

The Making of South Africa's Seaside Resorts: Pleasure, Health and Sport in East London

Christian M. ROGERSON¹

¹ University of Johannesburg, College of Business & Economics, School of Tourism & Hospitality, Bunting Road Campus, Johannesburg, South Africa.

***Correspondence:** Christian M. ROGERSON; e-mail: chrismr@uj.ac.za

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Abstract: Seaside resorts are widely researched in tourism studies of Europe, North America and Australia. Much less attention has been given to resort development and the evolutionary pathways of seaside resorts in other parts of the world. Using archival material and existing secondary sources this paper offers a novel contribution on the making of seaside resorts in South Africa. East London is the case study. It is demonstrated that East London took on many of the characteristics associated with British seaside resorts. In charting the development directions of the resort from the 1880s to 1939 an important role was played by 'local agency' in terms of municipal actions. Further, for building the tourism economy the production of publicity material and promotional efforts of the South African Railways and Harbours organisation raised both domestic and overseas awareness of East London's tourist assets. The initial anchors for tourist attraction were pleasure and health which were linked to sea-bathing. By the 1920s, a new focus is on sporting activities as an additional vital element of the touristic capital of this South African seaside resort.

Keywords: coastal tourism; resort development pathways; leisure; health; sport; East London; South Africa

Introduction

During the 1960s and early 1970s the coastal city of East London in South Africa was the focus of international attention for both sporting and political reasons. By the 1970s the city had become a world-renowned surfing destination, one of the Southern African 'hotspots', after being 'discovered' by international surf riders from the USA and Australia. The reputation of Nahoon Reef was that it "generated better waves than were available in Durban or anywhere else in southern Africa" (Bank, 2015: 255). East London therefore became a host city for local South African surf challenge events. The city's surf prowess saw a progression to attracting international surfing events, most notably the 'Gunston 500', in 1974, 1976 and 1978. The hosting of these international surfing events in East London with participants coming from up to six countries became a source of considerable political controversy as they took place at a time when international sports boycotts had been imposed on apartheid South Africa because of the country's racial policies of discrimination (Booth, 1998, 2003). Intense

scrutiny about the operation of such international sports events in East London was heightened because the surfing spectacles occurred close to the time of the 1976 Soweto uprising in Johannesburg as well as in an apartheid environment of struggles taking place against the racial segregation of beach spaces (Rogerson, 2017).

It is against this backdrop of international attention upon East London as a niche sports tourism destination that the aim in this paper is to offer an historical perspective on the city's development pathway as a seaside tourist destination. Saarinen (2004, p. 161) observed that tourism scholars "have for a long time been interested in tourist destinations, their identity and the changes occurring in them". Historical studies can reveal contextual elements that influence the present characteristics of tourism in places and further to understand how tourism works with localities and localities with tourism (Saarinen et al., 2017). As noted by Butler (2015, p. 22) the topic "of the development of coastal and other destinations is one of the oldest in tourism research". Walton (2011) makes clear that the seaside resort has been a central component of the spectacular rise of tourist industries since the eighteenth century. It is argued that the "seaside resort lives by the exploitation of a natural resource: a culturally-desirable maritime environment which promises health, scenic beauty, sociability and enjoyment to those who frequent it, grafting man-made attractions including distinctive architecture and entertainment on to the original lures of climate, bathing beaches, hills, coves and rock formations" (Walton, 2003, p. 73). Stock et al. (2021) put forward the concept of 'touristic capital' to capture the assets or capital of a geographical place such as a resort. It is evident that "what coastal resorts sell, and in a sense, 'manufacture', are experiences, sensations, health, well-being, sociability, pleasure and memory, in combinations that vary and change over time and between places" (Walton, 2011, p. 902).

Under scrutiny in this research is the historical period from the 1880s to 1939, which were formative years for the tourism economy of South Africa as a whole and especially for East London. Ferrario (1978) directs attention to the growth of seaside resorts as a component of the broader development of tourism in 20th century South Africa. The four-decade long study period is distinguished by the fact that visitor publicity for the city increasingly began to shift in focus and include advertising the locality's sporting assets. In this regard East London offers an example of the broader changes taking place in many South African coastal resorts with a pivot in marketing during the 1920s and 1930s to incorporate sport as well as local assets for pleasure and health. The development trajectory of coastal tourism destinations in South Africa has garnered only a small number of existing investigations (Gupta, 2015; Rogerson & Rogerson, 2020a, 2020b, & 2021). This paper therefore represents a novel contribution and provides insights of the varying development pathways of South African coastal resorts, a theme which has attracted some attention recently

from tourism geography scholars (Rogerson & Rogerson, 2020a, 2023). In addition, the paper demonstrates how sporting activities contributed to the development of tourism in colonial South Africa. Other documented examples are of sea angling (Rogerson & Rogerson, 2024a), trout fishing (Rogerson & Rogerson, 2024b), and the 'sport' of hunting as consumptive wildlife tourism (Rogerson, 2025; Rogerson & Rogerson, 2025)

