


Off the Beaten Track Tour in Inner-City Johannesburg: A Supply-Side Perspective

Abstract

Mitchell C.M. MALOHVA 
School of Tourism and Hospitality,
University of Johannesburg

Christian M. ROGERSON 
School of Tourism and Hospitality,
University of Johannesburg, Email,
chrismr@uj.ac.za

Jayne M. ROGERSON 
School of Tourism and Hospitality,
University of Johannesburg, Email,
jayner@uj.ac.za

Julia K. GIDDY 
School of Tourism and Hospitality,
University of Johannesburg, Email,
juliag@uj.ac.za
Corresponding Author

A growing trend in European and North American cities is for tourists to move outside of the usual geographical spaces of tourism precincts and go ‘off the beaten track’. This paper contributes to international literature on ‘new urban tourism’ and off-the-beaten track tourism by examining this phenomenon in a major Global South urban tourism destination. Use is made of a range of methodologies. These include a systematic review of existing literature, examination of the specificities of historical urban economic restructuring in Johannesburg, and structured interviews with eight tour operators. Analysis of the suppliers of inner-city tours was undertaken to profile the development of tour enterprises, the different features of the tours, and the business challenges of tour operators including through the COVID-19 pandemic. It is shown that off the beaten track tours reintroduce tourism to spaces in central Johannesburg that formerly were the core of the historical development of tourism in the city and that these tours are part of the place-making and redevelopment initiatives for the inner-city.

Keywords: inner-cities; new urban tourism; off-the-beaten track tours; place making; Johannesburg

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Introduction

The evolution, changing character and challenges of inner-city spaces have long been a focus of attention for tourism scholars. In a series of influential studies which were produced in the 1980s Jansen-Verbeke (1986, 1988) highlighted that inner city tourism was emerging as a theme of inter-disciplinary research with contributions emanating from urban studies, town planning and tourism. Arguably, the impetus for growing policy and academic interest in inner-cities as tourism spaces was their potential as assets for building urban tourism and the associated spin-offs for local economic development (Jansen-Verbeke, 1988). In European cities the traditional role of heritage and cultural attractions situated in inner cities was identified for growing numbers of visitors (van der Borg et al., 1996). Issues surrounding inner-city tourism’s role as a component in local economic regeneration and the making of urban tourism precincts have been documented particularly for destinations in North America and Europe (Hoffman et al., 2003; Ioannides & Timothy, 2010; Smith et al., 2023). The rise of urban touristic enclaves was boosted by the realization of property developers and urban governments that spaces formerly used for factories, warehousing, markets, railway stations or docklands could be readily repurposed into spaces of consumption (Ioannides & Petridou, 2016). Tourism was acknowledged as a key driver of contemporary urban change and “because of its ‘symbolic weight’ viewed as a critical means to reposition cities in a rapidly changing environment” (Novy, 2011: 78). The transformation of inner-cities into standardized tourism enclaves or ‘tourist bubbles’ must be understood as part of neoliberal entrepreneurial strategies associated with place-competitive re-imaging (Hoffman et al., 2003; Ioannides & Petridou, 2016). In recent years newer research foci have appeared concerning tourism in inner-cities. In particular, policy questions surrounding tourism gentrification and ‘overtourism’ have been propelled onto the scholarly agenda concerning the impacts of tourism in inner cities (Colomb & Novy, 2016; Horn & Visser, 2023; Klepej & Marot, 2024; Koens & Milano, 2024; Mendes, 2020; Novy & Colomb, 2019). The socio-spatial effects of intensive tourism in historic inner-city areas of European cities has galvanized policy concern and debates around justice and the right to the city (Parralejo & Diaz-Parra, 2021). Of increasing interest also is the shifting geographies of urban tourism in general and within that of the particular role of inner-city spaces. As far back as the 1980s it was contended that “the spatial dimension of tourism and recreational activities in the inner city is of increasing significance” (Jansen-Verbeke, 1986: 80)

An important trend which is observable in several cities of Europe and North America is for tourists to move outside of the usual geographical areas of tourism precincts and instead to go ‘off the beaten track’ (Gravari-Barbas, 2021; Maitland, 2016, 2022; Nagy, 2017). Visitors search out the ‘backstage’ of inner cities, and there to explore “places that are distinctive and uncontrived, not planned as tourism zones” (Maitland, 2016: 19). This form of development of tourism and leisure activities beyond the traditional spatial areas of inner cities is now a feature of the new post-Fordist, post-industrial urban political economy in destinations in the Global North (Ioannides & Petridou, 2016; Novy, 2011). Currently, the state of research relating to such trends in ‘the other half of urban tourism’, namely cities in the Global South, is sparse (Henning, 2023; Rogerson & Rogerson, 2021a). In the case of South Africa only limited work has been undertaken (Rogerson & Rogerson, 2017; Rogerson & Visser, 2020, Rogerson et al, 2024). It is against such a backdrop that the aim in this paper is to contribute an exploratory study which examines the makers and directions charted by off-the-beaten track tourism in Johannesburg, South Africa’s largest city and economic powerhouse. The urban analyst, Martin Murray (2011), styles Johannesburg variously as a ‘city of extremes’, ‘the quintessential apartheid city’ and “a harsh city of unmitigated contradictions, grim paradoxes and understated ironies” (Murray, 2011: 4). Nevertheless, as indexed by numbers of tourism trips and total bed nights Johannesburg remains South



Africa's leading destination for tourists (Rogerson & Rogerson, 2021b). As a major urban tourism destination in the Global South the chequered record of Johannesburg has spawned a rich scholarship (Barnes & Rogerson, 2021; Booyens, 2021; Naicker & Rogerson, 2017; Rogerson, 2002, 2004, 2024; Rogerson & Rogerson, 2016, 2019, 2021c; Rogerson, 2014, 2018, 2020). The focus here is a supply-side analysis of off-the-beaten track tourism taking place in inner-city spaces. The research explores the tour operators, their tours and business challenges, themes which differentiate this study from previous works discussing walking tours in Johannesburg as a form of 'slum tourism' (Frenzel, 2014, 2018; Hoogendoorn & Giddy, 2017).

