attention was given to the local scenic attractions: “It would be difficult to find anywhere, perhaps a finer combines as many elements of the picturesque – noble hills rising to an almost mountainous height – rugged walls of cliffs stained with a thousand hues and draped with foliage – huge masses of grey rock starting from the bed of the river mantled and festooned with verdant tapestry and noble trees through whose branches the eye catches glimpses of the jagged lines of the precipice” (South African Railways, 1914: 59). As a whole by 1914 Oudtshoorn was heralded as a convenient starting point “for some very attractive excursions and in many other ways will greatly repay the tourist for any time spent in its precincts” (South African Railways, 1914: 59). A coach provided by the Queens Hotel met all trains and the hotel offered to arrange motor trips to the caves as well as other local places of interest (South African Railways, 1920). Indeed, by 1920 the town of Oudtshoorn was marketed as a health resort and no longer seen as old-world but rather portrayed as “thoroughly-up- to-date in every way” but with the caveat that “the only drawback being that its station is so far away from the town” (South African Railways, 1920: 163).

Publicity material issued by South African Railways in 1920 proclaimed loudly the attractions of the Cango Caves:

“Everyone has heard of the Cango Caves; America sent an expedition last year to obtain films of them, and the Smithsonian Institute – after illuminating them, in order to secure satisfactory negatives – has stated that they are the most wonderful in the world. The drive to the Caves takes one through wild and wonderful scenery, as wild as that of Basutoland... As to the Caves themselves, no pen has yet described their wonders adequately, because when attempting details, one seems to be overwhelmed by the immensity of standing in the bowels of the earth, apparently in a building three or four hundred feet in height, where the action of the ages on the limestone has carved pinnacles, pyramids, growing arches, grottos, buttresses, all of which glisten and scintillate like a million diamonds in the light of the magnesium flares. These immortal caves should certainly be illuminated, especially now that Oudtshoorn is deservedly attracting the tourist” (South African Railways, 1920: 163).

Evidence of the growing importance of tourism to the town of Oudtshoorn was the expanding number of accommodation establishments. In addition to the Queen’s Hotel and the Cango Hotel, three new hotels were available to visitors, the Imperial, Central and Criterion. A 1923 national guide book – *South Africa: Land of the Outdoor Life* - observed of Oudtshoorn that the settlement “has been richly endowed by Nature, as, in addition to its possession of great advantage in geographical position, and there are fresh and wonderful surprises for the visitor from the time he enters the town until his departure” (South African Railways and Harbours, 1923: 73).

Although the ostrich feather boom had collapsed ten years previously the remaining ostrich populations on farms were identified as attractions as well as signifiers of the town’s past prosperity. Tourists were to be attracted to the town because of its remarkable history and rise to prosperity. It was stated as follows:

“There can never be lack of interest in visiting a district which a little over forty years ago was hardly known by name, and to-day takes its place as one of the powers of the Union of South Africa. The first impression any stranger has in visiting Oudtshoorn is the size of the business establishments and the evidence of wealth, especially in the quarter of the town in which the hotels and many private residences are situated, the majority of which are built of brown stone and are surrounded by beautiful gardens and grounds with streams of water running through them, and in which the roses are in bloom, this queen of flowers flourishes in gay festoons” (South African Railways and Harbours, 1923: 73-4).

Beyond the town itself the guide proclaimed that the “visitor should not fail to visit the Cango Caves” described as “far-famed and are the most astounding sight in the district of Oudtshoorn” (South African Railways and Harbours, 1923: 74). Indeed, the claim was re-iterated that “these caves are probably the most wonderful stalactite caves known, and were they in Europe or America, their fame would attract visitors from all parts of the world” (South African Railways and Harbours, 1923: 77). Travellers and visiting scientists to the area in the late 1920s affirmed that at Cango Caves “one may ramble for many miles in the interior of the mountain among stalactites and stalagmites (Wood, 1929: 32).

The 1924 *Illustrated Guide to South Africa* highlighted Oudtshoorn’s improved accessibility from various destinations across South Africa and especially with its position on the railway route access to the Garden Route. At this

time the town of Oudtshoorn “can be reached from Cape Town in 26 hours via the now famous ‘Garden Route’; from Port Elizabeth in 16 hours, from Bloemfontein in 30 hours, and from Johannesburg in 40 hours, whilst Mossel Bay, its natural port is only six hours distant by rail” (South African Railways and Harbours, 1924: 141).

