

Reviving Egoli, the lost city of gold

Claire Norrish finds things can be great when you go downtown

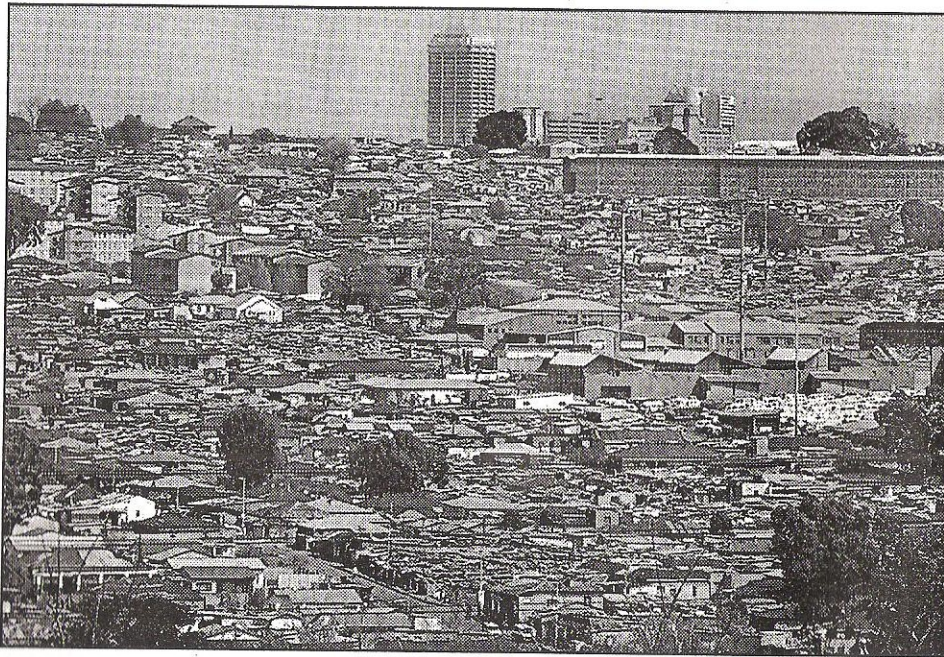
‘JOHANNESBURG?!’ I sort of spat, when my husband Paul casually dropped into our conversation that we would be relocating to South Africa from London. He had landed an environmental contract associated with the World Summit and it looked like it would be a far more pragmatic decision to base ourselves there, than in Cape Town, as I had originally hoped.

The very word ‘Johannesburg’ paints a dark picture. A dry industrial city flagged by ugly mine dumps, a legacy from when the gold-diggers swept into town and plundered the earth for its riches. A city with an unhappy history of segregation and brutality, of injustice and strife.

A city notorious for one of the highest crime rates in the world. So feeling like lambs to the slaughter we arrived with our small son expecting the worst, but got the best.

Forget what the guidebooks tell you. Sun City is hideous – chock-a-block with fast-food outlets, a fake beach and a nasty smell of money. Ignore the grotesque Monte Casino – an ‘exact’ replica of the famous 1950’s Italian gambling mecca, populated by scary teenage Lolitas from the northern suburbs. And spend too long in the endless shopping malls and you will surely suffocate in their airless confines.

Here you will find the greatest juxtaposition of all. Lying next to Sandton City, Jo’burg’s glitziest shopping centre, is Alexandra, the city’s biggest township, where one million impoverished people are



Contrast: the Alexandra township with the Sandton Centre in the background

Queen Elizabeth Bridge at night towards the inner city, you could almost be fooled into thinking you were approaching a mini version of New York City from Brooklyn Bridge.

Neon billboards advertise up and coming cultural events and the Carlton Tower stands tall behind skyscrapers studded with glittering lights. But look closer and you will see broken windows and abandoned buildings flanked by windswept deserted streets.

After the initial boom in the 1930s when Jo’burg was recognized as a world city, known locally as Egoli – city of gold, like most industrial cities it fell into decline. Due to rising crime the population of the inner city migrated to the leafy suburbs. The streets were abandoned and left to the market traders and

week. Already, security has been stepped up, closed-circuit television has been installed and refuse is removed twice a day.

The emphasis will be on conserving the rich heritage and encouraging the arts and creative industries. Beautiful old Victorian buildings with Oregon pine floors are being restored. Old warehouses are being developed into trendy loft apartments and factories are being transformed into photographic studios and nightclub venues.

This year’s South African fashion week was held in Newtown at a disused power station, The Turbine Hall, a monolith of a building. The fash-pack delicately picked their way passed giant hulks of rusting machinery to watch

through its doors as long as they were not black, Jewish or gay. This year the after-parade party of the gay and lesbian Mardi Gras was held there. Significant evidence of an emerging new consciousness.

In Fordsburg, the Oriental Plaza buzzes with the sound of India. In the central square you can relax at the outdoor tables and order samosas and hot biriyani and watch the traders haggle over spice prices. Visit the beautiful art deco Market Theatre on Bree Street and view an eclectic play, usually with the same potent message of freedom and justice.

There are several art galleries including the Spaza and the Standard Bank Gallery that display a wealth of talent, and the Museum Africa in front of Newtown Square documents

low with a picnic and a bottle of wine at Emmarentia Dam.

The weather is sublime – clear blue skies and sunshine every day with temperatures rising to 30 degrees in the summer, but with a cool wind that tempers the heat. It is also reportedly the least expensive major city in the world according to a cost of living survey released by a Geneva-based company in July. Less than half the cost of living in London and a quarter of that in Tokyo.

Johannesburg is vast. About the same size as Los Angeles, and like LA it relies on car culture. With a grim sense of humour people used to joke that the GP (Gauteng Province) on the resident car number plates was an acronym for Gangsters Paradise. There are no buses and the trains are an absolute no go area. The only local public transport seems to be unpredictable white minibuses that bizarrely, are called ‘black taxis’.

Car hire is essential if you don’t have your own, but it

doesn’t have to be expensive. But be careful, there seems to be an anarchic feel to the highways. Red lights, known as ‘Robots’ are often ignored due to the fear of car-jacking and speeds are high.

If you peel back the glossy veneer that first hits you upon arrival, Johannesburg has a big heart that throbs with life. It is an energetic city that bit by bit, is breaking down the walls.

But if the regeneration of the inner city is to be a success it has to be accepted by its own people. I wonder how the residents of the northern suburbs feel?

Tucked away in their ‘cluster homes’ behind forbidding electric fences, would they ever venture south to the vibrant ethnic hub that is downtown? And optimistic though I am for the city’s future, I am numbed when I open the classified pages of *The Star*, Jo’burg’s highest circulating daily newspaper, and see an advertisement for a ‘white’ tenant for a flat to let.

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