Literature context

As observed by Stock et al. (2014, p. 4) the issue of resort development "is one of the most widely researched subject matters within tourism studies". Tourism resort developments have been investigated in a variety of international settings and shown to exhibit markedly different trajectories of development (Gilbert, 1939; Walton, 1979, 1981, 1983, 2002 & 2003; Worthington, 2003; Torres & Momsen, 2005; Barke et al., 2010; Walton, 2009, 2011 & 2013a, 2013b; Jarratt, 2019; Bal & Czalczynska-Podolska, 2020; Burdett, 2023; Peirson, 2023; Soldatke et al., 2023; McLaughlin & Smith, 2024). Undoubtedly, however, as pointed out by Shoval and Cohen-Attab (2007, p. 235) "most investigations of seaside resorts have focused on North American, European and especially British seaside resorts". Walton (2009, p. 152) avers that "work on British destinations has dominated the historiography of seaside resorts and coastal tourism".

Arguably, an understanding of the evolution of English seaside resorts is critical in tourism scholarship as these spaces are regarded as the birthplaces of mass tourism. Peirson (2023) maintains that the period from the mid-nineteenth century to the early twentieth century is referred to by many observers as 'the golden age' of the English seaside. Burdett (2023) highlights that seaside visits and excursions became fashionable in Britain from the mid-18th century and as a consequence of the growth of urbanization which accompanied the Industrial Revolution. Initially sea bathing was a popular activity among the aristocracy and advocated by medical specialists from the early 18th century for its health-giving properties. Walton (2016) views sea-bathing as an English invention of the early to mid-18th century and locates its emergence to the Yorkshire seaside towns of Scarborough and Whitby. Indeed, Walton (2000) situates the birthing of coastal resorts to late 18th century Britain when the activity of organized and fashionable bathing developed and marked the institutionalisation of the beach. Brodie (2019, p. 13) records that by the mid-18th century in England "a number of small coastal towns were beginning to be transformed into seaside resorts, a consequence of the arrival of visitors seeking to bathe in the sea for the benefit of their health". According to Shaw and Agarwal (2007) the democratisation of leisure travel and holiday-making and the transformation of coastal resorts from the preserve of the wealthy elite to mass holiday locations

occurred into the second half of the 19th century and continued into the first decades of the 20th century.

The early rise of seaside resorts was an outcome of wealthy visitors seeking out coastal destinations on health grounds. According to Walton (2011, p. 69) "the essence of coastal resort development has been access to pure air and clean water in a physically attractive, if not always or necessarily picturesque setting". Seaside resorts transitioned to become popular sites for recreational sea bathing and entertainment as well as for medical purposes (Burdett, 2023). Richard Butler (2015) points out that in Britain the development of the railway system was critical to early mass travel and boosting coastal resort development as it allowed large numbers of people to move easily, safely and cheaply beyond the limits of their residence. The railway companies "were quick to appreciate the market of leisure travellers and participated in the development of services for that growing tourism market" (Butler, 2015, p. 18). This said, in the experience of Britain it has been pointed out that whilst railways undoubtedly were significant for resort development the process was more nuanced and evolutionary than railways being the only determinant for the economic health of coastal resorts (Burdett, 2023). Railways must be considered as a vital contributory influence rather than sole factor or determinant force for change. Seaside resorts sometimes have tended to be viewed as essentially the creation of the railways. Arguably, whilst "there is no doubt that the scale and pattern of their development was strongly influenced by the new transport system" other factors also must be considered (Walton, 1979, p. 191). Guiver et al. (2023) pinpoint the constantly, changing political, economic and other circumstances that impact the historical trajectory of individual seaside resort development.