Other infrastructural improvements were noted: “the town is in direct telephone communication with Cape Town and intervening towns and a direct service to Port Elizabeth is to be instituted in the near future” (South African Railways and Harbours, 1924: 141). In 1929 the local municipality partnered with South African Railway and Harbours in the production of material for local tourism promotion (Oudtshoorn Municipality and South African Railways and Harbours, 1929). This document stated that the town of Oudtshoorn “which by reason of the proximity of the famous Cango Caves, marks a halting place for many holiday travellers in South Africa” (Oudtshoorn Municipality and South African Railways and Harbours, 1929: 1). Emphasis was given to the climatic excellence of the town and most especially that during winter “a maximum of sunshine prevails which accounts for the popularity of the town as a winter resort” (Oudtshoorn Municipality and South African Railways and Harbours, 1929: 4).

It is significant to observe that alongside the usual charming descriptions of the town as “a comely, flower-decked town of considerable size and importance” much space and attention was devoted to motoring and highlighting the possibilities for drive tourism excursions from Oudtshoorn. It was noted as follows: “With the more general use of the motor car the place has come to be regarded in a new light” (Oudtshoorn Municipality and South African Railways and Harbours, 1929: 1). In particular, the use of Oudtshoorn was profiled as a base for many “pleasing motor excursions, through scenery both diverse and rare, lie at its door, and for this reason it has of recent years achieved considerable popularity as a tourist centre” (Oudtshoorn Municipality and South African Railways and Harbours, 1929: 2). The enjoyment of the journey itself was given prominence with “smooth highways” and “many delightful spots” for visitors to stop and ‘consume’ along their way to their final destinations (Oudtshoorn Municipality and South African Railways and Harbours, 1929: 2). Visiting Cango Caves was one of the highlighted short trips; “in a land of many natural wonders the Cango Caves stand out as the most striking attraction”. By the close of the 1920s the caves were presented as “a succession of lofty fairylike halls” which tourists were assured could be visited without any discomfort (Oudtshoorn Municipality and South African Railways and Harbours, 1929: 2). At this time the progress in improving the visitor experience was stressed:

“Concrete stairways have taken the place of rugged descents, and a cleverly designed installation of electric lights brings out to full advantage the iridescence of the walls and roofs of the caverns, which vary in hue from white to black through a range in which blues and browns and greys all harmonize. Here and there a diamond-like appearance is presented and in some caverns coloured lighting effects have been employed with results that outclass the most beautiful transformation which the scene painters art has ever designed” (Oudtshoorn Municipality and South African Railways and Harbours, 1929: 17).

Oudtshoorn was styled as “the motoring centre of the South Western Districts of the Cape Province” and details given of four short trips and eight longer trips that might be followed by drive tourists (Oudtshoorn Municipality and South African Railways and Harbours, 1929: 23). For potential drive tourists the local scenic attractions accessible from Oudtshoorn were likened to overseas destinations. For example, it was stated that in “places along the country roads high hedgerows create a similarity to an English country lane” and in the surrounding foothills of the town “the scenery is reminiscent of Northern Italy” (Oudtshoorn Municipality and South African Railways and Harbours, 1929: 1).

Similar promotional messaging both for Oudtshoorn and the Cango Caves continued into the 1930s with another partnership of the local municipality and the railways seeking to profile the town as a travellers’ “rendezvous amidst the mountains and a mecca of winter tourists” (Oudtshoorn Municipality and South African Railways and Harbours, 1939: 1). Signals of growth of tourism to Oudtshoorn were evidenced in the widened range of accommodation listings. A 1936 guide added nine boarding houses as lower budget options to the established hotels in town and at the caves (South African Railways and Harbours, 1936). By 1940 another new hotel was in operation, namely Fourie’s International Hotel (South African Railways and Harbours, 1940).

It is clear with the national growth of drive tourism in South Africa that the attractions of Oudtshoorn were now as a base for motoring excursions (South African Railways and Harbours, 1936: 153). Arguably, at least until the end of the Second World War, the wonders of the Cango Caves continued to be the leading tourism asset for Oudtshoorn. With improvements made to lighting of the caves visitors could be enticed by “scenes of entrancing splendour – fairy-like palaces, shining with diamonds and emeralds, and radiating all the hues of the rainbow, need only Ali Baba to make their resemblance to the cavern of the Forty Thieves complete” (South African Railways and Harbours, 1934: 96).

