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The Evolution of Small Town Spa Resorts in the Global South: The Historical Pathway of Montagu, South Africa³

ABSTRACT

An important resource for small town tourism is maximising the local advantage of natural mineral springs. Only a small international literature exists on the evolution of spa resorts with scant writings for the Global South. For small town South Africa the histories of spa tourism mostly are unrecorded. This article addresses this knowledge gap by investigating the historical development of one spa tourism resort, namely Montagu in the Western Cape. Archival and documentary sources are utilised to analyse the tourism development of this small town from its formal establishment in the early 1850s to the closing apartheid years during the late 1980s. It is shown that Montagu's rise was part of the wider growth of South Africa as a health destination which was anchored upon its assets of climate and mineral springs. The thermal springs of Montagu put the town on the tourist map resulting in its declaration as a health resort and emergence as a popular holiday destination. By the time of the apartheid period Montagu was becoming a more leisure-tourism dominated and a less health focussed destination.

Keywords: small towns, spa resorts, health, historical development, Montagu, South Africa

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INTRODUCTION

From a research perspective lower-order centres in the urban hierarchy such as small towns usually are the most neglected and undervalued (Nel et al., 2019; Mayer & Lazzeroni, 2022a). It is pointed out by Mayer and Lazzeroni (2022b) that one reason for their neglect is that small towns are viewed as ‘ordinary places’ and therefore they do not have the research allure which is attached to larger urban centres such as to world cities. Arguably, in the face of the large city research bias of urban scholars it is evidenced therefore that the literature on small towns historically has been “patchy” (Nel & Stevenson, 2019, p. 178). In recent years, however, a shift is taking place. Bański (2022) demonstrates that small towns are emerging as a key topic for scientific enquiry and currently the focus of a broad and multi-stranded literature with relevant works from the fields of geography, planning and spatial management. Within this scholarship one major theme surrounds the pressing challenges around small town economic development and marginalisation (Daniels, 1989; Nel & Rogerson, 2007; Nel & Stevenson, 2014; Drummond & Snowball, 2019; Stevenson & Nel, 2020; Drummond, 2021; Bański, 2022; Powe et al., 2022). Of note is that in a world of uneven geographical development the growth of writings about small towns occurs both across the contexts of the environments of the Global North and South (Bański, 2022; Mayer & Lazzeroni, 2022b).

For South Africa, at least until the mid-2000s, small town development issues have not been a significant research topic (Donaldson, 2018, 2021). Recent tourism geographical scholarship evidences, however, a rising interest about tourism’s potential as an economic driver for small town economic progress (Butler & Rogerson, 2016; Kotsiwe & Visser, 2019; Rogerson & Rogerson, 2019; Rogerson & Visser, 2020; Mhlabane et al., 2023; Rogerson, 2023). The overview of research on small towns in South Africa undertaken by Donaldson & Majiet (2023) confirms that an upturn has occurred in local scholarly attention to small towns. Leading research foci include issues around housing, infrastructure, local economic development and tourism (Donaldson, 2023). Nevertheless, Mabin (2021, p. 35) laments the continued neglect of the histories of the majority of small towns in South Africa and calls for “deeper consideration” of such historical issues. Arguably, the historical evolution of tourism in ‘ordinary’ small towns merits a place on the research agenda of literature concerning the ‘other half of urban tourism’, namely tourism in urban places of the Global South (Rogerson & Rogerson, 2021a). Within African tourism writings Pirie (2022) demonstrates that tourism’s past is a field of minority interest. In the specific case of South Africa there exist some research studies which explore historical facets of small town tourism (Davidson, 2000; Pandy & Rogerson, 2013; Rogerson, 2019; Rogerson & Rogerson, 2020; Drummond et al., 2021; Rogerson & Rogerson, 2021b, 2021c; Drummond et al., 2022; Rogerson & Rogerson, 2023; Sixaba & Rogerson, 2023; Drummond, 2024; van der Merwe, 2024).

