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## ***Oriental Plaza – Johannesburg’s Shopping Mecca***

Oriental Plaza, really, it’s a whole lot like visiting the casbah. There’s an excitement about the place and even a sense of mystery. It’s full of sights, sounds, smells and tastes. Products from all over the world – everything from spices to Chinese dresses – are on display, ready to be discovered by visiting shoppers. Best of all are the discount prices – often up to 40% off price tags for the same items found in other shopping malls!

Though technically belonging to the Fordsburg precinct, Oriental Plaza casts its shadow and influence squarely upon Newtown. Actually, Newtown wouldn’t be Newtown without the plaza. Many of the shopkeepers at the Oriental Plaza are descendants of Victorian Era stallholders who sold produce at Newtown’s central market, now the home of Museum Africa and the Market Theatre.

Opened in the mid-1970s, Oriental Plaza is a direct outcome of one of apartheid’s “grand” separation schemes. Much of Johannesburg’s Asian community was uprooted and concentrated into the area surrounding the newly constructed Oriental Plaza building. At that same time, shopkeepers and their stores were moved from nearby Vrededorp and Pageview. With little alternative but to accept space offered at the Plaza, most eventually bought their own shops in the complex.

Sprawling over 17 hectares of land dominated by its trademark minaret, the Oriental Plaza is made up of an uncovered section of single-story shops. This in turn, is linked to a three-story circular shopping area called the grand bazaar. Beyond this is a second outdoor market area that offers just about every conceivable consumer item you could possibly think of – and then a few more.

In all, 360 shops bursting with bargains spill out into the main causeway. Rolls of fabric are stacked on tables outside the shops. Basket sellers offer their wares in all shapes and sizes. Everything from pots, pans and crockery, to digital cameras, computers and cell phones are for sale every day here.

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And when you get hungry, try your luck at any one of several sit-down restaurants, or a fast food joint, or a chili-bite stall. One amazing taste sensation is coconut “samoosas,” – especially the ones sold at the Snack Corner. It’s a hole-in-the-wall kiosk located next to Pank’s Dress Shop on the second level of the grand bazaar and you won’t find better samoosas anywhere.

Today, Oriental Plaza is big, big business. An estimated one million shoppers pass through its gates each month. “Truly, Oriental Plaza is a very large draw,” says Ahmed Bobat, corporate chairman of the centre. “If the City of Johannesburg wants to get people out of the northern suburbs and back into the Newtown-Fordsburg area, it should promote our Plaza as the gateway to the inner city.”

Of course the question of security weighs heavily on the minds of those who long ago fled to the perceived safety of the northern ‘burbs. However, their fears can pretty much be put to rest when they choose to shop at Oriental Plaza. “Our Plaza is the safest shopping centre in the country,” Bobat beams. “During business hours, our parking lots are patrolled by 40 in-house security guards. And, inside the shopping centre, another 60 guards – many in plain clothes – are on duty every day.”

Plaza Management is also justifiably proud of their expansion program. “Our main parking area has been completely redone and we’ve enhanced security even further,” says M.V. Patel, Oriental Plaza’s General Manager. “And, this is just the beginning, paving the way to our expansion project that will begin in March and should be completed a year later, in March, 2007.”

What Patel is referring to is the long awaited 28,000 sq m mall extension which will include multi-level parking, a cinema complex, gym, banking hall, franchise stores, a food court and a chain supermarket. “Later on,” he continues, “we have plans for a world class hotel and an office tower in the Oriental Plaza complex.”

“Business owners of every kind in Fordsburg have to make sure our part of Johannesburg keeps in line with development in the rest of the inner city,” interjects Ahmed Bobat. “Oriental Plaza is close enough to the redevelopment in Newtown to easily tap into that hub and take advantage of its potential. ...I also have every confidence our expansion will be a success because it is self-financed by debenture fund-raising and through the financial participation of Plaza business operators. That means those business owners are stakeholders and they will make sure it is a success.”

Without a doubt, Oriental Plaza is like no other Shopping Centre in Africa, or maybe, the whole wide world. It is a uniquely Johannesburg experience and one that is changing with the times. So, if you really enjoy haggling and love going home with lots and lots of bargains, then Oriental Plaza is the place to spend a morning, or an afternoon, or the entire day. See you at Jozi’s version of the casbah! You won’t be disappointed.

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