



CYCLING SOWETO

There's no better way to get a feel for the vibrant soul of this world-famous township than on a bicycle

WORDS & PHOTOGRAPHS: FRANCESCA LYNAGH @FRANLYNAGH

a backpackers' hostel.

After spending several years developing the business, Lebo had the bright idea of offering his guests a unique way of exploring his hometown. He borrowed three bikes from local people and began showing visitors around on two wheels instead of on foot.

Lebo's Soweto Cycling Tours were a hit and the hostel now boasts an impressive collection of 90 bikes. The tours have become so popular, in fact, that TripAdvisor recommends them as a top-rated Jo'burg activity.

The passionate young South African employs a handful of upbeat and knowledgeable tour guides who take visitors on two-hour, four-hour or full-day tours, which always start in front of the hostel after guests have selected their bikes and helmets.

Even if you're a fairly active person, as I consider myself to be, the first five minutes of the two-hour tour will be a shock to the system. My group is led up a steep hill, which renders all 10 of us completely breathless, but once this climb is done, it's all quite easy for the rest of the 5km tour.

Famous landmarks such as the Orlando Towers are pointed out by our highly entertaining tour guide, Jacob. Standing on a hill with the Orlando Stadium as his backdrop, he performs a hilarious rendition of Shakira's hit song *Waka Waka*, which he tells us she performed at the stadium during the 2010 Fifa World Cup opening ceremony.

But the tour isn't all fun and games. Soweto has a turbulent history of segregation and oppression, and nowhere was this more apparent than at the Hector Pieterse Memorial and Museum – the halfway stop on the tour. Pieterse was a 12-year-old boy who was shot on 16 June 1976, along with hundreds of other school children, during protests against the use of Afrikaans as the language of instruction in black high schools. Outside the museum is an enlarged copy of Sam Nzima's iconic photograph of a bleeding Hector in the arms of Mbuyiseni Makhubo, with Hector's sister Antoinette Sithole running alongside. There's no doubt that the time we spend looking at this image is the most sobering part of the tour, but it's a necessary one if visitors are to learn the true story of Soweto.

Our next stop is Nelson Mandela's house on Vilakazi Street. After parking our bikes, we watch local dancers perform in the street before taking a quick look at the exterior of Mandela's old dwelling. Again, Jacob provides far more information than we'd ever find in a guide book, bringing the history of the street alive for us.

We're invited to meander back to the hostel in our own time for a tasting of local home-brewed beer around a campfire. We're all given traditional accessories to wear for the occasion, including beads for the women and animal-skin headbands for the men. Our tour ends with a hearty round of applause for Jacob.

Although some might argue that Lebo's tour of Soweto gives visitors a carefully curated version of township life, I disagree. Of course, the guides make a point of taking you to the most common tourist attractions, but seeing them is an important part of learning about the area's past. And the bicycle tour is far more than just a checklist of historical monuments.

During our bike ride I lost count of the number of people who high-fived us or called out "Hello" or "*Sawubona*". At one point, we stopped to grab a drink and spend a little time playing with local school children who clambered onto our bikes in the hope of hitching a ride. A local man stopped to help me when my bike malfunctioned as I went over a curb. He welcomed me to his hometown and a conversation about the importance of keeping fit ensued, before Jacob arrived and fixed my tyre.

It just goes to show that stepping out of your chauffeur-driven, air-conditioned minibus and hopping onto a bike instead, instantly

I pant heavily, gasping for air as I approach the top of the hill. I always knew Johannesburg sat at a high altitude, but I hadn't truly felt it in my lungs until I peddled up this steep incline in this famous township. My legs are burning and my brakes are dodgy, but I push on because I'm on the verge of seeing a whole new side of this vibrant city I've called home for the past year.

It's an unusually warm spring day and I've just embarked on a bicycle tour organised by Lebo's Soweto Backpackers, which is owned and run by entrepreneur and popular community member Lebo Malepa.

Lebo came up with the idea for the business about 13 years ago, when he started organising football tournaments for locals and tourists. Spotting a gap in the market for affordable, safe accommodation in the township, he turned his home into



erases the barrier between you and your environment. This allows for authentic interactions with real people, and it's this kind of immersion that teaches you the truth about a place. And this is the point of Lebo's Cycle Tours.

Chatting to the man himself once my tour is over, it's clear that his main goal is to bring more people to Soweto and to encourage them to keep coming back. This is why he's currently spending most of his time developing a campsite on the hill behind his hostel, which he hopes will become another tourist haven. He tells me he's planning a weekend festival here and points out several wooden huts that will be comfortable accommodation for some of those attending the event.

What's most striking about Lebo – other than his bright red trainers – is his cheerful attitude and optimistic vision for the future of his Soweto-based empire and the area as a whole.

In a country where racial and class tension remains a serious problem, it's reassuring to see that Lebo and his team are doing their best to break down barriers. I've felt welcome and safe at all times, and my recurring thought is: "I can't believe I didn't do this sooner."

The bike tour invites people into what is, above all, a vibrant and hopeful township, which has a reputation that is, according to Lebo, quickly becoming outdated. The only way to challenge negative preconceptions is to experience things for yourself — and that is exactly what Lebo is inviting people to do.

While writing this article, I came across this quotation (author unknown), which, from what I saw, sums up the township perfectly: "Soweto is a symbol of the New South Africa, caught between old squatter misery and new prosperity, squalor and an upbeat lifestyle – it's a vibrant city which still openly bears the scars of the Apartheid past and yet shows what's possible in the New South Africa." 🌈

It just goes to show that stepping out of your chauffeur-driven, air-conditioned minibus and hopping onto a bike instead, instantly erases the barrier between you and your environment.