

Johannesburg is South Africa's largest city and home to more than 12 million trees.

JONATHAN HEGER / SHUTTERSTOCK



# South African Odyssey

*A journey to Johannesburg*

By Rob Dunton

**Major cities are often situated** on lakes, navigable rivers or by the coast. Not so for Johannesburg. Located in the softly undulating tree-filled terrain of the province of Gauteng—"place of gold" in the Sotho language—South Africa's largest and wealthiest city owes its location to gold. Traces of the precious metal were discovered here in 1886, and by 1889, Johannesburg had grown to become the largest town in the region.

With the discovery of gold came many of the region's woes as well as fortunes.

Today, Johannesburg (locals call it Joburg or Jozi) has evolved into a paradoxical mix of lush suburbs and shack communities; stylish restaurants and simple pubs known as "shebeens." While the Soweto district and the Apartheid Museum are two of the most popular tourist destinations, there is much more

to see and experience here.

The city has a wealth of exceptional hotels and restaurants, lively pubs and clubs, and some of the best shopping for traditional and contemporary African art and fashion in the world. Within an easy day's drive are opportunities to explore active diamond and gold mines, the administrative capital of Pretoria, and a stunning animal preserve, nestled in an

extinct volcano, that showcases elephants, rhinos, leopards, lions and buffaloes.

Johannesburg's energy, diversity, contradictions and history make it a fascinating place to visit. With so much to see, my lifelong travel buddy Scott Vickery and I prearranged a driver through well-reputed Lords Travel & Tours, and when we arrive, Dukes is waiting for us.

Dukes navigates Johannesburg's network of backstreets and sprawling highways like a human GPS, and soon we are walking down a shady, tree-lined street toward our hotel in the quiet suburbs.

The city is home to more than 12 million trees, said to be the world's largest man-made forest, and the planting continues:

Soweto is set to receive about 200,000 new trees, and many of its dirt and gravel soccer fields will have new grass, irrigation and goalposts installed. These enhancements, in addition to others—such as the upgraded international airport and the new rail-and-bus system that will connect a broad swath of neighborhoods to the airport, central Johannesburg, the Sandton business district and Pretoria—are all signs of the city's investment in preparation for the 2010 FIFA World Cup soccer tournament June 11–July 11.

Scott and I check in at The Peech, a snazzy boutique hotel in the upscale Melrose district. We stroll past the plunge pool to our beautifully appointed room, and unwind with a fine meal at the hotel's bistro: grilled prawns with a tequila-mayonnaise dip, blue cheese–stuffed beef fillet on butternut chips with brandy sauce, five-spice duck with polenta and a honey-soy-mushroom sauce, and for dessert, poached bananas with toasted almonds and vanilla ice cream drizzled with Amarula cream liqueur.

Early the next morning after a complimentary breakfast nearly as rich as our dinner, Dukes takes us to Jozi's historic core through the suburbs of Sandton and



The Apartheid Museum educates visitors through vivid displays.

DAVID BUZZARD / ALAMY

Melrose, which are lined with gleaming office towers and shopping centers.

Our first destination is Constitution Hill, a national heritage site that encapsulates much of South Africa's turbulent history. Once a fort that was built to protect the Boers—South Africans of Dutch or Huguenot descent—from British invasion during the second Boer War, it was later converted to a prison that held political activists such as Nelson Mandela. As we walk past the prison cells, Scott and I get a sense of how hard life must have been here. The complex has since come full circle and is now home to the highest court in South Africa, the Constitutional Court.

We make our way next to the Apartheid Museum, situated near the Gold Reef City casino and amusement park just outside the city. The Bauhaus-style museum packs an experiential punch as it educates visitors about the former governmental policy of segregation

that favored the white minority at the expense of the black majority. For example, as we approach the entrance, Scott and I are handed cards that, through luck of the draw, assign our race and how we will enter the museum, as White or Non-white. The different entrances provide dramatically different perspectives. Inside, we see large photographs and detailed biographies of residents from Jozi's apartheid era, a diverse mix of immigrants who came in search of

## SIDE TRIPS

The side trips surrounding Johannesburg are, for many, the best reason to visit.