In understanding the evolution and growth of English seaside resorts Walton (1981, 2000) directs our attention to the importance of the reduction in working hours as well as greater prosperity among the working classes as contributing to the uneven development in the numbers and sizes of British coastal resorts. During the 19th century following the institution of public holidays as well as the extension of railways a growing proportion of the English population had the opportunity to enjoy daytrips or spend days at coastal resorts (Abell, 2023). Coastal areas afforded space and opportunities for relaxation and recreation away from the increasingly crowded British cities (Guiver et al., 2023). Walton (1978) views the emergence of the popular seaside resort in England as part of the wider experience of the working classes in industrial society. Indeed, he demonstrates that the agency of the working-class holidaymaker was foundational to the popularization of the seaside resort during the later stages of the nineteenth century (Walton, 1983). Blackpool in North-West England "has undisputable claims to the status of the world's first working-class seaside resort in the sense that during the nineteenth century its tourism economy

came to be dominated by wage-earning industrial workers from the cotton mills, engineering workshops, coal mines and multifarious other industries of Lancashire (the first industrial region and society) and then from a wider area of northern and midland England" (Walton, 2009, pp. 151-152).

During the 20th century resorts and resort life consolidated as big business for residents and visitors and a highly significant aspect of British culture (Walton, 2000; Huggins, 2002). Historically the local demand for sea-bathing traditions had been associated with the healthy environment of coastal localities and "at the core of the original promotion of the seaside as a healthy and desirable destination" (Walton, 2003, p. 81). Yet, into the early 20th century, it could be observed that resort advertising in England continued to exhibit a strong association with the Victorian ethic of clean and fresh air with a focus upon visiting 'healthy' destinations (Page & Connell, 2025).

Overall, according to Walton (2000, p. 27) England evolved "a system of coastal resorts whose scale and complexity was unmatched anywhere else in the world". Some catered for social elites, others for working classes. The British seaside resort was the dominant destination for the annual Victorian or Edwardian holiday (Walton, 2013). Seaside resorts enjoyed a near monopoly of British popular tourism as the railway network directed people to well-connected leisure destinations. Similar resort developments occurred in several other coastal zones of the world (Walton, 2003; Abell, 2023). Illustratively, Lewis (2009, p. 44) records "by the end of the nineteenth century, a distinct urban form had evolved along the Atlantic coast of the United States". Further, "the popular seaside holiday resort provided residential accommodation for the middle and lower classes and more particularly entertainment for the visitor on a one day excursion from the city" (Lewis, 2009, p. 44).

Methodology

The study was pursued through the application of different research methods. First, a literature search and survey was undertaken of existing international scholarship concerning seaside resort development. As is apparent from the above section of material, the bulk of extant research relates mainly to cases of resort evolution and of early tourism development in the Global North in general and within Europe in particular. Most literature concentrates upon the classic destination development pathways of British seaside resorts. Beyond that body of research writing, the pool of literature on historical coastal resort development is viewed as extremely shallow.

Second, the research on the evolution of East London as a coastal resort applied the methods of historical geographers, which include the mining of primary source

materials from archives and the gathering of other evidence in secondary literature. The benefits of archival research for geographers have been pointed out by several observers (Beckingham & Hodder, 2022; Byron et al., 2024). Arguably, in tourism studies, descriptive historical research continues to have merit particularly as "the judicious use of primary resources creates a purposeful narrative review, creating a historical reconstruction" (Page & Connell, 2025, p. 4). Indeed, if used carefully, historical methods including archival research can unveil patterns of change over time (MacKenzie et al., 2020). This is assisted by the adoption of a chronological approach to the analysis as recommended by Worthington (2003).

The East London research utilizes primary documentary sources mainly secured from the collections housed at the South African National Library depot in Cape Town. This is supplemented by other documentary material which was accessed at the Western Cape Archives in Cape Town. At the National Library, material was sourced in terms of the guidebooks and promotional material produced by the South African Railways and Harbours (SAR & H) during the 1920s and 1930s. Looking at the history of tourism development in South Africa one of the watershed moments was the establishment in 1919 of the Publicity and Travel Department of the railways organization (van Eeden, 2011). The promotional activities of this department surrounded the provision of publicity material and guidebooks that might encourage overseas tourists as well as regional tourists from neighbouring territories (especially colonial Rhodesia) to holiday in South Africa (Foster, 2008). Importantly, as in the case of East London, the railways organization cooperated with local municipalities to develop publicity material that was targeted also to expand the domestic tourism market.

According to Foster (2008) and van Eeden (2011) the South African Railways and Harbours (the latter was incorporated into South African Railways in 1922) organization played a central role in fostering tourism expansion in South Africa both in terms of domestic travellers as well as of overseas tourists. This was achieved through connecting different spaces of South Africa and forging an infrastructure for travel which was encouraged by the enormous amount of publicity material that was organised by, or commissioned for, the agency. The expanding railway network and the publicity provided by SAR & H greatly assisted in familiarizing overseas visitors with the varied landscapes of South Africa (Foster, 2008). Moreover, its publicity material was deemed a vital catalyst for stimulating local rail passenger traffic and expanding the development of coastal holiday destinations across South Africa, including East London (van Eeden, 2011). The analysis of East London threads the archival material with the existing secondary sources on the historical development of the city (Nel, 1991; Minkley, 1994; Nel & Rogerson, 1995, 1996; Bank, 2011 & 2015; Breier, 2023).