Literature review

Occurring at the end of the 20th century Gravari-Barbas et al. (2019) write of the emergence of a 'velvet revolution' in urban tourism. This was because of the desires and expectations of 'mature' tourists on the one hand and of the responsiveness of local tourist systems on the other hand. Cohorts of 'mature' tourists revisiting city destinations with which they were familiar felt comfortable to move into different urban spaces. Beginning in the first decade of the 21st century the adaptation of local tourist systems to this group of visitors caused a burst of new tourist offerings allowing them to experience the city in a more segmented and differentiated manner than hitherto possible with the usual tour of major city sights (Gravari-Barbas et al. 2019). For new urban tourists, taking part in a city's everyday life became a central aspect of the tourism experience (Giddy & Hoogendoorn, 2019; Larsen, 2019). Everyday locations in cities exercised appeal as multi-purpose 'heterogeneous tourist spaces' as opposed to the enclavic character of tourist bubbles (Pappalepore, 2010). Especially among leading world tourism cities the trend to get off the beaten track and to feel connected to the everyday was at the core of 'real' experiences for cohorts of what are styled as 'new' urban tourists (Maitland & Newman, 2009a). Maitland (2016: 14) draws attention to the growing trend that in many cases "tourists want to explore the city beyond tourism precincts and strive to get off the beaten track and discover the 'real' city". Using case studies in London the works of Maitland (2010, 2013) and of Maitland and Newman (2004, 2009a) discuss the emergence of new urban tourists' searching for experiences associated with everyday life as well as synergies between these tourists and local residents. In France Condevaux et al. (2016: 10) link the development of tourism in ordinary areas to the reversal of stigmas that often previously were associated with such spaces. The shift is for visitors to immerse themselves in everyday life as new urban tourists "prefer the authentic feeling to the artificial experience and become a temporary member of local communities, emancipating themselves from the suggestions and traditional offers produced by the tourism industry" (Stors & Kagermeier, 2013: 115). New urban tourists are seen in many respects as 'explorers' in their visits to spaces that seemingly have not been commodified for tourists. Maitland (2022) contrasts such areas with the choreographed land uses characteristic of areas of cities that have been carefully programmed for visitor experiences. It is argued that these off the beaten track spaces are places in which visitors encounter local city residents which can imbue them with a sense of 'coolness'. As pointed out by Gravari-Barbas (2024: 243) in many respects the evolution of new urban tourism "challenges the existing demarcation lines between defined tourism places and others, between tourism sights and everyday ordinary places". Indeed, Page & Duignan (2023: 4) highlight that the recognition of the plurality of urbanism and tourism has caused the blurring of the boundaries of everyday life and tourism thereby "marking a significant paradigm shift towards themes associated with urbanism". It is stressed that "mundane encounters between locals and visitors constitute an important part of the current vogue of urban travels" (Dirksmeier & Helbrecht, 2015: 277).

Beginning in the 1990s therefore a trend in many cities has been that spaces with few conventional tourist attractions have become desirable locations for consumption by both residents and visitors (Novy & Colomb, 2019). This has been the consequence of visitors seeking to move beyond the tourist bubbles of mass tourism as well as the appearance of 'marginal' or 'ordinary' spaces that seek to develop tourism. It is observed that these forces "are particularly important in touristically hyperpolarized places, inducing urban conflicts and tensions (such as in Venice, Barcelona or Paris) making it necessary to go beyond established tourism precincts" (Gravari-Barbas, 2024: 242). The rise of alternative tourist spaces and products has been documented for cities such as Berlin (Novy, 2011), Budapest (Nagy, 2017), Copenhagen (Stors & Kagermeier, 2013), Krakow (Matoga & Pawlowska, 2018), New York (Novy, 2011), Paris (Gravari-Barbas, 2024), and most extensively for the case of London (Maitland, 2016; Smith, 2009a). In particular, the London research conducted by Maitland and Newman (2004) and by Maitland (2008, 2016) in the areas of Bankside, Hoxton, Islington and Spitalfields disclosed the attractiveness of these spaces for both cohorts of domestic as well as international visitors to Britain's capital city. In New York the valorization of cultural capital in the inner-city space of Harlem was vital to its growing popularization as a tourism area (Hoffman, 2003). Maitland (2010) directs attention to shifts occurring in the geographical patterns of tourism in the well-established destinations of major world cities. Although cohorts of first-time visitors continue with the traditional arrangements of visits to iconic attractions much city tourism is taking on a different character and spatial direction. Many visitors to cities desire to move beyond traditional tourism precincts and search out everyday life and the 'real city'. Maitland (2010) points out that these visitors want to go outside the enclavic tourist spaces which have been created for them and instead seek out heterogeneous tourist spaces where a broad range of activities and people co-exist. The mundane practices of everyday life can be "attractive to visitors and act as a signifier of the real or authentic city" (Maitland, 2010: 10). What are termed as 'new urban tourists' engage in practices that value non-touristic neighbourhoods, non-designed local experiences and support private accommodation (such as Airbnb) (Larsen, 2019). The growing cohort of new urban tourists therefore seek additional experiences to those offered by the traditional sights and places of interest in cities. The appeal is towards areas because of their authentic qualities as opposed to 'staged authenticity'. In non-touristic neighbourhoods new urban tourists enjoy interacting with locals rather than tourists in local coffee-shops or restaurants (Larsen, 2019). For new urban tourists the architecture and



built environment significant for them is not iconic, monumental and planned, but the ordinary and everyday fabric of the city (Maitland, 2016).