One resource for tourism development in small towns is natural mineral springs which can be leveraged for their recreational as well as health properties. According to Rabbiosi and Ioannides (2022, p. 108) many spa towns are popular venues for visitors and some “boast a long history as

destinations”. The tourism histories of these spa resorts – especially their rise and fall – attracts a small international scholarship (Hembry, 1990; Bacon, 1998; Foley et al., 2011; Gordon, 2012; Walton, 2012, 2014; Steward, 2015; Frost & Laing, 2016; Thomson, 2018; Collinge, 2023). This paper therefore contributes to the international literature on spa resorts and the limited tourism histories of small town South Africa. According to Viljoen et al. (2018, p. 11) “in South Africa mineral springs are plentiful”; approximately 85 thermal springs exist but only one-third are used for tourism development. The list of small towns where mineral springs have been applied as assets for local tourism includes Aliwal North, Badplaas, Bela-Bela, Caledon, Calitzdorp, Cradock, Machadodorp, and Worcester. Importantly, the character of resort development linked to these centres varies relative to their size as well as the range of facilities on offer (Boekstein, 2012).

Against the above backcloth the aim in this paper is to recover the historical development of tourism in the small town of Montagu which is situated in South Africa’s Western Cape province. In a recent restructuring of local governments the town became part of the Langeberg Local Municipality, a locality with an economic base in which tourism spend assumes a critical role by accounting for nearly 10 percent of local Gross Domestic Product (Rogerson & Rogerson, 2021d). For Montagu specifically the major tourism asset remains the town’s hot springs but it includes also opportunities for adventure tourism, hiking, visits to wine farms and craft beer tourism. This paper will show that the historical tourism development pathway of this small town is inextricably interwoven into the early development of South Africa as a destination for health tourism and based upon its maximisation of the local asset of mineral springs. Montagu represents an example of the making of resorts for spa tourism in a Global South context.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The term ‘spa’ has experienced a change in usage over the past two decades associated with the growth of wellness tourism. The modern interpretation of the word spa refers to personal care services that can be viewed as pampering and would encompass massages, nail treatments and facials. In contemporary Anglo-American culture spas have become ubiquitous with large numbers of hotels and resorts claiming to be a ‘spa’ (Chambers, 2016). Nevertheless, what is viewed today as a spa is something radically different from the historical use of the term from the 17th to the beginning of the 20th century. In this paper we follow Walton (2012, p. 2) in understanding the word spa in the English language as “borrowed from the eponymous small town in what is now Belgium, and denoting a mineral spring at which seekers after improved health gather to ‘take the waters’, internally or externally, while enjoying leisure, entertainment and sociability”. This historical definition contrasts with more recent usage applied to hotels or leisure complexes which offer health, beauty, exercise and pampering programmes with often little or no connection to a local mineral spring.

Historically, spas have been founded on the existence of local natural features and build upon the fact of the idea of the spa has a long ancestry and wide diffusion that goes back to Roman times

(Hembry, 1990; Stobart, 2000; Walton, 2014). Health, leisure and social display were the essence of the historic spa which represented one of the earliest spaces for leisure-based tourism in Western culture (Walton, 2012). Brodie (2012, p. 125) pinpoints that by the early eighteenth century personal health was of key concern and that to deal with psychological disorders as well as chronic medical condition “many wealthy people headed to spas where they could receive treatment”. As a result it was observed that a distinctive leisure culture emerged as part of a growing economy of goods and services not just for the country’s limited number of aristocrats and gentry but also for the better-off members of the middle classes. According to Brodie (2012, p. 125) an “appetite for visits to spas was one aspect of this growing leisured class”. By the early 18th century in England the town of Bath was the pre-eminent spa resort. Walton (2011, p. 143) styles Bath as “the original fashionable English spa”. Spa towns represent one of the foundational sites for research on ‘therapeutic landscapes’, settings in which health informs the production of place (Gesler, 1992, 1993; Williams, 2010; Bell et al., 2018).