Results

The context

In 1836 the port settlement of East London was founded to serve British soldiers engaged in the sixth frontier war (Nel, 1991; Minkley, 1994; Lester, 1998). During the early decades of the 20th century East London rose to prominence as a trading centre with economic activity concentrated upon its harbour, railway, merchant houses, processing and craft works (Bank, 2011). It was both a centre for regional hinterland trade and leading port for the export of wool mainly to the colonial power, Britain. By the 1920s the area's wool export trade was under threat and the locality began to exhibit signs of economic depression. From the 1930s began a period of economic change as new industrial parks were established which boosted the rise of secondary industry (Minkley, 1994). At the close of the Second World War (1945), East London recorded over 100 manufacturing establishments (Bank, 2011). Nevertheless, as is highlighted by Beinart and Bundy (2023, p. 828), for the first 40 years of the 20th century, East London "was deliberately and self-consciously a non-industrial town".

As compared to other major South African urban centres East London shared in neither the mining (Johannesburg and Kimberley) nor the import-substituting industries to supplement its port activities (Cape Town, Port Elizabeth and Durban) and nor did it have a major administrative role in South Africa as was the case of Pretoria, Bloemfontein or Pietermaritzburg. Instead, with wool from its hinterland as the major export, until the Second World War East London was essentially a colonial port. It was argued that "East London municipal authorities centred their energies on its role as a port and entrepôt, with an eye on tourism" (Beinart & Bundy, 2023, p. 828). A critical factor supporting the town's emergence as a tourist destination was the issue of 'local agency' and the pro-activity of East London local government in driving the directions of local development. Nel and Rogerson (1995, p. 1) argue in the pre-1945 period across several urban centres in the Eastern Cape there occurred high degrees of municipal involvement in urban economic activity through place entrepreneurialism and what might be termed 'incipient local economic development' approaches.

Early tourism development directions

Tourism began to enter the landscape of East London in the latter half of the 19th century. According to Bank (2015, p. 249) "the Eastern Cape coastline has enjoyed a special place in the imagination and identity politics of white English-speaking people who have looked to the coast as a critical space of relaxation, recreation and recuperation". Eastern Cape farmers, traders and townspeople travelled from the interior to the Eastern Cape coast for leisure purposes and

including to the beachfront of East London. Farmers from the inland districts used to trek down to East London with their families and camp out in their wagons on the grassy areas that fringe the beach, and "a fortnight or a month sped pleasantly by in such healthful and enjoyable pastimes as bathing and fishing" (South African Railways and Harbours, 1923, pp.101-102.). Although white settlers considered the Eastern Cape coastline, as wild, treacherous and unclaimed, they transformed coastline enclaves in East London into British style seaside resorts.

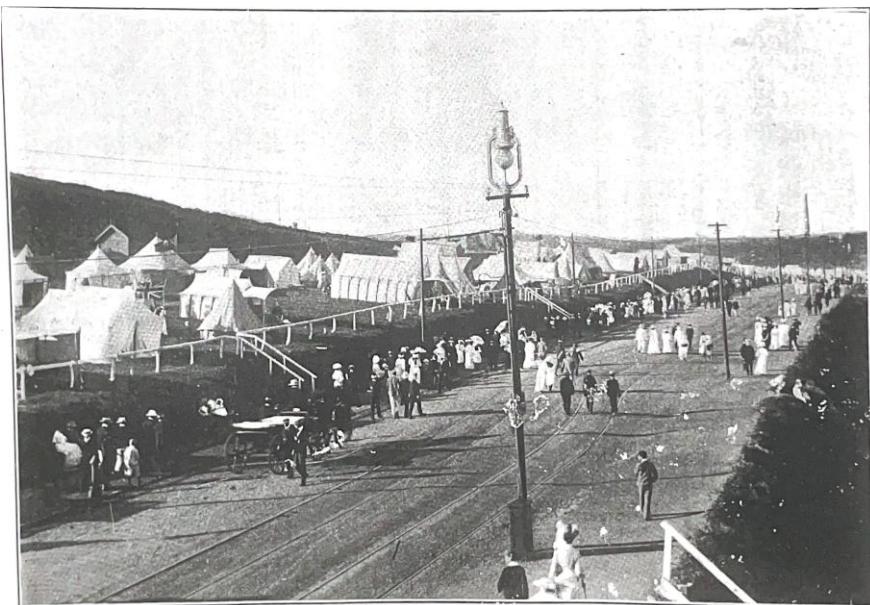


Figure 1. The East London Esplanade c. 1920 (Source: *Cape Times*, 1921)



