

Big, Bad, J'burg

The stories of Johannesburg had affected my psyche. The stories of Johannesburg - murder capital of the world. The stories of anyone with any background going to any Johannesburg hospital and being able to work as a nurse because of all the victims of violent crime. These were the stories in my mind as I traveled by taxi from the airport located in the eastern part of Johannesburg to a family I was staying with in the western part of Johannesburg. When I arrived at the Lombard residence, I was greeted by a black servant outside a very nice house, which was surrounded by barbed wire and security. This image summarizes South Africa: wealth, crime and ongoing racial tensions.

While crime is ever present, the major attractions in Johannesburg illustrate the importance of race relations in South Africa. Visitors enter the Apartheid Museum through one of two turnstiles, one designated for “whites” and another for “blacks”. The apartheid theme continues throughout the museum as there are old propaganda movies created by the white-controlled National Party, interviews with Nelson Mandela and Steve Biko, old political posters and other graphic photos. Soweto (Southwest Township) is the biggest and historically the most important township in Johannesburg. This township was the location of a 1976 black uprising and still suffers from a lack of electricity, clean water, as well as poor housing. I visited one of the government sponsored shacks in which a woman and her children were living. Her husband had just died of HIV/AIDS, one of five million South Africans currently suffering from the disease. While visiting Soweto one can visit Vilakazi Street, which is the only street that was home to two Nobel Prize winners (Desmond Tutu and Nelson Mandela). Nearby is the monument to Hector Pieterse, who was a black student



killed after protesting the government mandated use of Afrikaans, the white Boer language, at schools.

Cape Town illustrates the wealth of South Africa, as well as the variety of her residents. More and more Hollywood movies are being produced here and the value of housing continues to rise. There is a mountain, Table Mountain, in the middle of the city that allows for great views of the Atlantic Ocean and Granger Bay. While

walking to the mountain, one can see the expensive property that comes with wealth; one of the Bush twins apparently bought property in Cape Town. The city is less tense than Johannesburg and walking around at night is generally safe. The bars are fun and there is a variety of restaurants serving anything from Afghani to Mexican food. The Bo-Kaap Museum, located in the largely Muslim Bo-Kaap district, depicts the life of Muslims in that district.

However, the racial wounds of South Africa's near past are still evident in Cape Town, most notably at Robben Island. The island is a short boat ride from the city and it is where resistance leader and former president Nelson Mandela was held for 27 years. The island currently has some residents, but most visit the prisons in which political prisoners, along with violent criminals, were held under the apartheid regime. The tour guides are all ex-political prisoners; my guide was a student protestor who was arrested and imprisoned. The guides discussed the details of prison life: prisoners were further subdivided into coloreds (largely from the Indian subcontinent) and Bantu (the blacks), with the coloreds receiving more food and living in better conditions. The cells are nondescript, with Mandela's being just a typical cell like everyone else's.

As part of the Robben Island tour, visitors see the limestone quarries where the prisoners worked nearly every day. Mandela has requested no flash photographs be taken of him because his vision was impaired due to the sun bouncing off the limestone that he scraped for 27 years. Mandela and other resistance leaders met at a small cave at the quarry site to discuss resistance plans, and later some sympathetic white guards joined them. A small pile of rocks stands as a simple memorial, placed there by Mandela and other black leaders at a recent reunion.

Other museums in Cape Town illustrate race divisions either explicitly or more subtly. The District Six Museum details how the mixed-race suburb of District Six was destroyed by the apartheid government as part of their plan to keep the races separate. The National Gallery houses a recreation of Mandela's inauguration day as well as a sculpture of a black Moses. The Castle of Good Hope was built in the 1600's and is still a military base, but also includes a look at South Africa's colonial history and more recent apartheid system.

To the east of Cape Town is the Garden Route, a beautiful stretch of coastline along the Indian Ocean. Many places are more upscale, including the city of Knysna. There are several activities here, including forest walks, canopy tours, quad biking and abseiling. I just rented a bike and rode out to The Heads, which is where Knysna meets the ocean.



If one visits Africa, one has to visit the animals. One of the most frequently visited reserves is Kruger National Park near Nelspruit in the eastern part of South Africa. One can sleep in tents in the park just twenty meters away from grunting hippos as they call to each other. During the game drives, it is possible to see elephants, rhinos, lions, giraffes, jackals, warthogs, African buffaloes, gnus, zebras and

several types of antelopes. The park is over 200 miles long and 40 miles wide. Visitors could easily spend a week there, but a couple days would suffice, observing yet another African buffalo does get monotonous.

There are other areas in the eastern part of South Africa worth visiting for a day or two. Some people stay in Pretoria instead of Johannesburg as it is safer, but it is still a big city with many attractions. Bloemfontein serves as the judicial capital; it is one of three South African capitals. Furthermore, there are two independent countries located within South Africa's borders, Lesotho and Swaziland. Both of these countries were able to stay independent from both colonial rule and the military campaigns of Shaka Zulu. Lesotho is known for her highlands as many visitors trek in this area. The capital is Maseru and is not terribly interesting, but close by is the Ha Baroana rock paintings located in a gorge just outside the small university town of Roma. Swaziland's capital is Mbabane and is also nondescript but there are several reserves in Swazi worth visiting.

South Africa may be surprising to those who visit. The infrastructure and housing quality are similar to European standards. Crime is an issue but using typical safeguards will help. Considering the circumstances, race relations are stable, helped out by outgoing white leader De Klerk's and incoming black leader Mandela's decision to work together after the 1994 elections. One of the first signs of cooperation was Mandela's decision to wear a rugby jersey at a national rugby match; rugby is considered the "white" sport, while soccer is the "black" sport. The country's progress has continued, as exemplified by the decision to let South Africa host the 2010 World Cup.