

JOHANNESBURG UNDER AFRICAN SKIES

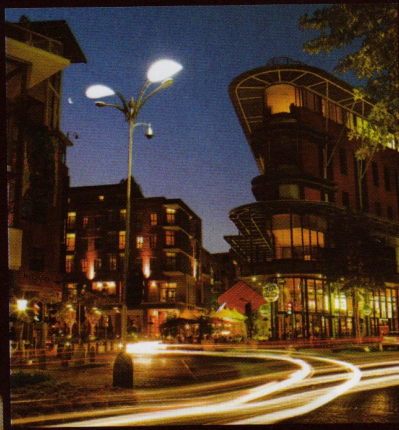
Jo Caird visits South Africa to investigate Johannesburg's cultural rebirth

Let's not beat about the bush – Johannesburg has a bit of a reputation problem. When I told friends I was going, most made 'are you sure it's safe?' faces, while the man next to me on my outbound journey intoned worrying crime statistics until the in-flight entertainment began. But while it's undeniably the case that Joburg is more dangerous than, say, Padstow, crime rates have been falling for years now – and as long as you take sensible precautions (the kind you would take in any major city) you'll be fine.

Johannesburg's unfortunate reputation, along with the fact that Cape Town is better known as a city destination, means that visitors to South Africa tend to pass through on their way elsewhere or skip the city altogether. It won't be this way for long, though – Jozi is a city on the up. After checking in at the Peech Hotel, a boutique establishment with a gorgeous garden in one of Joburg's well-to-do northern suburbs, I travel to Newtown to get my bearings on a walking tour of the cultural quarter. Joburg's Central Business District (CBD) was a no-go area for a long time, but a decade of urban regeneration has borne fruit, bringing money back into the city centre and transforming it into

a vibrant, creative place.

A five-minute stroll takes you past three museums, a handful of trendy bars, a theatre and a dance venue. It's quiet in the daytime, but when I return on Saturday night the area is buzzing. It's after 2am when I head back to the Peech that night, but there's no sign of the fun stopping



at DJ bar Ko'spotong, and young clubbers are queuing out the door of the Bassline.

When it comes to urban regeneration in the CBD, however, Braamfontein and Maboneng are the places to watch. I head to Braamfontein for

its Neighbourhoods Market, a funky collection of food stalls and local clothing and jewellery designers that sets up every Saturday in a multi-storey car park. I wander around sipping a glass of South African chenin blanc and nibble on samosas, grilled halloumi, bratwurst, waffles and ice cream, buying a vintage playsuit while I'm at it. There's a market with a similar feel at Maboneng on Sundays; it's part of Arts on Main, a recent development that includes an airy gallery space, a couple of designer shops, a terrace bar and Canteen, a very nice brasserie whose tables spill out into a courtyard filled with olive trees. My lunch is luxuriously laid-back – a holiday from my holiday – and a post-prandial perusal of Main Street reveals several more eateries that go straight on to my 'to try' list – as well as The Living Room, a breezy terrace bar with great views over the urban landscape.

But it's not just the centre of Johannesburg that's worth exploring. Not far from my hotel are two of Jozi's most respected commercial art galleries. The Goodman and Everard Read are both open to the public and well worth a visit, whether or not you're considering investing in the South African art market. And don't miss Circa, the Everard Read's newest space, an extraordinary optical illusion of a building

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that hosts changing exhibitions of world class contemporary art. On the day of my gallery visits, I stop for a bite of lunch at Tasha's, a buzzy eatery in the local area with an enormous menu that includes everything from liver on toast to fish and chips. My salad Niçoise is delicious but so generously proportioned that I am unable to finish it – not the first or the last time I am defeated by a plate of food this week. Further north still is Liliesleaf, where Nelson Mandela and the other grandees of the African National Congress were arrested in 1963 for plotting the overthrow of the apartheid regime. This interactive museum, whose exhibits include audio accounts of those involved, as well as the room where Mandela lived in disguise as a hired man prior to his arrest, is very sensitively curated and deeply moving. I visit the Apartheid Museum the next day to try to put this important episode in the country's troubled history in its full context. The two experiences, though not exactly pleasant, are vital for anyone hoping to understand modern South Africa.

Another South African essential is barbecue – called braai in Afrikaans, it's a national passion and features on almost every menu I come across in Joburg. It's a speciality at Moyo, a wonderfully quirky restaurant where a make-up artist paints

delicate designs on diners' faces as they wait for their food. My friend and I opt to share two of the braai options on offer: her boerewors – or farmers' sausages – were rich and meaty, as different from a British sausage as you could get, while my fillet steak was one of the best I've ever had. Most people who come to Johannesburg also head out on safari, but for those who can't spare the time, there are opportunities to get up close and personal with animals on a day trip from the city. At Lion Park, which is somewhere between a reserve and a zoo, I am taken on a guided drive through enclosures containing herbivores, lions, cheetahs and wild dogs.

It's not quite the savannah, but our guide is very knowledgeable and the benefit of a place like this is that you're guaranteed animal action: out on safari proper you can go hours with only wildebeest for company. Another thrilling perk is the chance to spend time in the lion cub enclosure. I won't soon forget the all-too-brief minutes I spent with these magnificent animals as they dozed in the shade. Not far from here is the Cradle of Humankind UNESCO site, where evidence has been found of some of the earliest human and pre-human activity. I wander, awe-struck, through the Sterkfontein Caves, gazing at ancient stalactites and stalagmites and an eerie

underground lake that lies silent and still in the darkness. Back in the city the following day I take a guided cycle tour through Soweto, once one of South Africa's most infamous townships and now essentially a suburb of Joburg. Parts of it are still very poor and there are certainly areas it would be inadvisable for tourists to visit, but much of Soweto is now comfortably middle-class and it's fascinating to have my expectations of such a place confounded.

My final evening in Joburg begins with a 'sundowner' cocktail at recently opened boutique hotel 54 on Bath. I've truly embraced South Africa's sundowner tradition this week, sampling old school colonial style at the Polo Bar at the Westcliff Hotel and contemporary elegance at the San Deck at the Sandton Sun Hotel. All three venues have fantastic views over the city, but 54 on Bath – with its garden terrace – is my favourite. As I watch the sun set and the full moon rise over this sprawling city, it strikes just how much more of Johannesburg there is still to discover.

The Peech Hotel; +27 11 537 9797) from £144 per room, per night (based on a bed & breakfast basis). thepeech.co.za