If everyday life drew visitors off the beaten track, it was the presence of locals that marked out areas as places where it is possible to experience the ‘real’ city. In the example of London, it was recorded that the appeal of everyday life caused increasing flows of visitors to go off the beaten track in search of the real city destination (Maitland & Newman, 2009b). The spaces of attraction are the ‘heterogenous’ spaces with blurred boundaries where an array of activities and (often) different populations can be found (Nagy, 2017). Such areas are described as “stages on which transitional identities are performed alongside the everyday practices of residents, passers-by, and workers” (Gravari-Barbas, 2024: 243). The new emerging geographies of urban tourism are denoted by such places ‘off the beaten track’ as visitors’ search for distinctiveness (Maitland, 2019; Smith, 2019b). The synergies between tourists and residents is at the heart of “reconfiguring, reimagining and reimagining places” (Maitland, 2017: 67). Increased visitor penetration of non-central areas of London is interpreted as an attempt to access ‘backstage’ regions which reflect better the contemporary reality of ordinary life in the city as opposed to the usual tourist bubble of Central London which is “regarded as an environment ‘staged’ for tourists, rather than an authentic experience” (Smith, 2019b: 227). Off the beaten track tourism has been disclosed in once unfashionable areas of several inner cities of the Global North (Maitland, 2017). The spaces visited are “characteristically formerly industrial, working class and under-privileged, often with a strong representation of ethnic minority groups” (Maitland, 2017: 72). Several researchers in urban tourism are excavating the dynamics of these alternative, lively, and mundane neighbourhoods which are the focus of new urban tourists (Maitland, 2019, 2022; Matoga & Pawlowska, 2018; Nagy, 2017; Stors, 2022). In terms of urban form these urban spaces are in marked contrast to tourist hotspots with often monumental architecture and layout as they appear “organic and unplanned” and with comparatively high density and buildings on a human scale (Maitland, 2017: 72). Indeed, these multi-purpose and heterogeneous spaces often are considered as ‘edgy’ urban areas and sometimes as stigmatized places (Nagy, 2017; Novy, 2011).

Methods

This research was informed by a range of methodologies. First, a bibliographical analysis was pursued of international literature on ‘off the beaten track’ tourism in cities. It was demonstrated that existing studies concentrate on city destinations in Europe, the United Kingdom and USA with minimal focus on cities in the Global South. Second, the study is anchored further on literature concerning the specificities of historical urban change and economic restructuring in Johannesburg. This focus necessitated the collection and analysis of material relating to both broad patterns of urban spatial change in the city and the specific evolution of the inner city which is the historic urban core of Johannesburg (Murray, 2011). Third, field research and structured interviews were conducted with eight operators of inner-city tours in Johannesburg. This contributed to an audit of the current state and characteristics of off-the-beaten track tours taking place in the inner-city and its surrounds. Interviews which were conducted with the operators or suppliers of inner-city tours sought to analyse the development of these tour enterprises, the different features of the tours, and the business challenges of tour operators including through the COVID-19 pandemic. At the time of the research an internet search disclosed ten companies as operating inner city tours in Johannesburg; eight of these enterprises participated in the study.

Results and discussion

The results and discussion are organised into three sub-sections of material. First, a context is provided on the changing character of inner-city Johannesburg, the study area. The next two sub-sections draw upon the interviews conducted with eight tour operators and supported by findings from other research. The second sub-section provides a profile of the tour operators and a discussion of their tours. Attention then turns to their operations, business challenges and responses to the COVID-19 pandemic.

The inner-city of Johannesburg

In its formative development the inner-city represented the historical economic core of Johannesburg. This urban space consolidated as the location of finance houses, banks, and focal point for both industrial and retail business establishments. Further, the inner city became the entertainment space of Johannesburg for “it was here that powerful real estate entrepreneurs largely concentrated their ornate theatres, cinemas, grand hotels, and countless upscale restaurants, cafes and other eateries” (Murray, 2011: 54). From the period of the 1930s as Johannesburg began to emerge as a leisure tourism destination the inner-city developed as the spatial zone for tourism activities. This dominance was manifested by the emergence of a cluster of accommodation service establishments (Rogerson & Rogerson, 2018, 2019; Rogerson, 2020). The prime role of the inner-city as economic hub and tourist axis of Johannesburg continued into the apartheid years (Rogerson & Rogerson, 2021c; Rogerson, 2018). Starting in the 1980s the economic and physical condition of inner-city Johannesburg began to exhibit signs of socio-economic stagnation and decline (Turok et al., 2021). As documented by Murray (2011: xiii) from the early 1980s “the conjoined processes of capital disinvestment and municipal neglect in the central city left a trail of destruction in their wake producing a shattered landscape”. With progressive capital flight to emergent decentralized property nodes such as Rosebank or Sandton the central area of Johannesburg partially dissolved and imploded, haemorrhaging at a rapid rate all kinds of businesses, jobs and middle-income residents as well as ceding its pre-eminent position as the primary locus of corporate decision-making. Turok et al. (2021) document that the spiral of decline of the inner-city and relocation of businesses to the Northern suburbs was driven by both push and pull considerations. For Murray (2011) Johannesburg inner-city metamorphosed



