

Neal McKenna

PO Box 6505, Cresta Postal Station, 2118
Johannesburg, South Africa

Telephone 011-782-2869
Cell: 072-554-3561
e-mail: neal.mckenna@gmail.com



The Urban Walkabout

– It's Like Nothing Else!

© November 2005

– by Neal McKenna

Tourism – it's the golden goose every nation wants to have nesting in its backyard. And why not? For the most part, it is a nonpolluting, self-replicating resource that only improves with development. When you really think about it, people have been tourists ever since the first wheels were attached to an axle. Today, with the Baby Boom Generation approaching retirement, a lot more people are taking to the seas and skies, primed to visit far-off, exciting and exotic locales like Johannesburg.

First, there was plain old tourism, then came agricultural tourism, ecotourism, medical tourism and now, there is *social development tourism*. Say what? **Social development tourism!** It's a new take on touring the cities one visits in a foreign land and Johannesburg is possibly the only city in Africa to offer such an opportunity. Called the **Urban Walkabout**, it is operated by two young entrepreneurs named *Zunaid Khan* and *Sayed Yusuf*.

So, how does someone start a kind of touring business that nobody's actually heard about before? "This particular tour got started about four years ago," says Khan, "when I was still a student at Wits University. I was studying for my urban planning qualification and part of the course was taking students in our department around the city so they could see urban planning – or the lack of it – in action. As senior students, it was our job to create appropriate routes and prepare a commentary, so that it all would make some sort of sense as we drove around." He grins. "That's when it struck me that these tours might be of interest to just about anyone visiting Johannesburg. ...It was something I already knew how to do, so all I needed to do was buy a comfortable micro bus and do some promotion."

In truth, the name "Urban Walkabout" is quite misleading; it's really more of a drive-about the city with a little walking thrown in to keep the joints limber. For R250 per person, you get an 8-hour tour that starts at about 9:00 in the morning. In most cases, a central pick-up point is determined in advance, but you can also arrange to be picked up at wherever you are staying – be it a hotel, a friend's residence, or even your own place, if you're keen on being a tourist in your own town.

The social development tour is based on the premise of providing the greatest amount of information about Johannesburg in a compressed span of time. Highlighted are urban planning, development, tourism, politics, poverty, and numerous other big city issues. It is ideal for students, academics, tertiary institutions, NGO workers, and for tourists

interested in a holistic approach to city touring. The Urban Walkabout goes beyond the realm of conventional sightseeing tours, taking visitors on a cultural and spatial journey that allows them to experience and share in the sights, sounds, tastes, stories, culture and politics that make up the South African urban landscape.

The tour begins in Newtown with a short walkabout in the area around Mary Fitzgerald Square and the cultural precinct. Then it's back into the air conditioned van and on to busy Diagonal Street to do battle in heavy traffic and to see some historical architecture. Next, you are whisked off, deep into the Central Business District and then up to Hillbrow, reputed to be one of the most densely populated areas on the planet. Of course, Hillbrow has another reputation too; that of being the most notorious and dangerous borough in all of Johannesburg.

"No doubt about it," says Kahn, "Hillbrow lives up to its gamy reputation. It's sleazy and teeming with activity of every variety – from selling fruit on a street corner to drug dealing and prostitution, which are also conducted on street corners. And yes, it can be a little dangerous," he nods knowingly, "but not to the extent a lot of people would have you believe. During the day, if you keep your head and use common sense, you'll be fine. On our daytime tours, we do a full walkabout in Hillbrow which includes a selective tour of Ponti Tower. But at night, it's surely not the place for visitors to be."

After the Hillbrow experience, it's time for lunch in Fordsburg before heading south to Kliptown and Soweto. The drive around Soweto includes visiting the **Hector Peterson Memorial** as well as the only street in the world that has been home to two **Nobel Prize** winners; *Nelson Mandela* and *Bishop Desmond Tutu*.

From Soweto, it is a fairly lengthy jaunt to the northern suburbs but before getting there, we visited the jarringly poor Alexandria township. Overcrowded and dominated by sloppily constructed government project housing along with shacks made of brick, tin and cardboard, this township is a harsh contrast to the ostentation that exists in nearby Santon and Melrose Arch.

"Melrose Arch is a prime example of *fake urbanism*," says Kahn. "It's a showcase study that would never have evolved in the real world; a totally manufactured phenomenon. To my way of thinking, even the people who go there aren't real. Celebrities and the newly rich are there to spend their money and to see and be seen. I think it should be bulldozed and turned into a park; but that's just my personal bias."

However, many – including this writer – believe Melrose Arch to be an interesting and stimulating place. Post Modern architecture abounds and it is constantly in a state of flux as new construction expands its boundaries. It is a mix of corporate offices, boutiques, pubs and sidewalk cafes. Would it have naturally evolved into what it is today? Certainly not! It is truly a life-size model; an experiment. In many ways, it is Disneyland but without the rides. Still, it is a fun place to go, as Kahn puts it, "to see and be seen" – even for real-life people like you and me.

Finally, the tour continues through the northern 'burbs and ends up at whatever point you started. By the end of the day, your head will be be buzzing from sensory overload and your body will be absolutely tired out. Guaranteed, that evening you will have no trouble slipping off to the Land of Nod.

Another guest on this particular tour, last month, was John Langston of Peachland, British Columbia, Canada. Winding up a month-long visit to South Africa, he and his partner set aside only four days to spend in Johannesburg.

“When we were planning this trip,” says Langston, “we had been told by several people, including some who lived in South Africa, that there was nothing interesting to see in Johannesburg and that it was very dangerous. ...As for the Jo'burg tour, there was nothing typical about it, while our tour of Cape Town was utterly touristy with a host who rattled on in a generic sort of way about really nothing at all. In Jo'burg we were able to have an on-going conversation with a very articulate and passionate guide, throughout the whole day. It certainly opened up my eyes. I have a very different impression of Johannesburg now.” Would he come back to Jozi for another visit? “Absolutely,” says Langston, “there's still so much we haven't seen, like for starters, the Apartheid Museum and Constitution Hill.”

Aside from the All Day Tour, Khan and Yusuf offer several other packages. Day Tour Plus runs from 9:00 until 3:00 and consists of a drive around the city with the guide providing informative insights. Day Tour Standard offers a 4-hour day of touring. It covers a wide variety of locations and sights in the city but to a lesser extent than the previous two excursions.

The “Dezigna” Tour is the pinnacle offering of the Urban Walkabout tour experience. On this trip, your wish is truly their command and all the stops along the way come from your wish list. It can include any portion of the previously mentioned city tours, as well as golf tours, package tours, night tours, safari tours and even coastal tours. It will be tailor-made to fit your specific needs. For more information about bookings and prices, call 082-403-6040 or visit their website at www.urbanwalkabout.co.za. You will be amazed!