

Taking local is lekker to new heights this holiday season

Authentic travel experiences have become a forerunner in travel today, but how many South Africans are actually experiencing this in their own country?



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Ask ten different South Africans what would make a travel experience feel genuine and authentic to them, and you may well get ten different answers.

For some, it will be culinary exploration through cultures as yet undiscovered, perhaps via neighbourhood crawl, while for others it may be connection with nature in a landscape they've never ventured into before: think shark diving, zip lining or white-water rafting. Or for others still, a travel back in time to discover heritage and history, from a visit to the Cape Town Castle to the Cradle of Humankind.

Of course, an "authentic" experience can be a highly subjective one, open to many different interpretations and therefore – particularly for a newbie to the authentic travel scene – a difficult choice to make in terms of deciding on destination and determining the things you hope to encounter.

"The most important concept that many South Africans need to get their heads around, particularly the more experienced traveller," says Siphesihle Penny Ndlela of local group touring company Soul Traveller, "is to understand that local travel can be as exciting and exhilarating as travelling to an exotic destination abroad."

A seasoned globe-trotter herself, Ndlela has turned her own love for authentic travel into a business aimed at creating experiences for South Africans in their own "backyard".

"The fascinating thing is that travellers from overseas often arrive in our country with a well-researched idea of the things they want to experience, particularly authentic ones. But South Africans themselves aren't very clear on or know where to begin. Many of us will happily travel across South Africa to visit family and friends, but we don't think to immerse ourselves in whatever local experiences may be on offer – even when travellers from overseas come here to do exactly that."

Sourcing specialists in the industry

The key to having an authentic local experience is to find out what the local specialists in their field are up to, says Ndlela. On her culinary tours through Johannesburg, for example, she regularly takes travellers to the Yeoville Dinner Club in Rocky Street. This is where foodie Sanza Sandile introduces diners to what he calls a Pan-Afrikan Plate experience. In one evening patrons are treated to a combined feast for all the senses from West Africa to South Africa.

Similar experiences in Cape Town, for example, would include Mama Africa, Marco's African Place, the Bo-Kaap Kombuis and the Africa Café in the Cape Town Central City, Spinach King in Khayelitsha, or the beer tasting at Darling Brewery and Gin tasting at Woodstock. The beauty is the link between these two places as one of the ingredients to make Woodstock Gin comes from Darling Brewery.

Working out what to do, as a local tourist, is really as easy as thinking what would appeal to an overseas tourist, says Ndlela : "If you're thinking of travelling to Durban, google the top things to do in Durban. Immediately you'll see options from the Durban Botanic Gardens, the Moses Mabhida Stadium and the Hare Krishna Temple of Understanding to the Isandlwana Battlefields or a tour to the Mandela Capture Site.

"What always fascinates me is how many people who live in a beautiful city like Cape Town have never been a tourist in their own town. They've never been up Table Mountain. Or taken local neighbourhood tour. Another idea is to look for festivals and music events happening. Last year, in December, Johannesburg hosted everything from the Soweto Ink Festival celebrating the art of tattooing to the annual Afropunk music festival held at Constitution Hill."

Converting South Africans to the idea of exploring their own country also creates important ambassadors for the travel industry in the country, believes Penny: "We want South Africans to connect with their own collective history and heritage. It's part of who we are – just think of the collective pride we develop whenever we get behind an international sporting event in which we're involved. Imagine if we could translate that pride of an event into a pride of place in terms of homegrown experiences we've had ourselves.

"We're a nation of storytellers. Imagine the wealth of stories we'd then have to tell each other."