into a blighted space, a ghetto of exclusion, and a territorially stigmatized space of concentrated distress. At the time of democratic transition in 1994 “the historical downtown core of Johannesburg lay in ruins, with decaying high-rise office blocs boarded up, commercial establishments closed-down, and crumbling buildings invaded by homeless squatters. Once a vibrant hub for upscale business and commerce, the central city had sunk into a state of suspended animation, transformed into a derelict and dangerous place during the day and a virtual ghost town at night” (Murray 2011: xiii). A corresponding geographical shift occurred in the Johannesburg tourism economy with the emergence and strengthening of new decentralized tourism spaces in the city. As is documented by Rogerson (2020) the tourism economy of Johannesburg inner-city experienced a period of dramatic decline and readjustment. Unquestionably, the major component in the inner-city tourism economy was no longer leisure but informal business tourism with the activities of cross-border shoppers from various parts of sub-Saharan Africa (Rogerson, 2018). In terms of encouraging leisure visitors the city of Johannesburg as a whole experienced an image and reputation problem because of urban decay and associated issues of crime, grime and security (Malleka et al., 2022). The space of inner-city Johannesburg suffered a negative image as a ‘no go’ zone for visitors (Rogerson & Kaplan, 2005).

According to Baro (2017) since the 2000s a make-over towards the re-imagining of Johannesburg from a fearful and violent city to a tourist-friendly destination has been taking place. This make-over has been associated with broader development initiatives both for the promotion of Johannesburg as a ‘World Class African City’ and the launch of initiatives for the redevelopment of inner-city spaces (Rogerson, 2004). Johannesburg was associated with ‘changing tourism imaginaries’ and the city represented as a compelling leisure destination with heritage, sports, lifestyle and cultural attractions (Bam, 2016). In general, city marketers sought to challenge the narrative of Johannesburg as an unattractive and unsafe destination for leisure travellers and attempted to present an alternative or counter-hegemonic discourse, including about the inner-city. Significant emphasis was devoted to the Johannesburg’s ‘world class infrastructure’. The inclusion of the inner-city in shifting tourism imaginaries of Johannesburg was viewed as one of the most significant shifts and “contesting the dystopian imaginaries that took hold in the late 1980s and 1990s” (Bam, 2016: 67). Travel guides and articles in mainstream Western publications praised the rejuvenation initiatives taking root in the central areas of the city and urged readers to visit. As Baro (2017) points out according to the *Rough Guide* travel site in 2015 Johannesburg became a ‘hip city’ as it was ranked at the top of its annual destinations to visit for that year. Likewise, Bam (2016) could style Johannesburg as emerging as a ‘hot’ tourism destination and included in the league tables of top global tourist destinations. Marketing tourism discourses even went so far as to celebrate the city’s pan-African culture fused with urban ways of living (Bam, 2016: 61).

Travel guides began to flag walking tours and other travels in the inner-city as a ‘must’ for tourists to the city. Towards the close of the decade Frenzel (2018: 52) could observe “inner city tourism in Johannesburg is on the rise” and that new tour operators were launching inner city tours. The Newtown area with its cluster of heritage, arts and creative activities was represented as at the heart of the resurgence of the Johannesburg inner city (Bam, 2016). Frenzel (2020) draws our attention to greater flows of international tourists plus domestic travellers boosting the economy of the inner-city and writes of the rise of ‘edgy urban tourism’. Undergirding the reinvention of inner-city tourism was a combination of influences. For one observer issues of improved cleanliness and safety in parts of the city “have been at the forefront of changes in the perception of the inner city in order to change its negative image with a goal of attracting visitors” (Baro, 2017: 51). Frenzel (2020) stresses also the transformation of former low-income neighbourhoods through gentrification and private sector initiatives around property regeneration, most especially in the Maboneng precinct and surrounds which enjoyed a boost from a creative industries cluster (Gregory, 2016). The opening of new food markets was a further injection into the tourism assets of parts of the inner city (Naicker & Rogerson, 2017). Finally, credit must be given to the post-2010 entrepreneurial initiatives of the tour guiding companies which contributed to the opening-up of formerly neglected areas for tourist visitation. Attention turns now to profile these entrepreneurial initiatives concerning the development of off the beaten track tourism in Johannesburg inner city.

The tour enterprises and inner-city tours

A wide range of tourism assets situated in Johannesburg inner-city have been tapped by the tour operators. The tour companies through which the interviews were conducted all offer uniquely packaged tours that aim to introduce the tourist to a variety of off the beaten track sites in the inner city. The largest of the tour operators have fixed premises as their base of operations in the inner city; others function by agreeing a fixed point at which to meet tour participants. Figure 1 shows the areas of



Johannesburg inner city covered by the tour companies and the location of offices of the tour operators with fixed premises.

