



Social Impact:

Soweto bike tour (above), Apartheid Museum (below left), and Sandton Convention Centre (below right)

PHOTOS: © SOUTH AFRICAN TOURISM



History and Hospitality

Blend business events with cultural immersion in Johannesburg. BY ELYSE GLICKMAN

While Cape Town remains one of Africa's leading MICE cities, Johannesburg emerges as an equally compelling business travel destination. In recent years it has come into its own thanks to its recognition as an economic powerhouse, home to the largest stock market in Africa and numerous attractions powerfully reflecting social and economic changes in South Africa and their impact on the rest of the world.

"I had the privilege of experiencing Johannesburg's MICE potential firsthand," says Simon Bacher, CEO and cofounder, Ling App, a language learning app whose courses include Afrikaans. Based on his team's experience at the ERTL-

ket Club Johannesburg, Saint Restaurant Sandton and Qunu Restaurant at the Saxon Hotel.

"It offers a vibrant blend of history, modern infrastructure and hospitality, making it an enticing business destination," Bacher continues. "Sandton Convention Centre, paired with nearby hotels, offered us both convenience and luxury. Marble Restaurant not only took us on a journey through South African gastronomy but also featured a panoramic view of the city's skyline. After intense discussions about business and social issues during the ERTL-YANG Leader Summit, my team visited the Apartheid Museum, which was an emotional, enlightening experience that bonded us further."

The Sandton Convention Centre boasts a location accessible via major freeways, some of the city's highest-end hotels and the Sandton City and Nelson Mandela Square shopping malls. The convention level accommodates 3,500, while its multipurpose pavilion hosts more than 4,000. It also boasts two 54,000-square-foot exhibition areas and 15 meeting rooms. However, its top-to-bottom sustainability initiatives for its daily operations remain key selling points for those planning international exhibitions and conferences.

Other venues are surrounded by reminders of South Africa's recent social and political development. Johannesburg Expo Centre enjoys status as the city's largest venue as well as geographical and cultural advantages, including proximity to Soweto, the Apartheid Museum and a number of companies offering tours and cultural activities. Its 452,000 square feet of covered space encompasses a 20,000-person main arena (staging the Rand Show, the largest consumer exhibition in the Southern Hemisphere); the flexible Bateleur and Black Eagle spaces; plus its own bank locations, post office and telecommunication services.

The Gallagher Convention Centre, midway between Johannesburg and Pretoria (South Africa's administrative capital, also in Gauteng province), can hold up to 8,000 delegates. In addition to an auditorium and a ballroom, it has an on-site halal kitchen facility. Boutique properties in pretty residential areas of Johannesburg, meanwhile, are ideal for more intimate MICE gatherings and corporate retreats before or after larger conferences. For example, as an event space, AtholPlace House can hold up to 50 people and can host product launches, photoshoots and small conferences. The hotel, near Sandton, accommodates up to 18 guests with nine bedrooms en suite and features an exclusive-use villa with space for eight guests.

UNIQUE VENUES

Lebo's Soweto Backpackers operates bicycle tours into the history and heart of Soweto's culture and daily life, where guests interact with residents and local vendors. Highlights include the Hector Pieterse Memorial (commemorating the 1976 Soweto Student Uprising), Nelson Mandela Museum (his home 1946–1962) and Tutu House (National Heritage Site). The company also offers group cooking classes in the preparation of Sowetan-style *potjie kos*, including gathering herbs and vegetables from the on-site garden, a local market visit and spice blending to create an authentic experience.

sowetobackpackers.com

Tours of Constitution Hill Human Rights Precinct encompass the Old Fort, the Women's Jail, Number Four and the Constitutional Court to explore the precinct's complex history, the injustices to which its inmates were subjected during apartheid's height, and further discussion about why the court's presence in this place is so meaningful. Book group tours for 10 people or more.

www.constitutionhill.org.za

**ACCORDING TO THE JOHANNESBURG
TOURISM CO., THE CITY COUNTS
260 HOTELS WITH AN ESTIMATED
30,000 GUESTROOMS.**

YANG Leader Summit in August 2022, he appreciated how Johannesburg offered his group a one-of-a-kind union of business and cultural immersion that added greater depth to their conference experience and overall stay.

Bacher stands in good company. The Johannesburg Convention Bureau notes among the 1,416,969 visitors who traveled to the greater metropolitan area in 2022, MICE activities accounted for 5.4 percent, while related categories "Business Travel" and "Business Shopping" made up 16.1 percent and 24.3 percent, respectively. Johannesburg ranked ninth in Cvent's 2023 "Top 10 Meeting Destinations in Middle East and Africa" list. The meetings, events and hospitality technology provider ranks cities based on the efforts of local governments and tourist offices to elevate their appeal as international meeting destinations.

According to the Johannesburg Tourism Co., the city counts 260 hotels with an estimated 30,000 guestrooms. Among them, Four Seasons Hotel The Westcliff Johannesburg; The Houghton Hotel, Spa, Wellness & Golf; Sandton Sun; and Southern Sun Rosebank earned top marks based on recent feedback from convention planners and MICE visitors. Destination restaurants chosen for smaller gatherings or post-conference dinners, meanwhile, include The Shortmar-