

The other side of Cape Town

(translated from article in "Kapstadt.com")

Visiting Townships with Hajo's Lodge & Tours

According to official channels, 3.4 million people live in Cape Town. It is estimated that about 2 million of them live in the Townships, the so called Cape Flats, at the fringe of town. That is more than half of the residents of the Cape Metropolis! And although these Townships cover a major part of the flat land between False Bay and Table Bay, only few tourists get to see them. They know Clifton, Simonstown, Muizenberg and maybe Blouberg and Durbanville. But who knows Langa, Gugulethu or even Crossroads? Maybe they've heard of them, but seen them? Forget it. It may be indifference, ignorance or fear that many tourists only see one side of Cape Town - the "bright" side: Camps Bay, Table Mountain, Waterfront. Who can blame them, after all Townships are associated with poverty, unemployment and Aids. Those however who want to get the full picture of this town and its people should get to know the "other" side of Cape Town and have a look behind the pretty setting. You won't just find misery there. Quite contrary.

Hajo Kowalke from Hajo's Lodge & Tours offers tours to the Cape Flats. "I wouldn't recommend to discover the Townships on your own" warns the trained guide. "Some corners are not safe and you can easily get lost in the maze of huts and streets." I highly recommend a guided tour, he emphasises. But Hajo's township tour is not the same as other township tours. Some tour operators simply cart the guests through the narrow lanes on a tour bus without giving them the chance to get off. "Tours of this kind are relatively insensitive" says Kowalke. "It is neither pleasant for the tourist nor for the residents of the Township and is the source of misunderstandings." That is why he takes his guests in small groups to the Cape Flats. "I think it is important to get close and approach the people and their life as unobtrusively as possible. Between the shacks and corrugated huts often hides an abundance of life and happiness which can't be seen from behind tinted glass." His tour also includes a walk of about one hour through Langa with a trained guide who comes from the Township.

Langa is Cape Town's oldest Township, with 200,000 people living in a place that was originally planned for 5000. The hope of finding work draws more and more people into the town. During the walk, the visitors get a true impression of life in an overfull Township. They visit the cultural centre Guga S'thebe, the doctor's house, Tiger's Bar and occasionally get a look into the housings of residents. "Many are surprised that there aren't just corrugated huts but also well-kept houses with pretty front gardens" as Kowalke describes this experience. "Many visitors get to talk to residents and get a chance to ask questions. The residents are pleased about the interest of the tourists and they know that much aid is coming from overseas."

Hajo's tour does not follow a fixed route or a strict timetable. He may stop at Mzoli's Grill in Gugulethu or visit a kindergarten in Nyanga or a charity project in Khayelitsha. But he almost always stops by Golden. "Golden's story is simply fantastic" he says. "An angel visited Golden night after night while he was sleeping and told him to search the garbage dump for flowers, which would give him an earning. So he searched but didn't find any flowers. Frustrated he stamped on a tin can and it hit him: I will make flowers from tin cans!" And that is what he is still doing today and feeding his family from the proceeds."

It's stories like this one that fascinate the visitors. The residents of the Townships may be poor but not necessarily unhappy. They have a joy in life, a don't-give-up attitude and a warm cordiality that in Cape Town may nowhere be as present as in the Townships. "For many tourists, a visit to the Townships is an eye opener and an impulse to think about their own life", sums up Hajo Kowalke. Best to experience it yourself.



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