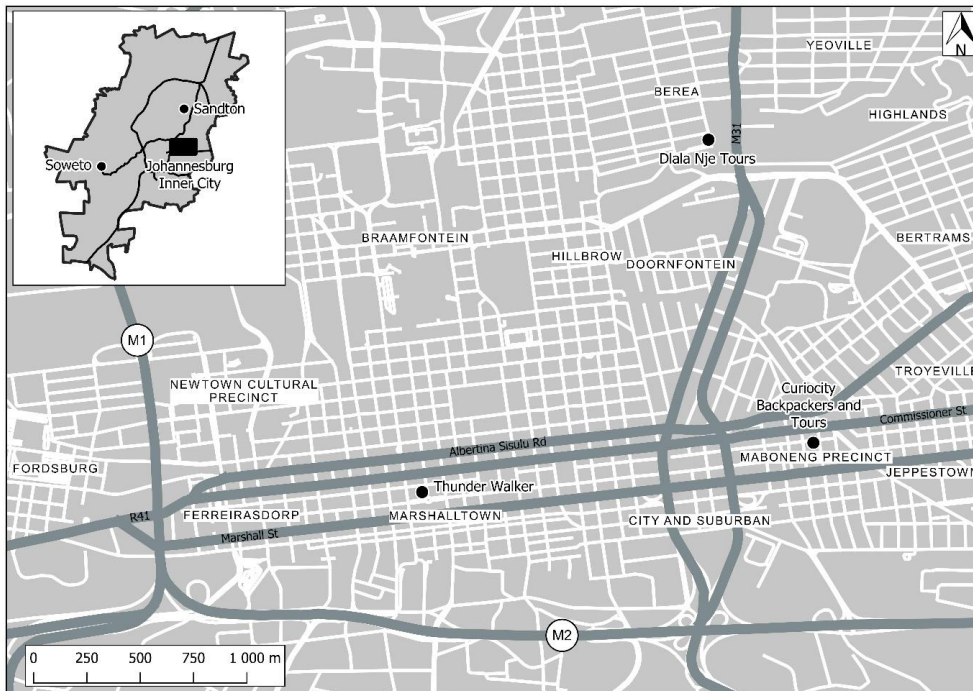


Figure 1. Suburbs covered by inner city tours in Johannesburg

Source: Authors

Table 1 shows that tours are focussed in several areas of the inner city variously on its history heritage assets, food offerings, street art/ graffiti, different cultural elements and the lifeworld of ordinary suburbs.

Table 1. Tour Enterprises and Their Tour Activities in Inner-City Johannesburg.

Tour Enterprise	Profile	Areas of Inner City
Dlala Nje	This tour company was started in 2012 by two former journalists who wanted to challenge people's perception of Hillbrow as the area was branded as a no-go area due to crime. The base of operations is at Ponte Tower, Hillbrow	Mainly Hillbrow with focus on history, architecture and adventure (fitness).
Curiosity Backpackers	The brainchild of a skating enthusiast who founded the tour company with the purpose of giving people a reason to stay in the inner city without looking to Johannesburg's Northern suburbs for accommodation. The enterprise is based at Maboneng and has 21 staff members who are responsible for the operations of accommodation and services but only two tour guides who conduct the tours.	Maboneng precinct, Fairview, Troyeville and Jeppestown, Marshalltown, Ferreirasdorp and Newtown. Packages are uniquely designed to suit each individual as well as the offer of standard tour packages. Tours focus on history, heritage, food, and adventure including a skateboarding tour
Past Experiences	Established 2009 as the first Johannesburg walking tour enterprise. The tour company is individually run by a woman who is a passionate entrepreneur for the love and appreciation of the inner city and especially of art and graffiti. The entrepreneur often works together with local artists and architects to assist tours.	Ferreirasdorp, Newtown, Marshalltown, Bertrams, Maboneng and Braamfontein with packages dependent on the tour chosen. Tours focus on themes of history, heritage, art and graffiti.
Joburg Places	One of the leading and most influential tour operators in the inner city. Founded by an entrepreneur who has been styled as an inner-city regeneration activist with a passion to support the revival of central Johannesburg. The entrepreneur's vision injected new life into several historic properties in downtown Johannesburg. The enterprise's headquarters termed Thunder Walker is situated in Gandhi Square Precinct, Marshalltown. The heritage building, a former bank office originally called Somerset House, was opened in 1904 just two decades after the 1886 gold discoveries which led to the foundation of Johannesburg as a mining settlement.	Geographically operated tours widely across the inner-city spaces with hematic foci of history/heritage, food, and culture. One tour centred on farming in the inner-city.
Eenblond Tours	Founded by a travel blogger who enjoyed experiencing new places and interacting with the local people. Through her experiences she saw a gap in the market and wanted to share these experiences with people and give them an opportunity to immerse themselves with the local cultures, food and history without being afraid of being in the city. The company is individually run but often the founder does have local guides that help her with tours and a driver to transport guests.	Melville, Fordsborg and Brixton. Tours cover themes of street food, art and history.
Jozy Triangle	Founded in 2010s by an individual who was fascinated by street art and its history. Through the tours he wanted people to experience the inner city themselves without observing how the inner city is portrayed on the media, so the tours aim at changing people's perception of the city. The tours are focused on educating people and taking them through a historical journey on art, food, fashion, lifestyle and architecture.	Different 'hotspots' in Yeoville, Maboneng, Marshalltown, and Newtown. Themes of tours include history, street art/graffiti, culture and food.
Micro-Adventure Tours	Independently run and established in 2017 after the founder was retrenched from his corporate position after 15 years of working in IT. The tours are organised and derive from a passion of travelling and fitness such that the founder was able to create cycling tours from these elements. The founder wants people to familiarize themselves with the inner city and look beyond the stigmas and fuse themselves with the local people and learn about the history, art and food.	Parktown, Hillbrow, Yeoville, Victoria Yards, Ellis Park, Maboneng, Newtown, Braamfontein, Gandhi Square and Marshalltown. Themes of tours history, food, nightlife, and architecture.
Roving Bantu Tours and Kitchen	Established by an apartheid exile the entrepreneur. started the tour company and restaurant with an idea to retain authenticity and create a welcoming and relaxed space for people from all walks of life. Although the company has five employees responsible for the restaurant, tours are conducted by the founder only.	Located in Brixton, the tours cover the areas of Braamfontein, Melville, Fiets and Yeoville. Tours mainly on history, heritage, culture.