Although the numbers of ostriches declined in the 1920s and 1930s following the restructuring of local agriculture and the replacement of lucerne by fields of tobacco it is evident that leisure travellers to Oudtshoorn were encouraged to visit local ostrich farms. After the end of World War 2 the ostrich trade experienced a slow recovery and ostrich numbers again began to rise. The ostrich economy of Oudtshoorn and its surroundings expanded and diversified beyond that of feathers. The new post-war economy of ostrich farms included the use of ostrich skins, ostrich meat and importantly ostriches as a major tourism attraction. For Oudtshoorn the post-Second World War tourism economy built upon the town’s reputation as ‘ostrich capital of the world’ (Seligman, 2007). Visits were organized to ostrich farms as well as the hosting of ostrich shows, including ostrich races, as major tourism attractions for both domestic and international tourists (van Eeden, 2014).

CONCLUSION

Small towns represent a key component in the settlement structure of all countries (Bański, 2022; Korcelli-Olejniczak, 2022). Understanding the evolutionary development of small towns as tourism destinations is a challenge for tourism

scholars. This paper contributes an historical perspective on small town tourism providing a window on the evolutionary pathway of one small town tourism destination. In the case of Oudtshoorn the early development of tourism was a welcome economic boost for a locality which experienced the ‘boom and bust’ of fashion. During the latter half of the 19th century the ostrich feather trade inserted this South African small town into the fickle global fashion economy. The enduring imprint of this extraordinary era is manifest in the local townscape of ‘feather palaces’, the opulent homes created during the period of the glory days of economic prosperity for Oudtshoorn (Gupta, 2024).

It has been demonstrated that a critical asset for the town’s economic revival has been the magnificent attractions of the Cango Caves, which contributed to the emergence of Oudtshoorn as a tourism destination. These caverns are highly significant in the international record of geotourism as one of the first sites for the introduction of legislation to conserve the attractions of these caverns. Beyond 1945 and into the apartheid period (post-1948) the local visitor economy diversifies with the revival and reorientation of ostrich farming. The economy of ostrich farming expands from the production of ostrich feathers to incorporate ostriches as tourism attractions, a change which reinforces Oudtshoorn’s historical reputation as international ostrich capital (Seligman, 2007). The evolutionary pathway of this small town shifts such that its local tourism economy is anchored now on the dual foundations of ostriches and geotourism attractions.

Author Contributions: Conceptualization, R.M.C. and R.M.J.; methodology, R.M.C. and R.M.J.; software, R.M.C. and R.M.J.; validation, R.M.C. and R.M.J.; formal analysis, R.M.C. and R.M.J.; investigation, R.M.C. and R.M.J.; data curation, R.M.C. and R.M.J.; writing - original draft preparation, R.M.C. and R.M.J.; writing - review and editing, R.M.C. and R.M.J.; visualization, R.M.C. and R.M.J.; supervision, R.M.C. and R.M.J.; project administration, R.M.C. and R.M.J. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Funding: Thanks are due to funding from the University of Johannesburg.

Institutional Review Board Statement: Not applicable.

Informed Consent Statement: Not applicable.

Data Availability Statement: The data presented in this study may be obtained on request from the corresponding author.

Acknowledgements: Thanks to Robbie Norfolk, Lulu White and Skye Norfolk for useful inputs both to the research and the final paper.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

