

A DISPATCH FROM SOWETO, SOUTH AFRICA

3 September 2005

We arrived at the Manor Guest House shortly before noon after an all night flight from London to Johannesburg. Staff was not expecting to feed us lunch but they quickly put together a light repast, then most of the group opted for naps knowing that they would be going to a museum later in the afternoon. But we had plans for an afternoon in Soweto. I had arranged for a car and guide... our travel agent said that a guide was required for visits to Soweto

Soweto came to the world's attention in [1976](#) when mass rioting broke out over the government's decision to enforce education in [Afrikaans](#) rather than [English](#). To be truthful, I was a little apprehensive about venturing into a township with such a brutal and bloody history, but couldn't travel to South Africa without at least having made an attempt. I got reassurances from Mark Abdy, our team leader who was born in South Africa, and Jeremy, our in-country guide. So about 1300 hours we were off in the care of Robert, driver and guide.

During the drive to Soweto, as Robert gave us an in-depth history of South Africa, we saw neat, sturdy brick and stone houses with healthy lawns, garages, and flowerbeds, protected by razor-wire topped walls and fences. These were conspicuously absent in Soweto.

Soweto is a "City within a City", home to nobody knows how many people, Soweto may sound like an African name but it is an acronym for South Western Townships. It was started in 1904 and in the 1950s became the governments dumping ground for unwanted black settlements in the white suburbs. Its first houses were made of tin and wood, the township only getting brick houses in 1933. It's a vast area of 33 townships some 12 miles south west of Johannesburg. Its people speak nine of the countrys 11 languages. Soweto was, from the start, a product of segregationist planning: originally there were only temporary living quarters for the mineworkers. Still Soweto is by no means only an accumulation of tin shacks.

We entered Soweto through a neighborhood of neat well-kept houses and lawns, and an occasional swimming pool, like a middle class American neighborhood. This was not what I expected. I suggested to Robert that we weren't really in Soweto. He told us that this is the township where the black professionals came, the physicians, dentists, and lawyers. Robert said there are 33 townships-the Apartheid government had separated the people into whites, non-whites, and blacks-and a number of more or less functioning social institutions like schools and hospitals. But, he also said there are some slums as waves of migrant workers move from the countryside and neighboring countries to look for work..





The perennial problems of Soweto, since its inception, include poor housing, overcrowding, high unemployment and poor infrastructure. Settlements of shacks made of corrugated iron sheets became part of the Soweto landscape. as



new arrivals move in where others have moved on to better housing.

We never saw one, but Robert said that there are 33 millionaires scattered in Soweto. We did see the defunct power station with its twin towers.

We drove past Baragwanath Hospital, the largest in the southern hemisphere. It was so large and spread out I was unable to get a decent photograph. It takes its name from a Welshman, John Albert Baragwanath who started it as a refreshment post and hostel for wagon drivers traveling to Kimberley soon after the discovery of gold. In 1942 the buildings became a hospital with 544 beds and today it has 4300 beds. We continued through various suburbs including the early suburbs of Orlando where many of the political giants lived and the Kliptown area where the freedom charter was signed, now being developed as the Walter Sisulu square of dedication.



Back in the van, we drove past a hair salon, public tele-
phones in metal containers, several churches, schools,
soccer stadiums, an abandoned bus station minus its metal
roof now part of someone's house, an orphanage, and
stopped in front of a house of one of Robert's friends.
At first glance it seemed quite modern, but then I noted
the outdoor privy. All the houses in the block were so
adorned.

Our next stop was atop a hill behind Mandela's 1960s
house. It is a museum now with items from the short time
they had together before he went into hiding and



eventually prison for 27 years.



Shortly we were going up the hill to Kumalo
Street and past the Orlando West High
School. From here, in 1976, students marched
down the other side of the hill and met with
an army of policemen. Halfway down the hill,
on June 16th, 12 year old Hector Pieterse
was shot and killed at the start of the student
uprising.

Because of time concerns we had opted to skip museums and cover as wide a territory as time allowed before inevitable jet lag set in. But we thought that the Hector Pieterse Museum, which opened in 2004, deserved some of our time. So this was our last stop in Soweto. Probably the most telling display was a mock-up of a cemetery with markers inscribed with the names of the 200 kids killed on June 16, 1976. There were several “unknowns” As expected the rest of the museum contained documents, photos and videos detailing the history of the student rebellion: .

“On the morning of June 16, 1976, thousands of black students met for a massive rally to protest more effectively against having to learn Afrikaans in school. Most of the students taking part in the protest on 16 June arrived at school that morning without a clue of what was in store. They only found out about the march that morning, but did not need to be convinced to join the protest against Bantu Education. Many senior pupils were worried about the forthcoming Afrikaans language exams they had to write.



The protest was intended to be peaceful and had been carefully planned by the Soweto Students' Representative Council's (SSRC) Action Committee. Teachers also supported the march after the Action Committee emphasized good discipline and peaceful action.

The students set off on their march and soon discovered that the police had barricaded the road that they wished to follow. The leader of the action committee asked the crowd not to provoke the police and the march continued on another route, eventually ending up near Orlando High School. The crowd of between 3000 and 10000 students made their way towards the area of the school. The atmosphere was very tense and the police called for reinforcements.

There are many different accounts of what actually sparked the massacre that day. The police had weapons and tear gas while the students were unarmed. Some say that the school children were throwing stones while others say that proceedings were peaceful with no violent actions from the children at all.

According to one eyewitness the police threw canisters of tear gas to disperse the students, who then began throwing stones. The gas forced the crowd to draw back a little, but they continued singing and waving placards with slogans like “Down with Afrikaans”, “Viva Azania” and “If we must do Afrikaans, Vorster must do Zulu”. Apparently a white police officer drew his handgun and a single shot went off. This caused panic and chaos. Children started screaming and running and more gunshots were fired. At least 4 children were shot, the first being Hastings Ndlovu followed by 13 year-old Hector Pieterse, the photograph taken of his body was to shock the world and become a symbol of police brutality.”

It was back to our guest house and a short rest before dinner. We knew that we had not seen all that one should see in Soweto. But we saw enough to go away with a better understanding of its significant role in the history of South Africa.