Figure 2. The Beach Tea Pavilion, East London c. 1920 (Source: *Cape Times*, 1921)

As stated by Bank (2015, p. 249) during the first half of the nineteenth century “East London developed as a British seaside resort”. The transformation of the city’s beaches into tourist attractions and as places for middle-class recreation started in the 1880s with the construction of a road to link the city centre to what was called in 1906 ‘Oriental Beach’. An English-style pavilion and tearoom were built thus opening “up the Esplanade to the urban middle class for weekend tea outings and strolls along the coast” (Bank, 2015, p. 251). Figures 1 and 2 show respectively the East London esplanade and the beach tea pavilion. An important development for the beachfront development was the opening of a tramline connecting the city centre to the beach. In addition, the opening of the Beach Hotel, viewed as a stunning example of Edwardian architecture, was a further significant landmark property development as it established a stylish presence on the Esplanade (Figure 3). The touristification of East London continued in earnest at the turn of the twentieth century with the development of the mile-long esplanade for strolling, bathing and recreation on the eastern side of the Buffalo River (Bank, 2015, p. 250).

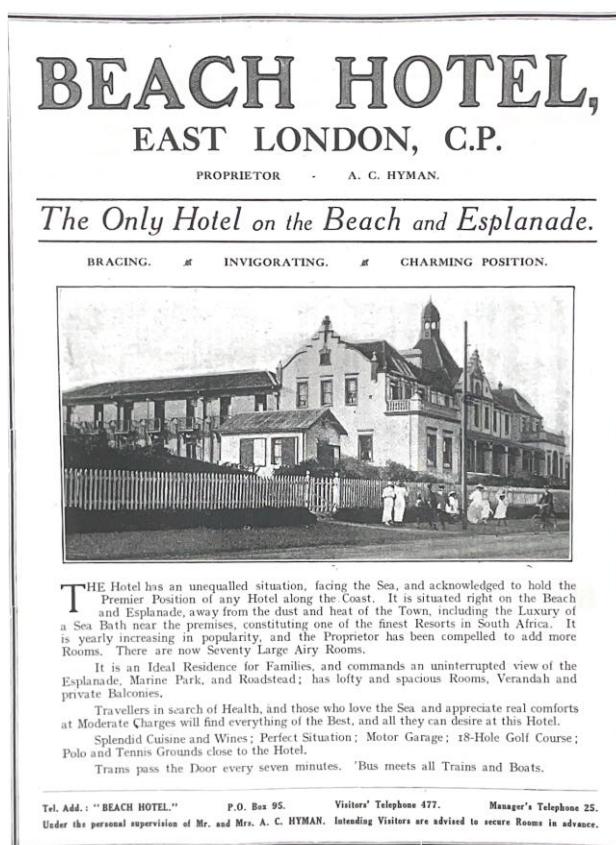


Figure 3. Advertising East London’s Leading Hotel c 1920 (Source; *Cape Times*, 1

At the beginning of the 20th century East London saw the establishment of a number of colonial beach hotels. This raised considerable hopes that East London would consolidate its status as a major seaside destination for domestic white South African visitors as well as attract overseas tourists (Minkley, 1994). One early hotel and travel guide for visitors to South Africa described in 1920 as follows: "East London has during the last half century enjoyed an ever-increasing popularity, and at the present moment is one of the most up-to-date seaside resorts in South Africa. Its esplanades are without rival, affording in their course of about two miles an extensive and magnificent view of the Indian Ocean. East London, moreover, possesses a perfect stretch of sand, which is the delight of visitors, both young and old. One of the staple and natural attractions is the Buffalo River, the fascinations of which are many and various; here are facilities for boating, and some excellent rod and line fishing can be obtained" (Cape Times, 1921, p. 86).