For Foley et al. (2011, p. 151) “spa towns have distinctive health and historical geographies”. In a seminal contribution Walton (2012) provides a historiographical overview of the development and significance of the mineral springs or spa resorts from the 18th century across the international spectrum. Spa culture diffused across Europe and from there to many countries and several continents (Bacon, 1998; Leonardi, 2010; Borsay, 2012; Walton, 2012; Steward, 2015). In nineteenth century Central Europe spas were important components of the medical market place as well as sites for recreational tourism (Steward, 2012). Walton (2011, p. 139) maintains that the historical spa resort remains quintessentially “a European phenomenon which has its counterparts in other parts of the world”. Gordon (2012) tracks the emergence and prominence of the French town of Vichy as an international spa tourist destination. Borsay (2012, p. 155) interrogates the ambivalent geographical and cultural status of spas in Britain and stresses that all such localities “supported in some measure an urbane culture, and were part of a wider process where from the late seventeenth century many towns were becoming centres of up-market health and leisure services”. Durie (2003) documents the beginnings of a spa movement in Scotland. Borsay (2012) traces the transition of many English small towns from destinations for their therapeutic qualities to something more than simply a health facility. As described by Borsay (2012, p. 156) one of the major reasons “that spas grew so rapidly from the late seventeenth century was that they were not only centres of medicinal treatment but were also at the forefront of the provision and development of a new culture of fashionable leisure and tourism that acquired a powerful hold on the minds of the elite and those who aspired to join them”. Cross (2012) shows from the USA experience that it was not only English resorts that diversified in character to become venues of elite socializing, gambling, shopping and even horse racing

Collinge (2023) highlights that in England the development of mineral springs as spa resorts mirrored in general the wider fashion for cold bathing that flourished in the 18th century and began to ebb in the early 19th century. It was evident that the promotion of spas in England on medical and therapeutic grounds was inadequate to ensure their long-term success as spa destinations as the larger spa resorts saw the socio-economic orientation of the spa town towards leisure with the accompanying

growth of theatres, concerts and casinos. Collinge (2023) turns the gaze away from the bigger and more famous English spa resorts such as Bath or Cheltenham, to explore the commercial development of “minor spas” as an under-represented area of scholarship. More broadly, Walton (2012, p. 6) draws attention to the research agenda of a global history of mineral spring resorts “much of which remains unwritten”.

Mineral springs in small town South Africa are part of the unrecorded scholarship of spa resorts. Although never as famous as the spa resorts of Europe or North America, from the late nineteenth century several small towns in South Africa evolved into resorts based on the local asset of medicinal hot springs. In an international historical review of spa resorts Walton (2012, p. 4) observed “the plentiful supply of mineral spring spa resorts in South Africa”. The research authored by Boekstein (2012) and by Boekstein and Spencer (2013) offered the first insights into the importance of thermal springs for tourism development in small town South Africa. In an historical analysis van Wyk (2013) investigates the social history of three thermal mineral resorts in the Western Cape and their influence on the development of the modern health and wellness sector. Most recently C. M. Rogerson and J. M. Rogerson (2023) analyse the rise, fall and readjustment that occurred in the tourism small town economy of Caledon associated with its mineral springs assets. The different individual historical pathways of development of South Africa’s spa resorts remain undocumented issues in small town tourism research. Attention turns now to scrutinise the evolution of Montagu as a small town spa tourism destination.

