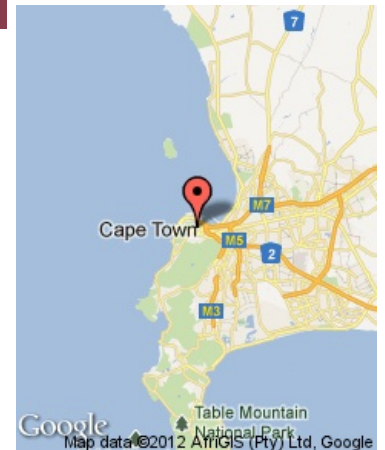


Township Tours by Bike



Highlights

Add a true taste of daily life to your South African adventure and contribute to a project that provides people with jobs and transportation. AWOL teams up with the Bicycling Empowerment Network (BEN) to provide township tours by bicycle through the Cape Town township, Masiphumelele. You'll visit a school, a local healer and eat lunch in a South African home. Get out of your comfort zone and meet people striving to improve their lives.

Plenty of people go to Cape Town for a traditional holiday - the beach, Table Mountain, museums and vineyards - but if you want to get to know South Africa on a different level the best way is to take one of the township tours. Under apartheid non-whites were forced into the townships which were always constructed on the outskirts of cities. Many townships still struggle with poverty and lack of decent housing, hygiene and municipal services. When first created, this township was called Site 5 but the residents re-named it Masiphumelele, which in Xhosa means "we will succeed". Now people are beginning to see that townships are worth visiting and have their own place in the South African tourism industry.

Transportation is a huge problem for those living in the townships - if there's no money for public transportation, walking, sometimes 10-15km a journey, is the only option. At the BEN bike shop in Masiphumelele, unemployed African locals are trained to be bike mechanics and entrepreneurs, fixing old bikes from Europe and then selling them on.

This tour is unique in that it provides real jobs for people in the community. Bike mechanics repair the bicycles that you will rent and use on this tour and local tour guides will show you around. On your tour, you'll meet Phumlani, who is not only the BEN bike shop manager but also owns the business. You will also have the chance to visit a local pre-school and meet a Sangoma, a traditional healer. It will be clear how empowering it is to be a business owner and this sentiment will be echoed often on the trip as you will hear from people whose goal it is to run their own business.

Is it for me?

On your last trips, how well did you get to know the local people? Apart from a tour guide, did you really get to know the people in Mauritius or Thailand or Mexico? Did you really understand their lifestyle? If you felt that like that was missing from your last holiday, then this will be a trip you will love and remember for a long time. It's not physically exhausting as the riding is done at a leisurely pace with many stops. If you only want to stay in luxury and are not keen to leave your resort, then do not book this tour. But if you want to get away from all of that, are not afraid to confront the many troubling and possibly upsetting issues facing South Africa and are passionate about supporting a mechanism for sustainable growth and job creation in an underdeveloped part of the world, then sign up to hop on that bike.

Accommodation

No accommodation is provided but lunch is included in the price should you opt for it. If not you will be treated to African tea and snacks.

Itinerary

Prices from

107 GBP (full day) per person

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A typical bike tour itinerary:

You will be collected from your Cape Town accommodation and transferred to the BEN workshop in the township by a highly qualified guide.

After being fitted out for a bike, the ride begins while your guide tells you about the township and everyday life.

First stop is a pre-school where you will meet local children and see just how hard the teachers have it in the township; a major issue in Masiphumelele is overcrowding in schools and day care centres (weekdays only - on a Sunday you can visit a Gospel Church instead).

Next is a visit to the Sangoma, the traditional healer. Sangomas use herbs and holistic healing, dancing and drumming and believe that everyone is guided by spirits of ancestors and that not listening to the ancestors can cause everything from colds to mental illnesses.

The last formal stop on the tour is to a local woman who opens her home to the groups. She will serve tea, perhaps the popular red tea or rooibos tea, and snacks or a traditional African lunch.

Other possible stops include visiting local artisans.

Details

Getting there

You will be picked up from your accommodation in Cape Town and driven to the start of your tour in the township of Masiphumelele.

Price includes

Transfer to and from Cape Town accommodation, South African qualified guide, entrance fees, bike, local African food.

All tours are private and require a minimum 2 guests and maximum 5 guests. Please enquire on special rates for 5+.

Experience required

A reasonable interest is all that is needed

Travellers should bring

Make sure you wear close-toed shoes and comfortable clothing you can move in and a camera.

Reviews (2)

Reviews of this experience

“ Along the dirt tracks of Masiphumelele, we arrive at the bicycle shop, stocked with imported, second-hand bikes and operated by local residents. One of the first things I notice is a striking mural, which graces the walls of one of the containers. ‘This was painted by the children,’ our guide, Mzwamadoda Zwai explains proudly. ‘This was painted by the children?’ I gasp. In fact, all of these containers comprise an entire complex for the youth including; a sewing centre, a small church, an arts and crafts centre and the bicycle shop itself.