In common with British Edwardian and Victorian seaside resorts, East London's Esplanade was constructed as a "domesticated city space of civility and innocence" (Bank, 2015, p. 252). Until the 1920s Victorian-style class and gender sensibilities and regulations prohibited men and women from bathing together and further required bathers to have costumes from the neck to knee. Following World War 1, however, changes occurring across the colonial world impacted the regulation of beach spaces in South Africa. Victorian style restrictions on dress and separate gender bathing were dropped and "by the 1920s, there was a new focus on tanning and exercise at the beach, as well as on beauty contests and surf lifesaving" (Bank, 2015, p. 252). During the 1920s East London began to reflect a transition from a seaside resort described by Minkley (1994, p. 106) as of 'elite coastal patronage' to a mass family seaside resort. This change was evident in its representation as a 'new' family haven with images of "famous beaches, glorious sea coast drives, ideal camping sites, a scenically endowed river and a reputation for keeping expenses within the limits available to the average wage earner" (Minkley, 1994, p. 106). Historically, East London had emerged as an early camping destination (Rogerson & Rogerson, 2021a). Despite the growth of commercial hotels, its traditional popularity for camping as a budget form of travel was retained. In 1924 it was observed: "East London has not lost its old-time characteristic of camping which is still a very special feature of the place" (South African Railways and Harbours, 1924a, p. 32). The municipal authorities preserved the old camping ground and for many residents in the Cape "Camptown is among the greatest attractions of East London for there one can lead the simple life and stroll from tent to beach in one's bathing dress" (South African Railways and Harbours, 1924a, pp. 32-33).

Pleasure and health

The evidence therefore is that during the early 1920s “the number of visitors has greatly increased, and this is due to the efforts of the municipal authorities to increase the attractions of the town and the beach” (South African Railways and Harbours, 1923, p. 102). The establishment by South African Railways of long-distance train services was the foundation of seasonal migrations of visitors from South Africa’s major cities of Johannesburg and Pretoria for leisure and for stimulating the rise of a suite of ‘fashionable’ coastal resorts, including East London (Foster, 2008; Rogerson & Rogerson, 2020, 2023). The marketing material produced and distributed by SAR & H conveyed positive promotional messaging of East London as a holiday destination, including for both domestic and overseas tourists. The health restorative benefits of a sojourn in this coastal resort frequently were flagged. For example, publicity material proclaimed that for “the last half-century or more East London has been a favourite holiday spot with the up-country resident anxious to enjoy the ozone-laden breezes from the ocean” (South African Railways and Harbours, 1923, p.101).

East London’s local ‘touristic capital’ was described as “richly endowed with natural advantages – a beautiful bay, a fine stretch of sandy beach, grassy turf running down almost to the edge of the sea, picturesque bush-clad sand-hills, a noble river, and an invigorating climate” (South African Railways and Harbours, 1923, p.102). In a narrative piece written with the overseas tourist as target audience it was stated that “East London has not the pretentiousness of Cape-town; it has not the prosperity of Port Elizabeth; nor does it rival Durban” but it boasts “magnificent river scenery, where the broad-bosomed Buffalo leisurely meanders between richly wooded banks such as one would look for on the English Wye or Dart” (South African Railways and Harbours, 1923, p.102). Above all “the outstanding delight of East London, from the point of view of the tourist, is the bathing to be had on the beach” which is safe, cool and health invigorating “unquestionably one of the finest sea-bathing grounds around the coast of South Africa” (South African Railways and Harbours, 1923, p. 104). It was concluded that “If a man were choosing his holiday rendezvous purely on account of the sea-bathing advantages, East London would be without a rival in South Africa” (South African Railways and Harbours, 1923, p.104). For mainly overseas visitors East London was further marketed as a tourist centre because of its proximity to the attractions of rural ‘Native life’ (Rogerson, 2022). Specifically, it was the gateway and access point to the Transkei, and thereby allowed excellent opportunities for “observing the characteristics of some of the native tribes in their wattle and daub villages” (South African Railways and Harbours, 1923, p.105).

Overall, Minkley (1994, p. 104) contends that “On a significant scale, a tourism ‘industry’ was only created in the post-1920 period, receiving much of its impetus

from existing commercial interests" in East London. Investment occurred in the development of hotels and was underwritten by commercial wholesale capital. The seafront/beachfront became the core of the "complex and extensive recreational and leisured social representation of place in the 1930s" (Minkley, 1994, p. 104). The main attraction was "the appeal of British-style holiday fun, compressed in an esplanade or beach-front and structured around hotels, bandstands, swimming pools and sheltered beaches" (Bank, 2015, p. 249). Arguably, until the Second World War East London's esplanade culture of the period was explicitly colonial and segregationist. Africans at the East London beaches were there essentially to serve white visitors, locals and holiday makers (Bank, 2015).