REFERENCES

- Bański, J. (Ed.) (2022). *The Routledge Handbook of Small Towns*. London: Routledge.
- Buirski, P. (1984). *Poverty in Oudtshoorn: Some impressions*. Cape Town: Second Carnegie Inquiry into Poverty and Development in Southern Africa Paper No. 37.
- Cape Times (1911). *South African Hotel Guide: “Where to stay in South Africa”*. Cape Town: Cape Times Limited.
- Cigna, A. A., & Forti, P. (2013). Caves: The most important geotouristic feature in the world. *Tourism and Karst Areas*, 6 (1), 14-26. https://digitalcommons.usf.edu/kip_articles/4724
- Coetzee, D. (2000). *Immigrants to Citizens: Civil Integration and Acculturation of Jews in Oudtshoorn Society, 1874-1999*. MA thesis (History), University of Cape Town.
- Coetzee, D. (2005). Fires and feathers: Acculturation, arson and the Jewish community in Oudtshoorn, South Africa, 1914-1948. *Jewish History*, 19, 143- 187. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10835-004-0918-5>
- Craven, S. A. (1992). *Cango Cave, Oudtshoorn District of the Cape Province, South Africa: An Assessment of its Development and Management 1780-1992*. PhD Dissertation (Environmental and Geographical Science), University of Cape Town, Cape Town.
- Davidson, J. (2000). Coping with marginality: Tourism and the projection of Grahamstown, 1870-1955. *South African Historical Journal*, 42, 176-190. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02582470008671373>
- Donaldson, R. (2007). Tourism in small town South Africa. In C.M. Rogerson & G. Visser (Eds.), *Urban tourism in the developing world: The South African experience*, New Brunswick NJ, USA: Transaction, 307-325.
- Donaldson, R. (2018). *Small town tourism in South Africa*. Springer, Cham.
- Donaldson, R. (2021). Small town tourism in South Africa revisited. In C.M. Rogerson & J.M. Rogerson (Eds.), *Urban tourism in the Global South: South African perspectives*, Cham, Switzerland: Springer 193-211.
- Donaldson, R. (Ed.) (2023). *Socio-spatial small town dynamics in South Africa*. Springer, Cham.
- Donaldson, R., & Majiet, M. (2023). A review of recent small town research in South Africa. In R. Donaldson (Ed.), *Socio-spatial small town dynamics in South Africa*, Cham, Switzerland: Springer, 1-15.
- Dredge, D. (2001). Leisure lifestyles and tourism: Socio-cultural, economic and spatial change in Lake Macquarie. *Tourism Geographies*, 3 (3), 279-299. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14616680110055411>
- Drummond, J., Drummond, F., & Rogerson, C. M. (2021). Latent opportunities for heritage tourism in South Africa: Evidence from Mahikeng and surrounds. *African Journal of Hospitality, Tourism and Leisure*, 10 (5), 1591-1609. <https://doi.org/10.46222/ajhtl.19770720-181>
- Drummond, J., Rogerson, C. M., & Drummond, F. (2022). Adventure tourism in the apartheid era: Skydiving in Mafikeng-Mmabatho. *African Journal of Hospitality, Tourism and Leisure*, 11 (SE1), 578-594. <https://doi.org/10.46222/ajhtl.19770720.244>
- Foster, J. (2008). *Washed with sun: Landscape and the making of white South Africa*. University of Pittsburgh Press, Pittsburgh, USA.
- Goetze, T. (1995). Mossel Bay and Oudtshoorn: Mercantile self-interest and the communication debate of the later 19th century. *Contree*, 37, 10-17.
- Gupta, P. (2024). “Washed with the sun”: Landscaping South African hinterlands. In P. Gupta, S. Nuttall, E. Peeren & H. Stuit (Eds.), *Planetary hinterlands: Extraction, Abandonment and Care*. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 129-146.
- Hinderink, J., & Titus, M. (2002). Small towns and regional development: Major findings and policy implications from comparative research. *Urban Studies*, 39 (3), 379-391. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00420980220112748>