We are each handed sublime, old fashioned bikes with long, curved handle bars, which you have to pedal backwards to brake. After a rusty start (it’s been years since I’ve ridden a bike!), we are soon cycling through the streets of Masiphumelele, with nothing to separate us from the shacks, houses, dirt tracks and local people. I already feel part of the experience.

I don’t believe in God, but I’m smiling. I can’t help it

Our first stop is a Sunday church service and we can hear the rumble of gospel, beckoning from within. We take a seat at the back and observe throngs of people of all ages, in joyous song; dancing and clapping with such energy. When the church leader orders everybody to shake hands with, or hug the person next to them, we are no longer voyeurs, but have folded into this scene. The congregation are shaking us by the hand and offering a warm embrace. ‘I know you,’ one woman says to me, ‘You have a familiar face’. I don’t believe in God, but I’m smiling. I can’t help it. I glance around and the rest of the tour group are too.

If doctors can’t heal your ailments, an African traditional healer can

Our second stop in the township of Masiphumelele is the home of a sangoma (an African traditional healer). We cycle past a local shebeen – the music is pumping and loud, in stark contrast to the church from which we have just come. Off road, we dismount and our walk takes us through a myriad of dirt roads and small shacks. It’s raining heavily and large puddles block the majority of our paths. I’m wondering if these shacks suffer flooding when the rain hits. My thoughts are broken as we reach the home of the sangoma.

This is where you come if doctors can’t heal your ailments; be it physical, emotional or spiritual.

We are sat on wooden benches around a low-lit, bare room. A woman sits in a corner with a drum whilst a young traditional healer emerges (the traditional healer's daughter). 'Welcome,' she says. Welcome is also written in many different languages on the walls.

Mzwamadoda is teaching us some Xhosa words, but we struggle with the pronunciation. It doesn't come naturally to us to make sounds with the back of the throat at the same time as vowel sounds. We simply don't have the linguistic coordination. Mzwamadoda offers to translate my questions, as the sangoma doesn't speak English.

She is wearing an intricate headdress with tassels, which she tells me takes a full day to make. Her ancestors spoke to her and told her to make the headdress in the colours of red, blue and white. It is these beads that let her know when someone is coming and, thanks to her ancestors, she already knows what is wrong with a person, before they tell her. The bells on her feet act as a drum, when she dances to evoke her ancestors. Although the role of traditional healer is largely inherent in her community, they have been known to share their art with other traditional healers. Beneath the costume and dancing, the piercing eyes of a wise woman peer out. I stare back at her, wondering what it must be like to possess such ability.

Masiphumelele: 'We shall succeed'

Our third and final stop is Charlotte's Place – a small, but cozy shack which she shares with her granddaughter, Tamika. We huddle in from the rain and sit in her living room, sipping on welcome cups of tea (a detox tea, grown in the Cederberg Mountains) and nibbling on delicious chunks of Vetkoek. Charlotte recalls her childhood – her mother was a domestic worker for an Israeli family in Tamboerskloof, so Charlotte grew up in a large house, dining on mussels and herring, and playing with children from a local boarding school. When the Israeli family left, they bought her family a house in Mitchell's Plein to thank them for their hard work. Township life, in contrast, took a little getting used to for Charlotte.

Charlotte has been waiting for a house for a long time. She doesn't work full time, which is what is required to qualify for housing, and her job as a tourist guide is seasonal. Despite this, she would never leave Masiphumelele, because she loves her community. It's a community that shares, a community that toyi-toyi's for better education for all and a community that campaigns to empower its women. In 2008, Masiphumelele was awarded the annual Reconciliation Award from the Institute of Justice and Reconciliation (IJR), in recognition of its efforts to live in peace with foreigners and resist violence. 'Tamika is always asking 'why?' and 'what?'" exclaims Charlotte, 'Perhaps she will become South Africa's first female president.'

Before you think of typing 'Xhosa customs' into Wikipedia, or driving with your camera pressed against the glass of an air-conditioned bus, think of taking a bicycle tour of Noordhoek's Masiphumelele instead. This great day tour is fully interactive and opens your eyes to age-old Xhosa customs and the township spirit of togetherness. It's a unique opportunity to say: 'I was there'.

Lisa Nevitt
Cape Town Magazine, 2010 ”

CapeTownMagazine reviewing Township Tours by Bike

“ We very much enjoyed the Ben Bikes Township Tour. Our guide was very friendly and knowledgeable and helped us get a glimpse into life in the Masi township. Seeing the township by bike was a unique and intimate experience. We found the township tour to be an important part of our trip to South Africa to gain an understanding and appreciation for how much of the population lives in these communities. The visit to the healer, the local businesswoman, and a local restaurant was a great experience. ”

Tracy reviewing Township Tours by Bike