Although the largest flow of domestic visitors occurred in the summer months to East London, it was argued that "amongst its other outstanding characteristics it has the advantage over many of its rivals of being equally – if indeed, not more – pleasant for a holiday in winter" (South African Railways and Harbours, 1923, p.104). Potential visitors were assured that throughout the year "there is no lack of entertainment, theatrical performances, vocal and instrumental concerts, bioscope entertainments, and the social amenities of a popular and prosperous town being plentiful" (South African Railways and Harbours, 1923, pp.104-105). Nevertheless, there were critical voices that suggested a need to strengthen the locality's tourism asset base. For example, one local observer drew attention to the weakness of the night-time economy. The question was posed what are visitors to do in East London during evening?: "They may have spent a most enjoyable day – fishing, golfing, motoring or sea bathing – but when the shades of evening fall there is nothing for them to do but to sit in the lounge or bedrooms of their hotels" (Anon., 1925, p. 659). Suggestions made to boost the night-time economy included the establishment of more places of amusement including "a first-class theatre" (Anon., 1925, p. 659).

Further support to tourism development derived from the activities of the East London Publicity Association which was founded in 1925. The association recognized the importance of "making the advantages of East London known to many thousands of people throughout the Union and in Rhodesia" (East London Municipality, 1925). In 1929 the organization reported "many more visitors are being attracted to East London, especially from the Free State and Rhodesia". Among the initial activities of the publicity association were the production and distribution of 15 000 copies of a local visitor guide with copies "placed on all boats leaving Hamburg for South Africa, others distributed from the various tourist agencies including London and New York. Through the courtesy of the Union Castle Steamship Company, these are distributed amongst passengers on all mail boats arriving here, together with a special illustrated folder suggesting short trips ashore commensurate with the time at their disposal" (East London Publicity Association, 1929).

The strong association of East London with health continued in marketing promotion throughout the 1920s. For example, one publicity guidebook pinpointed “the delightful climate with its glorious beach, so that as a health resort it challenges many other extensively advertised resorts” (South African Railways and Harbours (1924b, p. 109). In 1927 publicity material issued under the joint auspices of the East London Municipality and South African Railways and Harbours the core messaging was of “East London for Health” (South African Railways and Harbours, 1927). The publicity booklet stressed the benefits of the “equitable climate” and the impact of sea bathing as “a most invigorating health restorer” (South African Railways and Harbours, 1927, p. 9). For people who were run down “no better health could be found than that which lies in the waves of the Indian Ocean at East London” (South African Railways and Harbours, 1927, p. 9). Specific focus was given to sufferers of bronchial complaints for whom “the humidity of the air, when combined with the purity of the atmosphere of the sea shore, is most beneficial and soothing; and cases of chronic renal disease also derive much benefit from such climatic conditions. Insomnia, and the many functional nervous diseases, improve under the sedative influence of a climate such as that of East London, whilst for the form of heart trouble, the resort is unrivalled” (South African Railways and Harbours, 1927, p. 11).

The embrace of sport to drive tourism

Colonial South Africa had long enjoyed a reputation in Britain for its health benefits of sunshine and clean air (Rogerson & Rogerson, 2021b). During the 1920s and 1930s, however, the country’s tourist image began to shift away from that of a health resort to “a more diversified and sophisticated travel destination” (Ferrario, 1978, p. 50). It was observed the country’s seaside resorts began to develop “to accommodate the increasingly large number of holidaymakers who descended, during the school vacations, from the Rhodesias and the Congo Copper Belt, as well as from the new conurbations of the Witwatersrand” which centred around Johannesburg (Ferrario, 1978, p. 50). East London was now described to potential visitors as “one of the most sporting towns in South Africa” (South African Railways and Harbours, 1924a, p. 111). One observable shift from the 1920s was the growing profiling of East London’s assets for health-giving sporting attractions. A turn is observable in the focus of place marketing of seaside resorts such as East London from a former emphasis on healthy and salubrious vacations to activities and sport. The health-giving impacts of indulging in forms of sport and recreation such as rowing and fishing were lauded. East London “affords many opportunities for indulging in good sport in the fresh air, which does so much to promote health of body and mind” (South African Railways and Harbours, 1927, p. 11).