### CULLINAN DIAMOND MINE

Guests on the underground tour of the Cullinan Diamond Mine (now owned by De Beers) see a diamond mine in full production. For those who don't want to go underground, surface tours are also available. Visitors have the opportunity to view the excavation, cutting and polishing of rough diamonds, and can buy diamonds on site. Cullinan is one of the world's most-celebrated diamond mines, earning its place in history with the discovery of the Cullinan Diamond in 1905, the largest gem-quality diamond ever found (3,106 carats, rough). This single stone was the source of more than a quarter of the world's diamonds that weigh more than 400 carats—some are included in the British Crown Jewels. A 168-carat white diamond was found at the Cullinan mine on November 26, 2009, and sold for \$6.28 million. The mine is also the world's only significant source of the rare and highly valuable blue diamonds. The elevator cage goes down at 9 A.M. (sharp) to level 763 meters, under the big hole of Cullinan, and comes up at 11:45 A.M.

### LOCAL RESERVES & RESEARCH CENTERS

Visiting nearby nature reserves and educational centers supports valuable breeding programs that keep many species alive in the



The Ann van Dyk Cheetah Centre breeds cheetahs and other wildlife.

wild. These centers include the Lion Park (visitors can pet baby lions and giraffes), the Rhino and Lion Park, and most notably The Ann van Dyk Cheetah Centre in De Wildt. Ann van Dyk managed to breed cheetahs successfully in captivity, and the center now breeds other endangered African wildlife. The educational program lasts three hours and is an hour's drive from Johannesburg.

COURTESY: THE ANN VAN DYK CHEETAH CENTRE





WALTER KNIRR, COURTESY: CITY OF JOHANNESBURG

Visitors to Zoo Lake row across the calm water.



gold or to support the mining industry. Descriptions of the disparate treatment, segregation and laws that were enacted to maintain the power and class structure are posted in large print. Dramatic film footage of the time, riot-police tanks and metal confinement cages are also on display.

The apartheid system seems to me more like Orwellian fiction than anything that could have actually existed. After three all-too-short hours, Scott and I leave for Soweto.

The name Soweto is derived from South Western Townships, the collective name given to a group of townships with a population of 2 million to 4 million (census data

are approximate). The area was created as an enclave for native Africans who worked in white-owned mines, factories and homes. Like metropolitan Johannesburg that surrounds it, Soweto is in a constant state of flux. If Dukes hadn't pointed out a small white sign marked "Soweto," neither Scott nor I would have known we'd arrived.

The first neighborhood we visit comprises comfortable homes on paved streets. We head to Wandies Place for lunch, a local shebeen that was once an unlicensed pub and is now a popular restaurant for visitors to Soweto.

Set near the corner of a dusty street, the nondescript building houses simple tables and chairs, and offers an all-you-can-eat buffet with local flavor: mutton stew, *mogodu* (tripe), cooked chicken, oxtail stew, a variety of salads and starches (rice, dumplings and boiled hominy), and dessert (ice cream, fruit salad and cake).

While we dine, Dukes rings PJ, a native Sowetan who delivers an insider's perspective on the Soweto tours for Lords Travel, and after lunch we bid Dukes adieu for the afternoon and go with our new guide.

As PJ drives us deeper into Soweto's Diepkloof neighborhood, I am surprised to see

## PILANESBERG NATIONAL PARK

The closest game park to Johannesburg is Pilanesberg National Park, a two-hour drive away. The park has some excellent lodges for multiday trips, or one can visit for the day. There are nearly 200 kilometers of excellent roads for either self-drive or guided-drive tours, and professional guides operate within the park. The park is situated in an extinct volcano between the dry Kalahari and wetter, shrubby grassland, commonly referred to as "bushveld." This provides a unique overlap of mammals, birds and vegetation. Pilanesberg offers excellent wildlife sightings, including all of Africa's "Big Five" (elephant, both black and white rhino, leopard, lion, buffalo), as well as giraffe, zebra, hippo and crocodile.

## PRETORIA

Pretoria is South Africa's scenic administrative capital. More picturesque than Johannesburg, it has many parks and gardens. Visit Church Square with its many interesting colonial buildings. The Ou Raadsaal (Old Council Chambers) served as the first parliament of South Africa under Paul Kruger, who was the president of the old South African Republic during the second

Boer War (he ended up living in self-imposed exile in Switzerland). See the post office, supreme court, Café Riche, Tudor Chambers, the old Reserve Bank building, the old Grand Hotel building and the Union Building (government administration, president's office).