METHODS

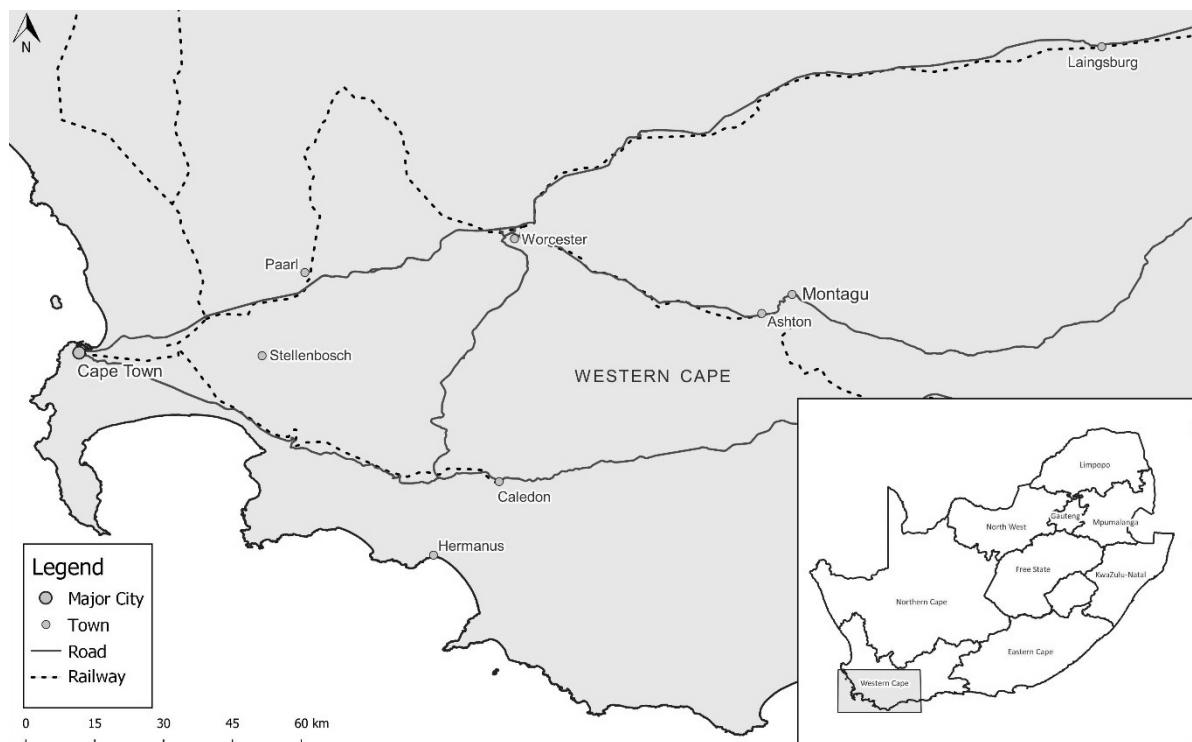
In terms of research methods an historical approach using archival sources is utilised. MacKenzie et al. (2020, p. 1470) point to the value-add of pursuing historical research and assert that “hospitality and tourism research has much to gain by incorporating historical methodologies”. Beyond the secondary sources used for the contextual literature review the research material in this paper draws from primary documentary material sourced at the National Library depot (Cape Town). In particular, the collection of the South African Railways and Harbours was mined as this organisation played a formative role in building an infrastructure for tourism development as well as publicising South Africa’s tourist attractions throughout the first part of the twentieth century (Foster, 2003). Further material for this study is drawn from the rich account of Montagu’s social history by van Wyk (2013) who excavated the local town archives. The time period under investigation is from the formal establishment of the town in the early 1850s to the closing apartheid years of the late 1980s.

RESULTS

The small town of Montagu is located 180 kilometres from Cape Town (Figure 1). The town was founded in 1851 albeit its settlement history and use of the local thermal springs has a much longer

ancestry. In common with most of the thermal springs in the Western Cape the indigenous Khoi people were its first users (Rindl, 1936). The beginnings of the commercialisation of the springs and of early tourism are associated with the 19th century emergence and popularisation of the Cape Colony as a health destination (Bell, 1993). In Britain South Africa gained a reputation as a health destination because of its climate. The belief was widespread in Britain and Europe that travel to places with dry air and high altitudes was beneficial to invalids suffering various ailments. As argued by Rogerson and Rogerson (2021b) the foundations of international tourism to South Africa are associated with ‘climate therapy’ and the country’s recognition as a health resort. Climate therapy was of particular interest for the treatment of consumption or tuberculosis. The perceived therapeutic regenerative qualities of South Africa’s climate became a driver for the development of a form of international tourism that pre-dated the country’s emergence as a leisure tourism destination. Guidebooks were popular in the nineteenth century and advertised the health attractions of the Cape Colony with mentions of the mineral springs. The healing properties associated with the thermal mineral springs reinforced South Africa’s status as a health destination and made the thermal springs a national asset and tourist attraction. Further, the healing powers attributed to South Africa’s climate “allowed the thermal springs to benefit from this as a form of healing” (van Wyk, 2013, p. 49).

Figure 1. Location of Montagu, South Africa



Source: Authors

Boekstein (2012) acknowledged that the earliest holiday resorts in South Africa were developed around mineral springs. The initial attempted commercialisation of the springs at the primitive baths established at Montagu occurred in the mid-19th century. van Wyk (2013) documents that the private

owners sought to create a haven both for invalids and healthy visitors to visit the spring and partake of its healing waters. Early progress was slow variously because of the town's difficulty of access, the primitive state of local accommodation and the poor condition of its bathing establishment with the first bathhouse commissioned only in 1873. Arguably, therefore the Montagu hot springs experienced an arrested development as compared to other resorts in the Cape Colony most notably Caledon (Rogerson & Rogerson, 2023). By the 1890s some signs of improvement were in evidence especially in terms of the state of accommodation and of the baths. Accessibility to the town was greatly enhanced with a new road link that was completed in 1877. More important was the improved railway access for the town. The 19th century expansion of the railway network across South Africa was a foundation for tourism development in many small towns (Rogerson & Rogerson, 2020). The town of Ashton, 10 kilometres from Montagu, was founded in 1887 and functioned as the station for a new railway line with travellers for Montagu transferred there initially by cart and later by motor-bus (South African Railways and Harbours, 1923). The baths were now potentially opened up to more visitor traffic.

