

Green Joburg

WENDING ITS WAY THROUGH THE CITY'S GREENEST AND MOST WOODED SUBURBS, THE CITY SIGHTSEEING GREEN TOUR GIVES PASSENGERS TIME TO REFLECT ON JOHANNESBURG'S COLOURFUL HERITAGE WHILE EXPLORING ONE OF LARGEST MAN-MADE URBAN FORESTS IN THE WORLD.

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The Westcliff hotel sits on a tree-covered hill opposite the Johannesburg Zoo.

There are 22 278 hectares of open space in Johannesburg.

Leafy green Zoo Lake is the perfect escape from the city.

Herman Heckstein had 3 million trees planted in Sachsenwald in 1904.

Cape Town may have Table Mountain, but Joburgers can brag about living in one of the world's most wooded cities. According to Johannesburg City Parks, there are around 2 343 parks, 22 nature reserves and 15 bird sanctuaries making up 22 278 hectares of open space and green areas within the city.

The new City Sightseeing Green Tour puts a spotlight on Johannesburg's leafy greenness. The verdant landscapes are complemented by tales of the city's history and culture, all told by locals.

The tour departs from The Zone in Rosebank (but you can buy tickets and hop on at any stop) at 30-minute intervals between 9am and 5pm everyday. A ticket will take you to four attractions on one of the carbon neutral buses, connecting with the red City Tour at the end of the route.

9:15am – Zoo Lake

It's 9am and we hop on the first double-decker, open-top red bus that arrives at the Zone. We're so excited by being almost within reach of the canopy of the tree tunnel we're passing through that we miss the first stop at Zoo Lake. Luckily we're able to hop off at the Johannesburg Zoo, which is just across the road.

After making it over Jan Smuts Avenue, we stroll across the lawns towards the man-made lake that lends its name to the area. We hire a colourful boat from The Boathouse Club (R15/adult per hour), hop in and start rowing.

Nearing the island in the centre of the lake, chattering egrets eye us out and take flight. The flurry of wings and squawking alert the ducks nearby to our presence. They spot our tube of Pringles and paddle over, stalking us like a shadow before we circle the

fountain nearby and lose them.

Out of the boat, we've worked up a bit of a thirst. We catch an Uber to The Four Seasons The Westcliff (there's a bit of a hill to summit) and order our refreshments.

From the elevated terrace of the Flames Restaurant, the foliage looks like a green carpet, matching the hue of my cucumber- and mint-based Eastern Skies cocktail. But there's not much time for rest, we've got a lot more to see.

10:37am – Johannesburg Zoo

You could spend an entire day exploring the 55 hectares that

Our ears fill with the sound of Tata Madiba's voice singing "Twinkle, Twinkle, little star"

house over 320 animal species at the Johannesburg Zoo (entrance: R80/adult and R50/children/students/pensioners). With exhibits ranging from the Ape House and the Lion enclosure, to those showcasing far-flung regions like the Amazon and Madagascar, there's more than enough to see and do.

The zoo is built on a piece of land that was donated to the city of Johannesburg by banker and mining magnet Hermann Heckstein in 1904. Interestingly, the Brit was one of the Randlords who played a major part in greening Joburg. He had three million pine trees planted

in the 5.3km² making up the Sachsenwald area, known today as Saxonwold, to be used for timber in the mines.

Considering that Joburg grew around the gold mines, this makes it slightly less surprising that it's one of the most wooded in the world, with the last tree census tipping the scales at a massive 10 million.

1:22pm – Ditsong National Museum of Military History

The bus trundles through the canopy of trees at Forest Town towards the National Military Museum (entrance: R40 for adults and R30 for children), the only museum of its kind in South Africa.

Situated next to the Johannesburg Zoo, the armoury houses over 40 000 items from the Anglo-Boer Wars, the Anglo-Zulu War, World War I and II, as well as the apartheid era. You'll find armoured vehicles, aircraft, weapons, uniforms and medals, as well as an angel-crowned monument standing in memory of the Second Anglo-Boer War.

David Rilly, the museums curator, gives us a guided tour. We're shown original military journals and personal log books from Apartheid-era struggles. He also guides us through exhibitions of aircraft, some of which are the only of their kind still in existence – a highlight being the German WWII-era Messerschmitt Me 262.

3:44pm – Constitution Hill

Next stop is Constitution Hill (entrance: R65 to R350 with a 25% discount for City Sightseeing City Tour ticket holders). We take the scenic Munro Drive to Houghton; as we pass the Nelson Mandela

Children's Fund and near the panoramic viewpoint overlooking the city's suburbs, our ears fill with Tata Madiba's voice singing "Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star".

Dubbed the 'Robben Island of Johannesburg', Constitution Hill is made up of former political prisons and a military fort. The area is famed for having housed many political activists (Nelson Mandela, Mahatma Ghandi, Joe Slovo, Albertina Sisulu and Winnie Madikizela-Mandela, to mention a few) throughout apartheid.

Today, it's a living museum with daily tours and serves as the seat of the Constitutional Court. You can catch a variety of guided tours that explore the various jails and delve into the precinct's history. If you're pushed for time like we were, you can get the essentials on the one-hour Highlights Tour.

From Constitution Hill, Green Tour passengers can hop onto the Red City Tour, which explores the Joburg CBD, at no extra cost.

Although the tour has come to an end, the colourful narratives of the city's history, art and architecture that we've heard throughout the day play on in our minds. We've learnt about Sir Herbert Baker and his national monuments, the Randlords, the effect of apartheid's choking hold and Desmond Tutu's journey to becoming the Cape's first black archbishop, all mixed in with African fables.

Some stories give me goosebumps, others make me laugh aloud. This city is a kaleidoscope of history and experiences. It's resilient and friendly. And this tour has reminded me that it has a heart of green, and gold. ●