



MEMORIES OF MANDELA COUNTRY

-By Aruna Rathod

It's lively, colourful and vibrant – South Africa is known as the Rainbow Nation because of its diversity of races, and since early times it has attracted people from all over the globe.

Johannesburg is a maze of flyovers, great connectivity, glitzy shopping malls, plush restaurants, fast cars and a lot of people. The city boasts of Michaelangelo, one of the most exclusive hotels that overlook the city. Sandton City is the spanking new part of the city that is slick and houses the best banks, shopping malls and offices. It is also the business and financial district of South Africa. It has opulent stand alone homes, towering offices, shopping malls with local and international brands. It was difficult to believe that this urban oasis was a wasteland just 50 years ago.

Eat out: While shopping is a pleasure in Sandton City, with 300 retail stores – electronics, garments, jewellery, eateries ranging from super fine dine experiences to grab a bite to fast food – it has it all. Snack at the Muggs & Bean coffee shop, and end your meal with Cinnabons - fresh baked goodies with a variety of cream toppings and a tinge of cinnamon. Absolutely sinful.

Attractions galore: The Nelson Mandela Square is situated in Sandton City and besides a six-metre tall statue of Mandela, a part of the mall has premium labels. The statue is a photo spot for tourists, for its sheer magnitude. Created by local artists Jacob Maponyane and Kobus Hattingh, the statue was commissioned in July 2002 and completed in 2004.

For night birds, the best place for action is the Monte Casino. Open 24 hours, it has enough entertainment for the entire day and night. It is a great place to have a meal with a choice of cuisines - Japanese, Italian, South African Braais (barbecues) or just a coffee at Illys.

Old city: The Hop on Hop off bus is a good way to see the old city of Johannesburg. Massive, tall buildings that have not been maintained, but the city has a soul. The first stop was the Gandhi Square. It was difficult to imagine that the statue of the man in his lawyer robes, with a head full of hair was Gandhiji. Another landmark is the Carlton centre, with an observation deck on the 50th floor, and the highest office building in Africa. The Gold Reef city is a theme park with bits of history thrown in about mining. Its main attraction is the huge casino and the theme park. Opposite the Gold Reef City is an important landmark - the Apartheid Museum that shows the history of Apartheid. It is an easy-to-navigate museum that gives a glimpse of the turbulent chapter of South African history.

The last stop on the tour is the Constitution Hill, where both Mandela and Gandhi were incarcerated, which now houses the highest court in the land.

Wild Life: The Kruger National Park is about four-and-a-half hours by road and just about 50 minutes by flight to Hoedspruit airport. Hoedspruit was a quaint airport with very typical African village-

like feel. Going past a couple of villages, it is about a 45 minute drive till one enters the National park area. After about an hour-and-a-half, you reach the private property of Hamiltons tented camp. Safaris begin at 3.30 pm and 6 am everyday in a comfortable 4x4 vehicle that has varying heights, for easy viewing.

Hamiltons offers two safaris a day. One at 6 am which goes on till 9.30 am and one at 3.30 pm which ends at 6.30 pm. The staff is friendly, speak good English and are comforting. Each tent (a luxurious room) has its own appointed butler for safety, he escorts you out for dinner and if you need anything during the night, gives you a wake up knock (since there is no phone). Pick and drop to airport is part of the package and the unique location next to a stream is the USP of Hamiltons. Two other exquisite properties are the Imbali safari lodge and the Hoyo Hoyo safari lodge done up in total African decor. The lodges also conduct guided Bush Walks that allow visitors to examine flora and fauna. Walks are available on request.

Cape Town: A couple of hours by flight is the magnificent Cape Town. Robben Island is a must visit for the serious traveller while in Cape Town. The island is situated nine kilometres into the Atlantic Ocean and is an hour's boat ride away from Cape Town.

To get to the island, you need to book a return ticket on a boat for 300 Rand (Rs 1,500) and board at the Nelson Mandela gateway, 30 minutes before the boat chugs out into the sea. The first boat ride to the island is at 9 am, which ends at 1 pm. Three trips are organised every day although they are subject to weather conditions, as Cape Town experiences strong winds that go up to 100 km/h. Even the cold winds that blow over the Robben Island

come with a bit of history attached to it – it is believed that the freezing wind and ocean stopped prisoners from planning an escape by swimming over to land.

While in Cape Town, make it a point to visit Table Mountain, Seal island, Castle of Good Hope, the Botanical Gardens, Cape of Good Hope, and Cape Point over two days or depending on how many days you have.

Wine trails and champagne evenings: A drive into the countryside covering the Stellenbosch, Franschhoek & Paarl wine routes is sheer pleasure. The wine farms and estates are located one after another and most tourists spend a day in Stellenbosch, tasting wine and cheese and indulging in a late afternoon lunch.

Before you pack: The best time to visit Cape Town is from October to April, when it is officially summer - temperature is around 25 °C and it's cooler in the nights. The strong winds subside in February, making the beaches an attractive spot.

Where to stay: The Taj Cape Town, in the heart of the city, has rooms that face the Table Mountain. For dinner, check out the Bombay Brasserie for its lip-smacking Indian and fusion cuisine. Dock House at the waterfront was built in the 1800's and has a fantastic view of the harbour. Also, with its 292 en-suite rooms, the Garden Court Nelson Mandela Boulevard is close to Cape Town International Airport.

Where to eat: Bokaap Kombuis in the Bokaap quarter serves authentic Cape Malay cuisine with lamb curry, rotis, chicken gravy and rice. Jewel of India at the V&A Waterfront offers an amazing Kebab platter. At Black Marlin in Cape Point, enjoy the sea food specialities and the deep blue ocean. For more Indian food, head to Sea Point.