Since the belief in the healing powers of thermal springs was still widespread with its improved access Montagu was among several thermal springs resorts visited by a trickle of international health tourists (van Wyk, 2013). The actual numbers of visitors was, however, insufficient to satisfy the private owners and at a time when the baths were in a deplorable state the property was sold. In 1907 the New Cape Central Railway purchased the Montagu Baths property and began improvements on the accommodation which was described formerly "as both meagre and primitive" (New Cape Central Railway, 1915, p. 53). In his account of Montagu's social history van Wyk (2013) stresses that the coming of the railway to Ashton was a turning point in the evolution of the thermal springs as the critical challenge of access to the town was resolved. It was now possible for Montagu to become competitive with the developments that had earlier occurred at Caledon with its Sanatorium attracting both international and domestic visitors (Rogerson & Rogerson, 2023). In the words of van Wyk (2013, p. 145) the purchase of the baths by the railway company "was the beginning of a whole new phase in the life of the Montagu thermal baths" and "this was the time that Montagu's baths was put on the map for once and for all". The railway company had a vision for modernisation and upgrading of the baths and the accommodation.

In the first years following the establishment of the Union of South Africa greater marketing took place of the attractions of Montagu. In 1910 the town and its hot springs featured as part of a tour of South-Western Cape in a guidebook issued by the New Cape Central Railway Limited (New Cape Central Railway, 1910). In the 1912 issue of the magazine *Motoring in South Africa* advertisements were placed by the railways and with agents of Thomas Cook – the innovator of package holidays – for visitors to frequent the town's hot springs and sanatorium. As is shown on Figure 2, the town was promoted as a "splendid health and holiday resort" offering tennis, golf, croquet and billiards beyond its core attraction of the mineral spring waters. Montagu was styled the 'Gastein of South Africa'. Following its upgrading it was proclaimed that "the hotel attached to the baths is run on up-to-date lines and modern conveniences" (New Cape Central Railway, 1915, p. 53). Further it was claimed "the

catering and accommodation are equal to anything in South Africa” (New Cape Central Railway, 1915, p. 53).

Figure 2. Marketing Montagu 1912

MONTAGU RADIO-ACTIVE HOT SPRINGS & SANATORIUM.

THE GASTEIN OF SOUTH AFRICA.

A SPLENDID HEALTH AND HOLIDAY RESORT.
(One hour from Ashton Station, N.C.C.R., through the Beautiful Cogman's Kloof.)

TENNIS. GOLF. CROQUET. BILLIARDS.

SWIMMING BATH.
50 x 20 feet. Radio-Active 110 deg. Fah.

The Waters have proved wonderfully efficacious in cases of Rheumatism, Sciatica, Gout, Gravel, Eczema, Paralysis of the Body or Limbs, Mental Over-Excitation and General Nervous Exhaustion, and Malta Fever.

PROF. HARN says: "I found the Waters strongly Radio-Active, more so than the Waters of Karlsbad and Baden Baden."

EXCELLENT ACCOMMODATION AND CUISINE. RESIDENT MASSEUSE.

Terms including use of Baths:
10/6 per day. £3 3s. per week. £12 12s. per month.

For further particulars apply to Tho: Cook & Son, Strand Street, Capetown; Smith's Street, Durban; and Joubert Street, Johannesburg; all South African and New Cape Central Railway Stations; the Manager, Montagu Baths; or
FRED DAWSON,
N.C.C.R., Robertson, C.P.

Tel. Ad. "GEM," Robertson Station.

