

RETURN TO SOWETO

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By his sixth day in South Africa, Tony had been shown around **Sandton** (a high-end business district in **Jo'burg**) five times. "A fine precinct," he said. "Not dissimilar to some we have in Toronto."

It seemed possible that the glimmer of a hint might lurk inside this information. I cancelled plans to show off certain classy office towers, and pointed to other quarters.

Whereupon began an excellent day. The high point was Soweto, for him because of the dining-out prospects once back in the 30 degrees below; for me because of the great march forward since I was last there. For instance I recall **Moroka Park** as a shambolic wasteland. Now it's green and kempt with decorative railings and families sitting in Saturday sun.

Everyone, evidently, has a doctorate in "**Making Foreign Visitors Go Dewy-Eyed.**" A bunch of kids fiercely debated the geography of Canada (they all got "north"; debate was whether north of America, Britain or Russia). Adults were hospitable from the start and added an extra notch when the Canadian connection came up. When a kid grabbed Tony's pen I thought 'uh oh', but he was just eager to write our names on his hand.

Miraculously I did not get lost, a pity in a way because getting un-lost in Soweto is throat-lumping; people take such trouble over you. But we did traverse a wider cross-section than intended, which meant lots of exposure to changes like shops looking chic and houses looking bourgeois.

I've always felt a gap between the perception of Soweto from the white north – all danger, squalor, tension – and the sight of Soweto close up, which includes life, buzz, flowerbeds. Never more than this time, which made it doubly odd that the most jarring note came at the most sacred ground, the old Mandela home.

For his decades behind bars, his house looked pleasant and modest. Now it's behind its own bars, a massive ugly fence so tight that it seems to be choking the house. Next to it an electricity sub-station would look pretty. The

new guardhouse outside is scruffy and boarded, and they hunted down the dirtiest, raggedy-assed flag in existence for their big proud flagpole.

In contrast, the [Hector Pieterse Museum](#) (they spell him with an 'i' now) put up a good showing. Actual exhibits are stunningly few – a dustbin lid, a desk, some placards and two firmly welded guns – but the arsenal of photography, still and video, is a stomach-punching reminder.

And it's not a caricature; amazing. One expects depictions of pre-1994 life to be, for a while yet, snarling iron-teethed whiteys kicking gentle black choir-boys to pulp; but here, not really. The brutality shows up, all right, and so does the disdain which was arguably more odious and certainly more widespread. So does the extraordinariness of shoving Afrikaans down black throats; the old State writing its death certificate. But dissent is displayed as well, and plain ordinariness.

The net impact on me – and I would think anyone white, wherever they stood in the old days – is a surge of relief. How tiny are our troubles now, compared to the gross contortion involved in keeping our foot on the other guy's neck.

Hillbrow is populated by West Africans proud of their video kiosks and cellphone kiosks; entirely warm and chatty though less than entirely clear about the origins of their merchandise. In **Yeoville**, only, were we made to feel like markets – many people definitely wanted to sell us something, but were strangely coy about telling us what. Looked sort of like seedlings in packets. Newtown was spic and span and treed and under-occupied, an asset waiting to be exploited. Downtown is spoiled by litter – gutters are static rivers of waste, and papers and wrappers swirl like after a nuclear blast – but is on the up nonetheless, especially the west side, smarter and more occupied than a while ago.

Thanks, visitor to our shores, for awakening this Jo'burger to his turning world.

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