Sea sports linked to the beach became significant products of local touristic capital. This was exemplified with attention given to surfing. In 1924 publicity it was stated that "East London "claims to be the home of the surf-board, and this sport has become very popular. It is an animated scene on a sunny day when swimmers make merry in the tumbling surf, the more expert riding the great breakers gaily ashore on their gaudy coloured boards, while the learners perchance are bowled over and rolled in the shallows. But the knack of surf-riding is soon learnt and in almost no time the visitor finds himself master of the exhilarating sport, and realizes that 'Life is still a merry, merry things for those who make it so' (South African Railways and Harbours, 1924b, pp. 31-32). In promotional material that appeared in 1929 East London's tourism assets were described as follows: "Surf board riding on the long breakers that sweep up the Orient Beach, boating and fishing in the rivers and from the rocks along the sea front, a climate that is consistently invigorating, and the leafy glades of the woods and parks round the town, together make East London an excellent place for a temporary sojourn at almost any time of year" (South African Railways and Harbours, 1929, p. 29).

By 1930 the East London Publicity Association had amended the messaging focus from 'East London and Health' to East London as the "Home of the Surf Board - Where Sea and Sunshine Call" (East London Publicity Association, 1930). Beyond surfing, however, other recreational and sport activities were highlighted which linked to the Buffalo River. Most notable were boating and fishing. It was claimed that "in and around East London we can offer the finest fishing in South Africa" (Anon. 1925, p. 659). River sport activities were highlighted: "There are few more picturesque rivers than the historic Buffalo" where "a splendid rowing course has helped to develop the best oarsmen in Africa" (South African Railways and Harbours, 1924b, p 111). The town's prowess for golfing was also indicated with reference to visits from British Royalty: "East London possesses one of the most beautifully situated golf links in the whole of South Africa, which was greatly enjoyed by the Prince of Wales during his recent visit" (Anon., 1925: 660). In railways publicity material the golf narrative was also repeated: the "Golf Course, 18 hole, is a real sporting one, kept in excellent condition" (South African Railways and Harbours, 1924a, p. 111). Once again, in a 1936 SAR & H publicity titled *Golf in South Africa: Play it in the Sunshine*, East London was profiled. It was stated that in its vicinity "the countryside is park-like, often bringing memories of England" (Grimsdell, 1936, p. 13). The town's golfing attractions were much celebrated: "perfect golfing country, undulated and heavily wooded" and that the "fairways roll in a delightful manner, and charming views of the Indian Ocean add to the pleasures of the round" (Grimsdell, 1936, p. 13). Another 1936 guidebook for overseas visitors to South Africa proclaimed East London among 'the wondersights of Southern Africa'. It describes:

“East London is a popular seaside resort and thousands flock to its fine Orient Beach during the summer season. The Buffalo River is the scene of a number of the Union’s most important regattas, while the other rivers in the vicinity are favourite picnic haunts for holiday-makers. The aquarium on the sea-front contains a fine collection of the marine species found round the South African coast,” (South African Railways and Harbours, 1936, p. 17).

The changing balance between tourism and industry

Arguably, by the 1930s tourism had become “East London’s ‘gospel’” (Minkley, 1994, p. 104). The tourism economy continued to record steady growth and by the 1940s there were more than 50 hotels and guest houses, many situated on the Esplanade, and attracting the estimated 15 000 tourists that visited the city each year. During the 1940s industrialization was advancing in East London and created local political tensions as to the future development of the city, whether as a coastal lifestyle city or as an industrializing centre (Minkley, 1994).

Local political conflict occurred between tourism commercial interests and those of manufacturing with the former favouring an anti-industrial axis for local development (Minkley, 1994). According to Bank (2015) the decision-makers in the City Council opted to pursue a dual pathway seeking to attract new industrial investment and at the same time maintaining the appeal of the city to tourists. Post World War 2 development in East London therefore witnessed the opening of a new chapter in its urban development trajectory as an accelerated path of local industrialization occurred alongside efforts to sustain the established reputation of East London as a place of pleasure, health and sport.

Conclusion

In researching the evolution of resorts Stock et al. (2014, p. 4) stress the relevance of “historical contextualisation”. The novel contribution of this study is a historical examination of the evolution of seaside resort development in a setting that has received minimal attention in international tourism scholarship.

The research has shown that the making of the South African coastal resort of East London was much in the style of British seaside resorts. East London’s seafront esplanade, its beach tearoom and the pleasurable activities of seabathers represented a model of several English seaside resorts which had been established in the 19th century. In promoting the development directions of the resort from the 1880s to the period of the beginning of the Second World War an important role was played by ‘local agency’ in terms of the municipality. Of critical significance also for the growth of the tourism economy was the production of publicity material and promotional efforts of the South African Railways and Harbours organisation in raising local and

international awareness of the tourist assets of East London. The initial anchors for tourist attraction to East London were pleasure and health. By the 1920s, however, a shift is evident for incorporating also a new focus on sporting activities as a further vital element of the touristic capital of this South African seaside resort.

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