Source: Montagu Radio-active Hot Spring and Sanatorium, 1912

The competitiveness of Montagu for health visitors as well as a growing number of leisure travellers was strengthened by promoting its ‘champagne’ air (van Wyk, 2013). It was emphasized that Montagu “offered a two-in-one deal, not only did it have thermal mineral waters with medical curative powers, it also had celebrated and renowned health giving semi-Karoo air, making it the perfect health resort, and therefore making it a strong contender for best spa in the Cape” (van Wyk, 2013, p. 173).

In 1915 the New Cape Central Railway issued a guide book covering Cape Town, the Garden Route and Port Elizabeth. It stated that “within a mile and a half of the village of Montagu, at the head of a marvellously fascinating kloof, are situate (*sic*) the celebrated Montagu radio-active Hot Springs, which for over one hundred and fifty years have been known locally for their miraculous curative properties” (New Cape Central Railway, 1915, p. 10). Much attention was given to the recent installation of radio-active peat baths at the Montagu Baths which were seen as on “the same principle as those at Franzensbad in Bohemia” (New Cape Central Railway, 1915, p. 12). It was stressed such peat baths were highly effective for acute cases of rheumatism. To further enhance the status of Montagu the old thermal baths were retitled as a Sanatorium, a development considered to raise the profile, interest and competitiveness of the town as a health destination (van Wyk, 2013).

Starting in the 1920s an increasing role was assumed by publicity material produced by South African Railways and Harbours (SAR & H) in marketing South Africa’s natural assets of medicinal springs. SAR & H produced a series of publications which showcased the country’s medicinal springs assets with a view to their tourism promotion possibilities especially for international tourists (South African Railways and Harbours, 1928; Rindl, 1936; Carlyle-Gall, 1937; Kent, 1952). The first

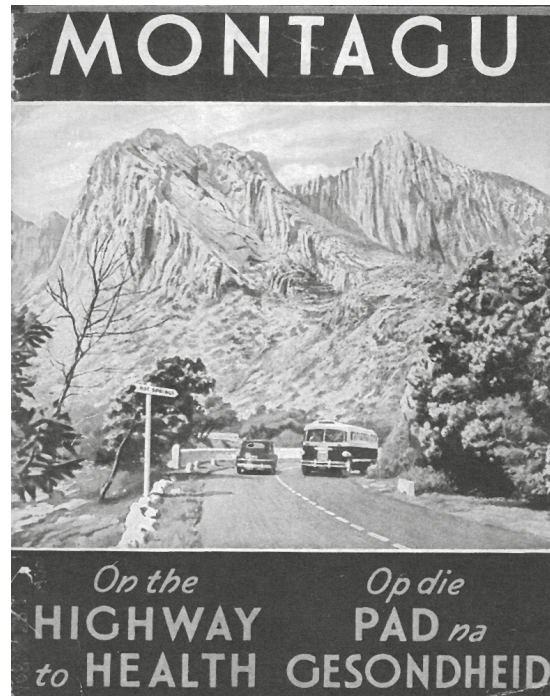
booklet in 1928 concentrated on those small towns possessed both with medical springs and “suitable accommodation for those who are anxious to benefit by the curative properties of the waters” (South African Railways and Harbours Administration, 1928, p. 3). Montagu was one of several small towns that was flagged for attention. Publicity material produced by SAR & H (1934, p. 102) noted Montagu as “where radio-active springs, a sanatorium and baths are a great attraction”. In 1923 the Montagu entry in the *Illustrated South African Hotel Guide*, valued by both domestic and overseas visitors, spoke of the improved transfer by regular motor-car service from Ashton station to Montagu. The road to the village was described as traversing “one of the most picturesque mountain passes in South Africa” (Union Publishing Agency, 1923, p. 113). The beauty of this area was deemed a ‘natural marvel’. Montagu’s famed hot springs were portrayed as situated in “a weird setting” where “it does not require a lively imagination to picture the springs as the overflowings of some stupendous cauldron, tended by witches in subterranean fastnesses” (South African Railways and Harbours, 1923, p. 60). It was pinpointed that “the accommodation has been enlarged and improved, electric light has been installed, a swimming bath has been added” (Union Publishing Agency, 1923, p. 113). The guidebook highlighted in addition to the mineral springs “wonderful curative properties” that “the surrounding scenery is mountainous and attractive, and the climate is dry and invigorating” (Union Publishing Agency, 1923, p. 113). Montagu was emerging now as serious rival to the more established Caledon Sanatorium with its promotion combining as a package the idea of a holiday with “elements of Karoo air, thermal mineral baths, good food and luxury accommodation” (van Wyk, 2013, p. 180).

