

Perceptions of Soweto

Soweto. South West Township. Somewhat boring name, but those six letters encompass so much about recent South African history, and the place became symbolic of the whole country, going some way to explaining some of the weird perceptions that people, both domestically and internationally, have about South Africa, its towns, and its people.



Overview of part of Soweto

See, perception is a strange thing. The way you view a place depends largely on your own feelings about it; whether you know a place well or not often doesn't come into it. South Africa in general often comes under this banner – certainly in the run-up to the 2010 Football World Cup the newspapers in the UK were full of scare-stories about the country; the crime rate, the difficulty in getting to the stadiums, the lack of infrastructure etc; and many believed these stories despite few people ever having been there and seen it for themselves. They were simply reporting on what they'd heard from their friends, or still focussed on what they remember the country used to be like. (...)

These perceptions, interestingly, are often enhanced by what the media and society call 'ex-pats' (immigrants, but white, and therefore 'acceptable'), who may have their own agendas and view of what the country has become. Especially as those ex-pats generally are white, and doubly so if they lived through the Apartheid regime. They may tell you that the townships are violent, completely unsafe, especially for tourists. They may tell you that it's dangerous to walk in the cities at night, and that everyone lives in houses protected by electric fences and even security guards because it's the only way they can sleep at night without the fear of aggravated burglary. They may even tell you to avoid the Johannesburg area completely and spend all your time in Cape Town. (...)

Most people have heard of Soweto. And most people will have an impression in their minds about it – dangerous, unruly, everyone's out to get you, anarchy, rioting. Soweto, in British terms, is a council estate with 3.5 million people in it. (...) And yet.... The centre of Soweto is a calm oasis, pretty much given over to tourists, with cafes, designated walks, museums, and local entertainment. While some of the outlying suburbs look 'rough', this is more to do with badly-built housing (in some cases, mere shacks – the town was built cheaply and quickly, to house people the national government literally didn't want to deal with) rather than the people. While a tourist might be singled-out as an obvious 'outsider', this is no less true in any other major urban area – there are some parts of every city, even those closest to home, into which I'd be wary of travelling.

The area later known as Soweto was founded in the early 1930s, specifically to house Blacks that the South African government didn't want living in Johannesburg, so even from the start it's had that 'outsider' feel; this was, indeed, the very purpose and nature of 'townships' – they were created without much structure, often literally thrown together, as a place for non-whites to live, outside of 'proper society'. They often had pretty much no electricity, water, or sewerage provision, nor was any heed given to provide education.

The first settlement here was named 'Orlando', after the responsible government official; other settlements soon followed. The term 'Soweto' wasn't applied until the early 1960s, when the local government asked for suggestions for an all-encompassing name to cover all the townships to the south-west of Johannesburg; the final name being decided upon by committee. As you can tell.