

living history in the *Overberg*

Visiting Elim in the Southern Cape
is like walking back in time.

IT'S BLAZING HOT OUTSIDE BUT COOL and serene inside the thatched and gabled church of Elim, a tiny Moravian mission village about halfway between Gansbaai and Bredasdorp in the Southern Cape.

All is white and sparse, plain and pure. Even the pews are made of simple wooden planks painted white. Organist Andréé Joorst tells us that backs weren't added to them until 1935. "In the old days you couldn't fall asleep in church but now you can," she laughs. Although the old people still stick to the division between sexes – there's a wooden partition for that purpose – sometimes the younger generation are a bit more flexible.

Turn your back to the lectern and your gaze falls on a splendid honey-coloured organ on a raised balcony. Brought from Germany, it spent the last part of the journey on a jolting ox-wagon. It's where >>



□ Small dogs are as much a part of Elim as their owners.

□ Spurred by historic pride, the Overseers Council wants houses on the main road to keep to the old style of thatched roofs and small windows.





□ The charming Wilma Gillion (left) and Jane Speelman are partners in the watermill restaurant.

□ At Easter, a brass band leads a procession to the cemetery where people lay flowers on the graves. Men and women are buried on opposite sides of the main path, and children at the back.

□ Elim Tourism's Andréé Joorst doubles as the church organist. She's a mine of information about the village.

□ The monument to the abolition of slavery stands in front of the old school, which now houses the kindergartern, library and Internet café.



>> Andréé loves to be on Sundays, when the church is a hive of activity. After the service and communion, the mostly middle-aged and old people stumble into the sunshine – the women wearing black dresses and soft white headscarves, the men in suits.

Founded in 1824, Elim seems to have fallen through a time warp. The story goes that the palm trees there reminded the missionaries of the biblical Elim, a place of 70 palms and 12 fountains where the Israelites camped after their exodus from Egypt. "Today we still have 60 palms and are blessed with nearly 200 fountains," says Andréé.

Some 7 000 hectares of land around Elim are privately owned by the church. As you approach the village, a blue-and-white sign warns you that you're entering private property and that hawkers and overnight visitors should get permits from the Overseers Council – a democratically elected body that controls all aspects of village life.

Thatched houses line the main road up to the church, some well cared for, others reflecting the owners' lack of fix-it money. The oldest were built of mud-brick plastered with a rendering made from seashells and roofed with restio grass harvested from the surrounding fynbos. Elimers are still renowned internationally for their thatching skill.

Some houses have wooden benches beside the front doors. On one an old man is dozing, his hat covering his face as the morning sun licks the shadows at his feet. "It's also the best place to sit in the cool of the evening," says Henneke Cloete, whose two-roomed house is awash with colourful knick-knacks.

An old woman throws open her window to shout greetings to a friend across the street; another is sweeping her stoep, but takes time to smile and wave at us. We stop to admire sweetpeas in a garden and get chatting to Amalia Cloete. "I've got two brides coming here for their wedding photos on Saturday," she says, then invites us in to see the handicrafts she's making to raise funds for the church.

Life and community are very different here. When heavy rains in 2007 ruined a struggling pensioner's *rietdak*, the church organised a collection to pay for the repairs.

Opposite the church is a guest house whose guests can soak up the early morning sun or take in the stars from the *kerkwerf*. Like many buildings here it's 'grey-washed', as they used to be in the old days – no doubt because whitewash was too dazzling in the bright sun. In the dust outside, a bell hangs between wooden posts that are peeling green paint.

It used to be rung at midday so people working their plots would know it was time to take a well-deserved break. The much more stately church bell chimes people into services and doubles as a disaster warning system. If there's a fire, the bell tolls and the entire village is put on the alert.

Elim is the only place in South Africa that boasts a monument celebrating the abolition of slavery in 1834. Back then slave owners were so bothered about losing their labour that a condition of release was that slaves should be 'indentured' to them for another four years. That's why the monument bears the date 1838, the date of their true freedom.

Beyond the church – yes, almost everything exists in relation to the church – is a long thatched building that used to be the mission store. Today, in the care of Amanda Cloete, it's a heritage centre and museum of the community's way of life and people. It houses old furniture and farm implements. Best of all is a wealth of photos – people fording streams with ox wagons, smart 1950s-style weddings, all puffed hair and dresses with nipped-in waists, even Elim's oldest twins celebrating their 80th birthday in 2007.

Old is something Elim does well. The church boasts the oldest clock in the country – more than 235 years. Another geriatric is South Africa's largest wooden waterwheel – part of a mill built in 1833, declared a national monument in 1974, and restored and reopened in 1990. In the restaurant that Wilma Gillion and Jane Speelman operate from the mill, we enjoy a delicious lunch of bobotie and roast chicken topped off with *melkert* still warm and wobbly from the oven.

We learn that villagers who leave to find work elsewhere usually return for holidays and celebrations, keeping the fabric of the community intact. Easter is a big event, and so is the flower festival in September.

With time running out, we pop in at the tiny bakery to buy a hot loaf of sweet-smelling bread, then head back past the old thatched houses, watched by a patch of sunflowers and a trio of grinning children ... out of the time warp of Elim and back to the hurly-burly of modern life. □

Map reference G2
see inside back cover

HERITAGE
COUNTRY
LIFE

Elim Tourism 028 482 1806, 083 694 5537
G&S Restaurant 073 769 7679
Elim Guesthouse 028 482 1715



□ Pensioners Maggie Schippers (left) and Christina Afrika run the Elim Guesthouse.

□ Amalia Cloete potters in her colourful garden, which is in demand for bridal photographs.

□ The church dominates the village.

