

The cycle of change

Armed police have given way to tourists on cycles in the South African township of Soweto, writes **Amy Fallon**

A BICYCLE might sound like a practical way of seeing Soweto, South Africa's most famous township.

That's until you spot 100 local school children marching down the road, and they in turn spot you loaded down with Smarties and a camera hanging around your neck.

Suddenly I'm being mobbed for sweets and photos.

"Shoot me, shoot me!" they cry, trying to grab my Canon from around my neck. Smarties fly everywhere. I'm now down off my bike, just five minutes into the tour, which began in Soweto's Orlando West area.

I realise there's a great chance that I will spend the rest of my trip around the township, which stretches out over more than 130sq km south-west of Johannesburg, lagging behind the other tourists.

That's the problem with trying to bike around Soweto — there's just too much to see and do, and the locals are just too hospitable and chatty, to keep you riding continuously.

"I love the atmosphere and nature of Soweto," says my 20-year-old guide Tshepo Matsile, who was born and raised in the township. (Soweto is actually a collection of townships, with its name an abbreviation of SOUTHWESTERN TOWNSHIPS.)

"It's a place that everybody should see. The tour's a good adventure for the tourists, rather than a bus tour where you're just taking photos and the locals feel like animals."

During the trips — half-day and full-day tours can be arranged — globetrotters can get a feel for Soweto by stopping at a shebeen (informal drinking house) in the Mzimthlope Hostel to have a drop of umqomboti.

It's a strong, fiery home-made brew — the pronunciation involves an impossible clicking noise — drunk from a large bucket.

Visitors can also try a kota, a local sandwich consisting of bread, chips and cheese.

Soweto is also the place to visit if tourists really want to learn about South Africa's black community's fight against apartheid.

It's impossible to speak about apartheid without mentioning the world's most famous township, created away from Johannesburg to house black labourers, who



MEET AND GREET: Children surround tourists on the cycle tour of Soweto. The township was at the forefront of South Africa's liberation struggle.



ADVENTURE: The brightly-painted cooling towers.

worked in mines and other industries in the city.

The township's Vilakazi St is the only street in the world to be home to two Nobel Peace Prize winners — former South African president Nelson Mandela and Archbishop Desmond Tutu.

Mandela lived at a house on the corner of Vilakazi and Ngakane streets, from 1946 to 1962, and in 1997 it became the Mandela Family Museum.

The tour also includes the notorious spot in Orlando West where hundreds of thousands of students gathered on June

16, 1976, to protest against the introduction of Afrikaans as the official educational language — otherwise known as the Soweto Uprising.

The South African Government put the official number of deaths from this violence at 23, but hundreds are believed to have been killed.

Student Hector Pieteron, just 12 years old, was fatally shot by police that day, on the corner of Moema and Vilakazi streets. A memorial and museum dedicated to Hector, featuring the poignant photograph of the dying boy being carried by 17-year-old Mbuyisa Makhubu, was

Power to the people

ONCE labelled the most efficient power supplier in South Africa, Soweto's Orlando Power Station is today one of the township's top tourist attractions.

The whole area is towered over by two electrical cooling silos, which showered Soweto with pollution as they supplied electricity to the white suburbs.

For years Soweto had no electricity and blacks were not permitted to own houses in urban areas. And even today people string illegal wire from the electric poles to their rooms at the hostels.

Work on the iconic facility began in 1939, during demand for extra

power, with the two cooling towers added in 1951 as extra mechanisms to cool the steam from the landmark's boilers.

The power station, which was also the largest municipal power station in the southern hemisphere, operated until 1998.

In 2007 entrepreneur Bob Woods came up with the idea of using the former facility as an adventure centre. The former power station now has the first ever swing ride inside a cooling tower — aptly called The Abyssa — as well as an abseil and rap jump.

Bungee jumps are planned.

MORE: www.orlandotowers.co.za

built on Khumalo St in 2002.

The parents of Lebohanga Malepa, who runs the bike tours from his hostel, Lebo's Soweto Backpackers, were both students involved in the 1976 violence.

Lebo, who lived as a young child with his parents in exile in Botswana following the clashes, says Soweto played an important role in the fight against apartheid, "especially being an urban township".

"People in Soweto felt the pressure of apartheid more than anybody else in this country," he says.

"There was a lot of resistance coming out of the township."

It was out of his desire to have

tourists learn about the significance of Soweto that he began running the township's first hostel in 2003.

Lebo's Soweto Backpackers is also South Africa's first black-owned hostel. The "formal match-box" house belongs to Lebo's grandfather. It has seven rooms and can fit 24 beds.

After a very slow start, Lebo has accommodated thousands of tourists from all over the world, and Lonely Planet has even jumped on the bandwagon, listing the hostel in its guide books.

The bike tours were introduced in 2005.

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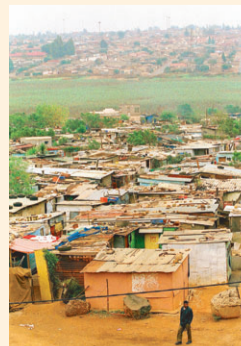
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GETTING THERE: Qantas operates six flights per week between Australia and South Africa. This will move to daily from June. www.qantas.com.au

ACCOMMODATION: Lebo's Soweto Backpackers. Bookings can be made through www.sowetobackpackers.com or 27 (0) 11-936-3444. The hostel can arrange pick-ups from Johannesburg's Tambo International Airport. They can also arrange bike, walking and car tours of the township and Johannesburg.



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