Source: Authors

The tours presented to tourists in Johannesburg cover almost the entire inner city, with emphasis placed on routes that explore historical buildings, markets, art, graffiti, restaurants, and monuments. The regeneration of the inner-city spaces around



Newtown, Maboneng and Braamfontein opened opportunities for tour operators to undertake a range of tours in these spaces of inner-city Johannesburg. For individuals tours could be tailored to clients' desires and focused on a particular theme or specific geographical areas. For group tours the safer spaces of the inner-city allowed new companies to operate tours (Bam, 2016).

New foci of such tours include graffiti which became a popular attraction for especially international visitors to Johannesburg. Bam (2016) points out that the rise of graffiti tours in Johannesburg was in part a response to the city's policies around promoting public art and its more relaxed stance towards graffiti in the city as, for example, contrasted to Cape Town where graffiti is often gang-related. One focus in tours is to demonstrate to middle-class South Africans how to use public transport in the city by taking visitors on public buses in the city as well as in mini-bus taxis.

A description of selected inner-city tours provides further insight into the nature of off-the-beaten track tourism operations in Johannesburg. In a four-hour inner city walking tour visitors are introduced to key events that led to the gold rush, the rise of Johannesburg as a mining settlement, the subsequent decline of the inner-city and its current regeneration status. The tour begins by explaining the historical significance of Gandhi Square and to view the statue of Mahatma Gandhi. This is followed by a walk to the historic Rand Club, where the guide narrates the story of this social venue and continued by a walk along Hollard Street and then to Main Street in Marshalltown. A focus stop is the one-meter long rhino replica designed for the mining precinct which serves to educate people about the significance of gold in South Africa and how this shaped the mining industry. The tour views the Impala Stampede Sculpture before moving to Chancellor House located on Fox Street, the former law offices of Nelson Mandela and Oliver Tambo. Before returning to the tour start-point a visit is undertaken to the Sisulu Sculpture of Albertina Sisulu and Walter Sisulu, among the most prominent figures in the anti-apartheid struggle. 'This is Hillbrow' is a four-hour historical and architectural walking tour that seeks to introduce the visitors to an area of Johannesburg which has experienced physical decline and change and often viewed as a 'no go' zone for tourists because of high levels of crime. The tour participants meet the guide at the children's centre, the starting point of the tour. The guides sign them into the building so they can proceed to the 51st floor where they visit flat number 5101 which is also used for an office space. There, the guides explain what the tour is about, the history of Hillbrow and of Ponte Tower. The tourists have an opportunity to view Hillbrow and its neighbourhoods from the tower, take pictures and purchase merchandise such as books, jewellery and locally-designed clothing. The tour proceeds to the core of the building where stories about it are told before walking the streets of Hillbrow. The tour takes in sites such as the Joe Slovo House, Saint Jose Tower, the German Club, Apostolic Faith Mission, Barnato Park, Gumtree (a physical wall for local advertising of accommodation, transport, goods), Telkom Tower and the Summit Club. Finally, the tourists are given the opportunity to walk along Pretoria Street to interact with locals and buy goods. They connect with the tour guides for a visit to a tavern for a South African meal before returning to Ponte Tower where the tour ends.

Food is the focus of several inner-city tours. One example is the four-hour tour that explores Indian flavours in the Fordsburg area. The tour begins in Newtown where the guide explains the development of inner-city Johannesburg, its history, and food offerings. The tour moves to Oriental Plaza for *samosas*. This is followed by sweets infused with Indian flavours and spices. After dessert, the tourists enjoy a pre-lunch offering of Dosa (rice pancake) accompanied by chutneys. The tour proceeds to Fordsburg Square Flea Market. Along the way tourists are advised to support street vendors selling fresh coconut water that is cracked and opened for tourists to sip on their way to lunch. Upon arrival at the flea market, tourists are met with the aromas of freshly prepared tikka chicken meal to enjoy and offered *pani puri* (fried semolina balls served with potatoes and chickpeas) as well as curry pies. The Fordsburg market offers a variety of food, clothing, and homeware items for tourists to browse. After lunch, tourists are introduced to freshly prepared dessert of Kulfi (traditional ice cream) and fresh squeezed sugarcane juice. To ease digestion given the amount of food consumed, the guide introduces the tourists to a vendor who sells betel leaf that is accompanied with traditional candy, rose water, and coconut amongst other traditional additions as the tour concludes. An alternative walking food tour is offered within the Yeoville and Hillbrow areas beginning at Ponte Tower. The tour starts with a walk to Yeoville Ridge and is timed to observe the sunset as well as to discuss Hillbrow's history. The tourists go to Rocky and Raleigh Street, a vibrant area with different cultures and stories of people from all over Africa. Along these streets there are vendors selling fruits, vegetables, cooked meals such as offal, chicken feet and the popular street meal of *kwasa kwasa* (peppered rice and meat). Tourists purchase any items of their choice, albeit the guide constantly cautions of the ingredients used in the street food in case of allergies. This sort of exposure to the local economy and daily experiences of locals gives tourists an interest of where the food they consume on the tour comes from and the manner in which it helps to boost the local economy. The walking tour continues to a restaurant for a starter of filling beef, pap and salads. After the meal tourists are encouraged to dance to the sounds of African jazz. This is followed by a walk through the Yeoville Market where the guide explains the transition that the inner-city is going through especially how it has become a home for many migrants from other countries in sub-Saharan Africa seeking better life opportunities in South Africa. The market is described as 'all things Africa', with traditional African fabrics, hair salons, food and a diversity of languages. After the market visit, the guide leads the tourists to a Cameroon restaurant, one of the most popular ethnic restaurants for grilled fish. The group is then organised for a mini-bus ride to return to Ponte Tower.