According to van Wyk (2013, p. 181) this change to being a holiday and health resort turned the Montagu Sanatorium “into a replica of the European spas”. In 1934 after 27 years of ownership and the successful re-modelling of the Montagu Baths and Sanatorium the railway company sold the property to a private entrepreneur who further improved the property in terms of its entertainment offerings which were described as “an almost English spa theme, with its tennis- and croquet courts as well as the Tea room” (van Wyk, 2013, p. 184). In 1936 the town of Montagu was declared officially as a health resort because of its healthy climate, beautiful surroundings and calm atmosphere (Montagu Municipality and South African Railways, 1948, p. 9). In 1937 another booklet from the South African Railways once again gave mention to the town with the hot baths and sanatorium and with comparisons made to well-known European spa resorts. It was stated as follows: “Since early Dutch settlers at the Cape discovered them over a hundred and fifty years ago, these baths have held the reputation of possessing great curative properties. Comparisons were once more made to well-known European spa resorts. It was stated that the waters are authoritatively ranked as more highly active than those of Karlsbad and Baden-Baden, and are extensively patronized” (Carlyle-Gall, 1937, p. 96).

By the time of apartheid government, the ownership of the Sanatorium and property had passed into the hands of the local municipality. Tourism publicity material on the town in 1948 was produced jointly by the local municipality and the publicity department of South African Railways (Figure 3). The town was styled as a popular holiday resort as a result of “its health-giving, radio-active hot

springs, genial climate and highly attractive scenery” (Montagu Municipality and South African Railways, 1948, p. 2).

Figure 3. Marketing Montagu 1948



Source: Montagu Municipality and South African Railways, 1948

The attention of potential visitors was drawn to the area’s fascinating kloofs and that the environment of the town was “packed with scenic splendours and every kloof is a challenge to the intrepid mountaineer” (Montagu Municipality and South African Railways, 1948, p. 10). Nevertheless, the town’s core tourism asset was presented as its health-giving waters which the brochure portrayed as “a source of health and pleasure”. It was made clear that the radio-active hot springs with a temperature of 111.3 degrees Fahrenheit enjoyed “remarkable curative properties”. As usual comparisons were drawn with the waters of famous European spa towns. It was observed that the local water “is very soft and contains very little dissolved and undissolved solids” and further that the value of the radio-activity had been measured at 30.5 Mache Units.

Of great importance compared to European resorts was the much higher level of sunshine received at Montagu. The health giving properties of Montagu waters were claimed to be boosted by the “existence of almost uninterrupted sunlight”. Overall, it was stressed that the high levels of sunlight “adds considerably to the efficacy of the baths, and sunshine cures, midst quiet surroundings”. The claim was advanced that many “asthmatics who have visited Montagu during the winter months have found their health greatly improved by the dry climate” (Montagu Municipality and South African Railways, 1948, p. 9). In the last regard the tourism attractions of Montagu were captured as follows: “The visitor to the town is treated with traditional South African hospitality. He feels himself at once to be welcome and a kindly atmosphere is perennially abroad” (Montagu Municipality and

South African Railways, 1948, p. 11). Furthermore the visitor would be assured of a restful holiday amidst a countryside full of interest and could enjoy the comfort of the town's three well-appointed hotels "which attract a large clientele, especially during the winter months when the superb climate adds to the many other attractions in the town" (Montagu Municipality and South African Railways, 1948, p. 11). Another boost for the local tourism economy occurred in the 1950s when the Railway Administration transport services included Montagu as an overnight stop on one of its regular motor coach tours from Cape Town to visit the Garden Route. The Montagu stop involved also a tour of a fruit canning factory located at nearby Ashton (South African Railway News, 1954).