- Kekana, M. R., Engelbrecht, A., Bonato, M., & Cloete, S. W. P. (2023). Ostrich (*Struthio camelus*) feather production and research: An historic overview. *World's Poultry Science Journal*, 79 (3), 619-637. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00439339.2023.2225794>
- Korcelli-Olejniczak, E. (2022). Small towns in settlement systems: A return to the foreground? J. Bański (ed.), *The Routledge Handbook of Small Towns*. London: Routledge, 20-31.
- Le Roux, A. (2013). *'n Historiese ondersoek na die ontwikkeling van landbou in Oudtshoorn en sy distrik, 1914-1980*. Masters dissertation (History), University of Stellenbosch
- Mabin, A. (2021). History and hope in Cradock, Eastern Cape. *Transformation*, 106, 35-67.
- MacKenzie, N. G., Pittaki, Z., & Wong, N. (2020). Historical approaches for hospitality and tourism research. *International Journal of Contemporary Hospitality Management*, 32 (4), 1469-1485. <https://doi.org/10.1108/IJCHM-03-2019-0273>
- Mayer, H., & Lazzeroni, M. (2022). Introduction to *A Research Agenda for Small and Medium-Sized Towns*. In H. Mayer & M. Lazzeroni (Eds.), *A Research Agenda for Small and Medium-Sized Towns*, Cheltenham, Edward Elgar, 1-8.
- Nasab, P. S. A., Carr, N., & Walters, T. (2022). Using archival material in tourism, hospitality and leisure studies: Beauty and the beast. In F. Okumus, S. M. Rasoolimanesh, & S. Jahani (Eds.), *Advanced Research Methods in Hospitality and Tourism*, Bingley, UK: Emerald, 111-125.
- Nel, E., & Stevenson, T. (2019). Demographic and economic change in small towns in New Zealand and the responses to marginalisation. In W. Leimgruber & C. Chang (Eds.), *Rural Areas Between Regional Needs and Global Challenges*. Cham: Springer Nature, 177-189.
- Oudtshoorn Municipality and South African Railways and Harbours (1929). *Oudtshoorn and the Congo Caves*. Johannesburg: South African Railways and Harbours.
- Oudtshoorn Municipality and South African Railways and Harbours (1939). *Oudtshoorn: A Travellers' Rendezvous Amidst the Mountains and a Mecca of Winter Tourists*. Johannesburg: South African Railways and Harbours.
- Rogerson, C. M. (2016). Outside the cities: Tourism pathways in South Africa's small towns and rural areas. *African Journal of Hospitality, Tourism and Leisure*, 5 (3), 1-16.
- Rogerson, C. M., & Rogerson, J. M. (2019). Tourism, local economic development and inclusion: Evidence from Overstrand local municipality, South Africa. *GeoJournal of Tourism and Geosites*, 25 (2), 293-308. <https://doi.org/10.30892/gtg.25202-360>
- Rogerson, C. M., & Rogerson, J. M. (2020). Resort development and pathways in South Africa: Hermanus, 1890-1994. In J. M. Rogerson & G. Visser (Eds.), *New Directions in South African Tourism Geographies*, 15-32, Springer.
- Rogerson, C. M., & Rogerson, J. M. (2021a). Creative networks and the making of Africa's first UNESCO creative city of gastronomy. In C. M. Rogerson & J. M. Rogerson (Eds.), *Urban Tourism in the Global South: South African Perspectives*, Cham, Switzerland: Springer, 239-266.
- Rogerson, C. M., & Rogerson, J. M. (2021b). The other half of urban tourism: Research directions in the Global South. In C.M. Rogerson & J.M. Rogerson (Eds.), *Urban Tourism in the Global South: South African Perspectives*, Cham, Switzerland: Springer, 1-37.
- Rogerson, C. M., & Rogerson, J. M. (2023). The historical development of South African small towns as spa resorts. In R. Donaldson (Ed.), *Socio-spatial small town dynamics in South Africa*. Cham, Switzerland: Springer, 225-242. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-37142_10
- Rogerson, C. M., & Rogerson, J. M. (2024). The evolution of small town spa resorts in the Global South: The historical pathway of Montagu, South Africa. *Modern Geografía*, 19(3), 99-116. <https://doi.org/10.15170/MG.2024.19.03.08>
- Rogerson, J. M. (2019). The evolution of accommodation services in a coastal resort town: Hermanus, South Africa. *African Journal of Hospitality, Tourism and Leisure*, 8(5), 1-16.
- Rogerson, J. M. (2023). The evolution and pandemic recovery of Africa's first creative city of gastronomy. *African Journal of Hospitality, Tourism and Leisure*, 12(5), 1646-1655.
- Sanz-Ibáñez, C., & Clavé, S. A. (2022). Destination evolution. In D. Buhalis (ed.), *Encyclopedia of Tourism Management and Marketing*, Cheltenham: Edward Elgar, 861-864.
- Seligman, J. (2007). Oudtshoorn – ostrich capital of the world. https://seligman.org.il/oudtshoorn_history.html {Accessed 2 July, 2023}.
- Simon, J. (2007). Jewish identity in two remote areas of the Cape Province: A double case study. *Jewish Culture and History*, 9 (2-3), 131-148. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1462169X.2007.10512081>
- Stein, S. A. (2007). "Falling into feathers": Jews and the Trans-Atlantic ostrich feather trade. *The Journal of Modern History*, 79 (December), 772-812. <https://doi.org/10.1086/521065>
- Stein, S. A. (2008). *Plumes: Ostrich Feathers, Jews and a Lost World of Global Commerce*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- South African Railways (1914). *Mountaineering in South Africa*. Johannesburg: South African Railways.
- South African Railways (1920). *The Illustrated South African Hotel Guide*. Cape Town: Cape Times and Union Publishing Agency.
- South African Railways and Harbours (1923). *South Africa: Land of the Outdoor Life*. Johannesburg: South African Railways and Harbours.
- South African Railways and Harbours (1924). *The Illustrated Guide to South Africa*. Cape Town: Cape Times and Union Publishing Agency.
- South African Railways and Harbours (1934). *5,000 miles Through Southern Africa on the South African Railways*. Johannesburg: South African Railways and Harbours.
- South African Railways and Harbours (1936). *Illustrated Guide to Hotels and Boarding Houses*. Johannesburg: South African Railways and Harbours.
- South African Railways and Harbours (1940). *Illustrated Guide to Hotels, Boarding Houses and Farm Guest Houses*. Johannesburg: South African Railways and Harbours.
- van Eeden, J. (2014). South African Railways postcard calendars, 1961 to 1984. *South African Historical Journal*, 66 (1), 79-103. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02582473.2014.891645>
- Wood, M. E. (1929). A tour in South Africa. *South African Geographical Journal*, 12 (1), 32-35.