An adventure experience in the inner city combined with learning about aspects of inner city heritage is undertaken through skateboarding. The two-hour long tour includes skateboard hire, helmet and transport. The tour is beginner-friendly with the aim of introducing the tourist to the inner city. The tour begins in Maboneng and ends at the Market Theatre in Newtown with focus areas being Marshalltown, Ferreirasdorp and Newtown. At the tour start point, the street culture and interesting street art are observed at an ideal location to skate and take pictures. This is followed by a skate to Marshalltown



which offers the best skateboarding opportunities whilst learning about the architecture and history of the buildings. The tour concludes with a skate to Newtown and encompasses visits to the area's attractions and public art. Overall, the collection of inner-city tours place emphasis on new types of attractions including the diversity of African inhabitants in the city and the peacefulness of these neighbourhoods, which contrasts their bad image (Frenzel, 2020; Opfermann, 2021). The tour operators consider that the rise of inner-city tours was inextricably linked with wider programmes of area regeneration and importantly of the appearance of a cohort of tourists "looking for an authentic city experience of Johannesburg" (Bam, 2016: 84). From interviews conducted with tour operators Bam (2016) recorded that whilst international travellers were significant markets, local residents also feature significantly as a sign that they are exploring their own city. In addition, corporates represent another market for such tours to educate their staff to think differently about the city as well as a day out-of-the-office (Bam, 2016). The works of Frenzel (2014, 2018) pinpoint how the growth of inner-city tours contribute to place-making initiatives that seek to counter negative place representations of neighbourhoods such as Hillbrow or Yeoville.

Several tours aim to address the territorial stigma that impacts these spaces in Johannesburg (Frenzel, 2014). For example, Ponte City is a landmark 1970s housing tower in the city and originally an exclusive address in Hillbrow with its striking architecture of a round tower around an empty core and its extreme height. During the 1990s Ponte City became a hijacked building and potent symbol of the decline of inner-city Johannesburg. It is the start point for several tours of Hillbrow and the base for Dlala Nje (Table 1). The tours are geared to increase the visibility of a suburb that traditionally local (white) residents refuse to venture into because of its dismal safety reputation (Frenzel, 2014, 2020). For certain tour operators the act of conducting tours is a funding vehicle for the charitable work of an NGO which focuses on support to local children, including through a play centre. In nearby Yeoville tours are presented to focus on the area's pan-African diversity with the tours a potential base for community upliftment. As stressed by Frenzel (2014, 2020) tourism functions to change perceptions about inner-city spaces and in the case of Yeoville its cultural diversity is seen as a strength rather than as a problem. The tour operators seek to shift place perspectives. Frenzel (2018: 52) highlighted the "bottom-up character of these initiatives" and "that profit making was not their primary motive and that they all, in their different ways, worked closely with residents and used the tours to display and highlight the existing social fabric of the neighbourhoods as valuable". In an influential contribution Frenzel (2014) pinpoints the pioneer role of the tour guides in opening-up spaces of territorial stigma to outsiders and putting these places on the map for tourism. This said, the tours also point clearly to failures of urban planning and government service delivery in these neighbourhoods. Frenzel (2018: 52) asserts that the tours "were used to amplify the voices and recognition for the residents in the area and could be considered as 'place making from below'".

Tour operator perspectives

This final section shifts to examine the perspectives of tour operators. Themes under scrutiny are their relationships with each other as well as with the local communities in the inner city. In addition, the business development challenges of operating off-the-beaten track tours in inner city Johannesburg are highlighted including impacts and responses to COVID-19. The interviews with the tour enterprises indicate that they function collectively in a manner of 'cooperating to compete' in that they operate together such as to promote the growth of the tourism cluster in inner-city Johannesburg as a whole. Indeed, whilst each tour operator is running their own operation it was observed that tour operators respect each other's selected area of specialities in terms of tours and – very importantly - cooperate with each other by often referring tourists if they cannot do a tour or if fully booked. This point about cooperation between the tour businesses is highly significant for the survival and prosperity as a whole of the enterprises engaged in off-the-beaten tourism in inner city Johannesburg. Fostering a positive relationship with the local populations living in the areas traversed by the tours is vital for the tour operators. In the interviews the tour operators emphasized that the local inhabitants engage with the tourists during the tour. This engagement is in terms of interacting with them via conversations and importantly from tourists supporting local businesses. The latter reinforces a strong relationship between the tour operators and local community and opens-up a platform for locals to welcome these tourists into their space without conflict. This kind of relationship with locals has led the tour operators to introduce initiatives for 'giving back' to the community in order for tourism to spread benefits more widely within that area.