In 1962 the Montagu municipality partnered once more with South African Railways Publicity and Travel Department to release a further promotional booklet. The contents of this publication and its messaging are almost identical to that which was issued 14 years earlier. Under the title *Montagu and Its Famous Baths* the town was described as the "centre of a fertile and progressive agricultural, vine-growing and fruit-producing region, and known to visitors and tourists from many lands for the curative properties of its famous hot springs" (Montagu Municipality and South African Railways, 1962, p. 1). Montagu was proclaimed to be "one of the ideal winter resorts of the Cape Province" (Montagu Municipality and South African Railways, 1962, p. 1). The town's strengths were listed as its "genial climate" and easy accessibility from Ashton, the railway station which served Montagu and from where a South African Railways road transport service could transfer the growing numbers of visitors, both domestic and international. Nevertheless, it was reiterated Montagu's "most valuable asset is, without doubt, its radio-active hot springs" with their healthful properties (Montagu Municipality and South African Railways, 1962, p. 12). The promotional literature concluded as follows: "Whether you come here to take the cure of the medicinal baths, or simply to enjoy the many scenic splendours, Montagu will provide you with a thoroughly restful holiday in a setting full of interest, abounding in charm and beauty and pervaded with tranquil picturesqueness" (Montagu Municipality and South African Railways, 1962, p. 16).

Under the guidance of the local municipality Montagu and its famous baths continued to flourish as a small town tourist destination into the 1970s. Arguably, the resort became ever more tourist-driven and popular as it was promoted as a family holiday destination. Montagu had transitioned from being a spa resort to become a health and holiday resort where tourists might "take the cure in the thermal baths, walk and admire the natural beauty of the surroundings and experience a peaceful and pleasant holiday with their families" (van Wyk, 2013, p. 188). The addition of a municipal caravan park aligned with the 1960s and 1970s growth of caravanning by domestic tourists thereby expanding the cheaper accommodations options available in the town (Rogerson & Rogerson, 2021c).

The improvements made to the resort by the municipality and the economic health of tourism in Montagu were shattered, however, in January 1981 when the catastrophic Laingsburg flood took place (Pietersen, 2018). This flood event in the semi-arid Karoo region is generally considered one of South Africa's worst ever natural disasters in terms of loss of lives and environmental damage. It impacted a wide geographical area and including the small town of Montagu. The local tourist attractions were

destroyed swiftly as flood waters swept through Montagu producing crippling damage to the locality and its surrounds. The core assets of a tourism-dependent small town were obliterated threatening the town's local economic base. Adaptation and reconstruction of the town following the flood occurred through private sector investment. Although the town's thermal waters remained its main attraction, product readjustment occurred with a wellness spa at the newly opened (in 1985) Avalon Springs Hotel. Further changes to the local tourism economy took place in 1988 when Avalon Springs became a time share resort, one of the few in South Africa which was also marketed as a wellness resort (cf. Pandy & Rogerson, 2013).

CONCLUSIONS

Tourism in 'ordinary' small towns merits a more elevated position on the research agenda of urban and tourism studies (Donaldson, 2018, 2021; Mayer & Lazzeroni, 2022a, 2022b). In recent times some progress has been recorded on researching the contemporary challenges of tourism development in small towns. Nevertheless, the historical evolution of small town tourism remains sparsely documented. Spa resort development is one strand of research in tourism history, itself an underdeveloped terrain in the literature on tourism in sub-Saharan Africa (Pirie, 2022). This examination of the historical tourism pathway of Montagu contributes to the minimal Global South scholarship which investigates the evolution and adaptive readjustment of spa resorts. In addition, it addresses the specific plea made by Mabin (2021) for a deeper consideration of the unwritten histories of small town South Africa.

It has been shown that in their early development South African spa resorts primarily centred on healing and their health properties rather than leisure. This development trajectory is somewhat different to the evolution of many of the spa resorts in Europe and North America that have come under historical research scrutiny (Walton, 2014; Frost & Laing, 2016). The establishment and rise of Montagu was part of the broader growth of South Africa as a health destination based upon its dual assets of climate and mineral springs. As van Wyk (2013, p. 192) states the thermal baths put Montagu on the tourist map and "it was thanks to the natural wonders Montagu possessed that the town was declared a health resort and became an extremely popular holiday destination". By the time of the apartheid years (1948–1991) the locality of Montagu was becoming a more leisure tourism dominated and correspondingly less health-focussed destination. In general the tourism development pathway of this small town exhibits a different trajectory to that recorded for other South African spa resorts (van Wyk, 2013; Rogerson & Rogerson, 2023). In the last regard this finding affirms the continued relevance of pursuing locality-based research investigations which can uncover the specific distinctive historical pathways of tourism in small towns.

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