A visit to either the Paul Kruger House or the Melrose House provides insight into the colonial lifestyle of the upper class in South Africa. And the Voortrekker Monument, which is visible from many parts of the city, honors the Dutch pioneers. —R.D.



Pretoria's parliament buildings are visible behind a statue of Paul Kruger.

PETER HORREE / ALAMY

## 2010 WORLD CUP SOCCER

Nine cities will host matches for the FIFA World Cup 2010. Johannesburg will have matches in two stadiums (Ellis Park Stadium and the new Soccer City Stadium). The opening ceremony (June 11) and the final match (July 11) will both be held at Soccer City Stadium. Nearby Pretoria will host six of the matches, including South Africa vs. Uruguay on June 16 and U.S.A. vs. Algeria on June 23. Tickets are available from the FIFA Website: [www.fifa.com](http://www.fifa.com).

Soccer City Stadium will host the opening ceremony and final match.



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scores of polished S-Class Mercedes and 7-series BMWs driving to and from increasingly large homes—some veritable mansions.

Soweto has many registered millionaires, and most residents drive luxury cars, PJ says, responding to our surprise. He adds that because of the area's high rate of unemployment, he believes that many of the cars have been stolen from outside Soweto.

As we make our way down Vilakazi Street in Soweto's Orlando neighborhood, PJ states with pride, "We are driving on the only street in the world that has been home to two Nobel Peace Prize winners." Soon we pass an unadorned gray house, the home of Archbishop Desmond Tutu and his wife, Leah, and a few blocks later, we see the former home of Nelson Mandela. "Professional soccer players and famous musicians live here, too," PJ says.

We drive a short distance to one of the poorer parts of Soweto, an informal settlement called Motsoaledi (named after Elias Motsoaledi, who was arrested with Nelson Mandela in 1963). Here, people live in shelters built of corrugated tin and scrap, the type of settlement that was the backdrop of the powerful 2006 Academy Award-winning film *Tsotsi*. Between the humble dwellings, children play soccer in dirt alleys while women hang laundry and men hand-form charcoal for cooking and heat. Milk crates and plastic buckets function as seats and tables, and perforated oil drums perform double duty as both stove and hearth.

Late in the afternoon, we reconnect with Dukes and ask him to recommend a dining experience that is unique to Johannesburg. "You have to try Moyo," he says without a pause. Moyo means "heart" or "soul" in Swahili, and is a Joburg institution known for its wide range of African cuisine and decor, and live African music. En route, we swing by 44 Stanley, an urban-chic industrial complex from the 1930s that has been converted into a hip collection of specialty boutiques, restaurants and galleries. After window-shopping, we continue north past Johannesburg's zoo and arrive at a lush park surrounding

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Zoo Lake. Families stroll by as the warm glow of dusk illuminates the trees and lake.

When we arrive at Moyo it is buzzing. The outdoor eating area has a Bedouin/Moroccan feel, with relaxing lounge chairs. A broad array of patrons includes working professionals and an international crowd. Inside, different sections are decorated to reflect other parts of Africa, while Xhosa tribal women walk past, singing traditional songs. Once we're seated, an elegant woman in a colorful tunic arrives and pours rosewater to wash our hands, then returns to paint our faces in an artistic pattern of white dots, a tradition of the Masai.

The menu reads like a "Best of African Cuisine." I order a North African stew seasoned with coriander, ginger, cinnamon, cumin and saffron. Scott contemplates the grilled ostrich and the Zanzibar fish burger, but decides on the South African venison *bobotie* (a mild, sweet curry).

As we dine, Scott and I reflect on the day. Since we awoke, we feel as though we've visited three different worlds: the contemporary world of Sandton and Melrose; vibrant and struggling Soweto; and now pastoral Zoo Lake Park. Around us are people of many ethnicities and cultures, a gathering that could not have occurred here 50 years ago. Yet, tonight, in ever-evolving Johannesburg, Scott and I sit enchanted by the blend of flavors, sounds and styles of Africa as we begin to plan our return—for a month next time—to encounter more of what this amazing country has to offer. 🏠

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