Tour operators give back to the community in various ways. They seek to employ locals to work in their establishments. One example is of a tour enterprise restaurant that makes use of local produce and employs people from within their area. It was stressed as follows: "Our tours are mainly aimed at supporting local businesses and our restaurant itself supports local business because we buy everything from the local shops for example with meat like duck... we buy fresh produce from the local city farms by Bertrams". Beyond these economic linkages and impacts through employment and supply chains the tour operators support the local communities in other ways. Some tour operators dedicate time to assisting local communities through support of charities and community centres. There are numerous challenges that tour operators face in operating their businesses. Safety of tour participants is always a prime concern. Although the inner city is going through regeneration many spaces within the city still are considered unsafe. This essentially means that whilst tourists might want to explore the inner city the tour operators constantly have to be aware of the places that do not have security and advise tourists that they should not have valuables with them to avoid being pickpocketed. Opfermann (2021) observes tour enterprises draw on the city's negative reputation and frame the tours as an opportunity to challenge perceptions about safety. Indeed, it is stressed that the perception of spaces as insecure is crucial as a drawback for cohorts of visitors – both international and South Africans – to support guided tours to spaces of the inner-city that they would not otherwise feel comfortable accessing (Opfermann, 2021: 46). Another of the major challenges that the tour operators have faced is the impacts of the xenophobic



attacks and the looting of businesses which occurred in Johannesburg during September-October 2019 and forced companies to turn away tourists on grounds of safety considerations.

Essentially, tour operators are an integral part of the growth and changes occurring within the city and benefit from positive redevelopment initiatives which aids them in improving tour offerings. Such changes are apparent with the adoption of walking and cycling tours and transitioning from using tour buses to get tourists around the city. These changes are pivotal for tourism development which emphasizes ideas of sustainability and promotes fitness and wellbeing. Tour operators also observed that there has been a significant market shift whereby more local South Africans – including Johannesburg residents - engage with tours and eager to find out more about the city they live in. Former inhabitants are coming back to the city to visit because they want to re-live their memories. These changes have led tour operators to be alert for emerging trends, new routes and discovering new places so that they may be able to package experiences that might be attractive to the target market of off-the-beaten track tourists. The tour operators interviewed confirm that the new tours that they aim to introduce are observed as a geographical expansion of their operations further into the inner city and entering zones previously unexplored. The operators expressed the hope that through the introduction of these new tours the regeneration of the inner city would be assisted and spaces with unique heritage and historical significance might be preserved.

Tour operators argue that through their tours visitors will have a change of attitude towards the inner city and view it in a positive lens as they would have learned and experienced it first-hand. As such, operators hope that tourists learn to appreciate what the city has to offer in terms of the cultural diversity, backgrounds of locals and the uniqueness of spaces identified. This viewpoint is reinforced by the statement made by one tour guide that “enjoyment, truthfulness, understanding and fun are the most important aspects, but a lot of the times inner city has been misrepresented as an unsafe area so through the tours I want people to see what it can offer”. Several enterprises pinpoint that “they attract their audience by promoting and subsequently performing ‘authentic’ urban African experiences” (Opfermann, 2021: 46). Tour operators highlighted a potential synergistic role with local government in meeting the challenges of physical regeneration of the inner city. They stressed the need for continued government interventions to support physical infrastructure upgrading. One guide observed as follows: “our tours are about bringing people back to the city and to see the city from a different perspective, but it is something that we cannot do alone because we need the local government to pitch in by taking care of public spaces”. For Opfermann (2021: 42) “tour companies actively contribute to shaping the inner-city regeneration in line with a broader trend promoted by private investors and entrepreneurs aiming to make inner city Johannesburg accessible and acceptable for a new urban middle class”. The COVID-19 pandemic had devastating consequences for all the tour enterprises engaged in off-the-beaten track tours in inner-city Johannesburg. Indeed, of all South African urban destinations Johannesburg experienced the greatest negative impact from COVID-19 measured by reductions of tourism trips and tourist spending because of the lockdowns introduced in South Africa (Rogerson & Rogerson, 2022). Under the national government’s COVID-19 lockdowns no tours operated. Several innovative business responses were, however, initiated by the tour operators. One was the development of inner-city virtual tours. Arguably, virtual tourism helped several tour operators keep their businesses financially afloat and are indicative of the resilience of the tourism industry. Another response was appeals made to supporters for donations to keep payments to staff as well as assist with operational business expenditures. Enterprises with restaurants introduced the sale of frozen meals and delivery around the city and especially into Johannesburg’s wealthy Northern suburbs. Another tour enterprise launched a supplementary business of selling firewood because part of the lockdown period was during winter. The resilience of these track tour operators is evidenced by the relaunch of such tours in the post-COVID recovery period. Of the eight interviewed tour enterprises in this study, only one closed its operations.

Conclusion

New urban tourism and off-the-beaten track tours attract a growing international scholarship. Off-the-beaten track spaces explored by new urban tourists in the Global North are distinct from established inner city tourism spaces. The new tourism spaces “offer the opportunity to experience the everyday life of the city, and mundane activities and routines are invested with interest and meaning” (Maitland, 2017: 73). This research offers insight into the evolving characteristics of off-the-beaten track tourism in a major tourism destination in the Global South. In the experience of Johannesburg, the physical and economic decline of the inner-city during the 1980s and 1990s triggered a new geography of tourism in the city as a whole as decentralized spaces such as Rosebank and especially Sandton became the heart of the tourism economy of Johannesburg. Off the beaten track tourism is reintroducing tourism to spaces in central Johannesburg that formerly were the core of the historical development of tourism in the city (Rogerson & Rogerson, 2019). In addition, the tours are part of the redevelopment initiatives for the inner city. Tour operators are agents for new place-making in certain spaces of the city which are perceived as insecure urban spaces. The rebirth of off-the-beaten track tours in post-pandemic Johannesburg merits further investigation and most especially for its contribution towards the regeneration and reshaping of the inner-city.

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