

Jo'burg by bike

For most visitors, Johannesburg is simply a gateway to destinations like Kruger National Park, but *Philippa Jacks* finds there's plenty worth stopping over for during 24 hours in the city

always try to learn some of the local lingo when visiting a foreign country. The problem on my bicycle tour of Soweto in Johannesburg is that there are 11 different languages to choose from, as well as several dialects and impossible clicking sounds.

Once we're kitted out with bikes and helmets, our cycle guide NK runs through "Soweto Survival 101", teaching us various ways to say hello on our ride through the township: "Sani bonani" (Zulu); "Dumela" (Sotho), "Ndaa" (Venda) and "Molweni" (Xhosa).

Our group sets off in a slightly wobbly convoy, stopping every few minutes for NK to explain how Soweto (South West Township) was created under apartheid, and how its current population - estimated at up to two million people - now live.



Soweto school kids come to say hello

We stop at Hector Pietersen Memorial to hear about the 1976 student uprising which led to 500 being killed, and ride down Ngakane Street - formerly home to not one but two Nobel Peace Prize winners: Nelson Mandela and Desmond Tutu.

We also stop at a "shebeen" (pub-shack) and share a drink of umqombothi (a rather vile-tasting sour beer made from maize) with the locals. We're greeted by cheerful smiles as we make our way through Soweto but I soon forget the various greetings NK taught us and, convinced that I am offending people in several different languages, I resort to high-fiving and shaking hands with the kids instead.

The real South Africa

Johannesburg does not top many visitors' wish-lists on a holiday to South Africa. High crime rates mean most tourists fly straight through to Kruger National Park as fast as they can.

A cycle tour through one of the world's most notorious townships won't appeal to everyone, but I find it an engaging way to get my head around the culture and history of Jo'burg, and of South Africa itself. And as one of a dozen cyclists, and with our guide so recognised and respected in the township, I feel safe.

Tourists don't normally use public transport in Jo'burg, so hiring a driver-cum-tour guide for the day is the best way to pack in the main attractions.



Clockwise from top left: the Old Fort Prison Complex at Constitution Hill; a Motswaledi school; a Mandela portrait at the prison; and hearing "Soweto Survival 101" on the cycle ride

After cycling, our driver takes my friend and I to Constitution Hill, site of South Africa's Constitutional Court, and Jo'burg's notorious Old Fort Prison. Nelson Mandela and Mahatma Gandhi were just two of the thousands of prisoners that were housed here for political dissention, or simply not having one of the pass books that all black Africans were obliged to carry during apartheid. The old prison is a now an excellent museum, with chilling written and oral accounts by former inmates, but the museum is calming and beautiful, and sends a message of hope.

Next our driver drops us off for a short tour of Motswaledi, a settlement of 20,000 within Soweto, which I don't enjoy as much as the cycle tour. A young man from the settlement gives us a 15-minute tour, and invites us to look inside the home of a local family. I don't feel as safe as I did on the cycle tour, and there is a little awkwardness over how much we ought to "donate" to the lady we visit. We feel intimidated by the craft-sellers here too; we are much happier shopping for souvenirs

in the huge craft market, a few minutes' walk from our hotel.

In the evening we venture out for a drink at a bar in the Rosebank shopping mall. Relaxing on a white sofa in a futuristic bar playing European dance-music is a marked contrast to the emotional sight-seeing we did earlier in the day, but feels just as important in appreciating the many facets of modern-day Jo'burg.

I have to confess, however, to preferring a chilled glass of chenin blanc to the umqombothi.

Book it: A two-hour Soweto Bicycle Tour costs around £27. Cox & Kings admits few clients spend much time in Jo'burg but can arrange half or full-day tours.

I stayed at Crowne Plaza's Rosebank hotel, a fresh and funky hotel with a great restaurant in one of the city's safer areas. South Africa Airways has London-Johannesburg lead-in rates from £724 return in January 2012.

- sowetobicycletours.com
- coxandkings.co.uk
- southafrica.net
- therosebank.co.za
- flysaa.com