

Episode 73: Townships and Towers

Summary

In their last conversation from Southern Africa, Nick and Wendy talk about visiting two historically poor but very different areas of Johannesburg: the township of Soweto and the Ponte Tower.

Transcript

Nick: Well, today is our last day in Africa after just over three months on the continent, and we've spent the last couple of days in Jo'burg (Johannesburg), and, Wendy, we've been visiting some of the poorer areas of the city.

Wendy: Yeah, when we first arrived in Jo'burg about three months ago at the start of the trip, we just stayed in one of the more affluent¹ suburbs, but this time we wanted to get out and explore the city and have a better understanding of what most of the people's lives are like here.

Nick: Yeah, in Jo'burg and especially Cape Town, there are some very wealthy and rich suburbs, but then there are also very poor areas as well. And so it's really important that you understand, uhh, what this is place is really like. So on Sunday we visited one of the townships. Uhh, the word township is used in South Africa to refer to urban settlements but it's come to mean a slum² or a shantytown, maybe something similar to the *favelas* in Rio, for example.

Wendy: Yeah, although what's interesting about Soweto in particular is that there's actually a very wide range of economic situations that people are living in. So the first part of Soweto that we saw on our trip was actually similar to the suburbs that we had been living in, uhh, that we had stayed in on our first visit to Jo'burg. So, yeah, there were large houses, nice houses with lawns out on the front and with cars parked in the garage in most cases. Umm, and then we saw kind of a lower-class and then a very, uhh, very, very poor part of Soweto where people were just living in shacks made out of corrugated tin.

Nick: Right, so to back up a bit, Soweto is kind of an acronym. It means **South-West Townships**, and it's this huge area. And I think that was the, perhaps, the surprise for us. I mean, it's an area with four million people so it's not one

¹ affluent: wealthy, rich

² slum: shantytown, very poor area, usually densely populated with very basic housing. See also: Episode 56: Mafalala.

homogeneous³ area. Uhh, as you said, there's lots of different regions kind of within it. Umm, and so it can be hard to, I don't know, to get a grasp⁴ of what it's like. You know, if someone says, 'Oh, I live in Soweto,' that could mean anything.

Wendy: Yeah.

Nick: Like you said, it could mean that they're doing quite well or it could mean that they're really living very, very poorly. Umm, and so it was good to go and see different parts of it to try to get a little bit of an understanding and a bit of an idea, umm, of what it's like there. Umm, so like you said, there were these suburbs, umm, that seemed quite wealthy. And in fact the poorer people of Soweto - the kids - they call the kids from the wealthy areas of Soweto 'cheese boys', umm, because when they go to school they have a packed lunch and they have cheese in their sandwiches and that's apparently the indicator that they're wealthy and they can afford cheese or something like that. But more than that, these are, umm, these are quite wealthy houses, they have cars, they have flat screen TVs, plasma TVs and all this kind of stuff. And so like you said, that's similar to some other suburbs in Jo'burg. But then these poorer areas were very poor.

Wendy: Absolutely, yeah. And it's something that's very incongruous⁵ with what you normally see in South Africa, 'cause we've been blown away⁶ by just how developed the whole country is, and how it really doesn't feel like the rest of Africa. But there are these places that are very much like the rest of Africa in that they are very poor and very underdeveloped. And there are lots of people living there. I mean, let's not forget that, you know, this is probably the majority population of South Africa is living in these poor conditions.

Nick: So we visited this suburb or this kind of area of Soweto and people are living in these shacks⁷. They're single-room shacks, about ten square metres. So, kind of a small bedroom size, but that's the whole place.

Wendy: Yeah.

Nick: So we went into one and we met the woman who lived there and she let us go in and look. And she lives there with her husband and her two young children. The children sleep on the floor. There's one bed where the parents sleep and then they do all their cooking also in there. But they don't have proper kitchen facilities. It's just pots and pans and they, umm, make their own heat and that's how they do it. And, uhh, that's it. They don't have a toilet in the house; there's a kind of

³ homogeneous: composed of things that are the same

⁴ grasp: idea, understanding. See also: Episodes 58b and 65.

⁵ incongruous: out of place, not in harmony

⁶ blown away: amazed, very surprised (often used in the passive voice like this)

⁷ shacks: basic cabin-type houses. See also: Episode 40: Lisbon Lookouts.

community sanitation area where they can go and use kind of what we would call a port-a-loo⁸ or rent-a-loo, kind of, umm, almost a temporary bathroom.

Wendy: Yeah, yeah, just a temporary toilet. And when you said they make their own heat, they use a gas, umm, yeah, a...

Nick: Gas stove.

Wendy: A gas stove. And they have a kerosine lamp, uhh, that they use for lighting. but they're not hooked up to any kind of electricity.

Nick: No, some of them will illegally hook up to the street lights and basically steal electricity from there, which they're not supposed to do, but of course, you know, they've got to do what they've got to do. Uhh, the problem there is that it only works at night when ... once the street light turns on. Umm, and so that was really, you know, to go in and to see that, it was, umm, emotional and it really makes, uhh, you know, it makes the conditions that people are living in in Africa and even here in South Africa real to us. Umm, and so that was a visit that I think people should do. Soweto used to be very dangerous. Uhh, now it's become a lot safer, and again, it depends on the different areas of it. But you can take an organised tour for a half-day and go into Soweto and go into safe areas, but also see these different levels of the way that people are living as you mentioned.

Wendy: Yeah, and I was surprised that actually, some parts of Soweto are really touristy. Uhh, there's one particular street called Vilakazi Street, which is known to be the only street in the world that has produced two Nobel Peace Prize winners and that is, uhh, Archbishop Desmond Tuto and Nelson Mandela. They both lived on the street, and so you can visit Nelson Mandela's house as a museum. But, yeah, it's ... there are a lot of tourists there, and a lot of, you know, the tacky souvenirs and things that come along with touristy areas. So I really didn't enjoy that part of Soweto all that much. Umm, but I'm glad that more and more people are visiting and that they are seeing this side of Jo'burg.

Nick: And yesterday we did another tour to a poor area, and this was a contrast to that last point about Soweto, which is that there was nobody else there. We were the only people (tourists), uhh, there. This is not a township but it's more in the inner city of Jo'burg. And there's a very fascinating story behind a huge skyscraper⁹ that's there. It's called the Ponte Tower, and it was built in 1976 as an upper-class residential building for white people only. It was during Apartheid and 1976 is the year of the Soweto student uprising, so it was right in the middle of these huge problems related to Apartheid. And so we went into this building, and it's fifty-four storeys high. It has nearly five hundred apartments. And so, as I said, this is where wealthy white people lived, it was before the affluent suburbs had really been built. And so if you wanted to, uhh, you know, if you had money you

⁸ port-a-loo: a portable toilet used for concerts and outdoor events

⁹ skyscraper: very tall building, high rise

could still live in the city centre but in a building like this. And then what happened was that over ... in the 1980s, it (the area around the tower) became designated as a grey area which means that there are people from different races living there, and then this huge downward spiral¹⁰ happened, whereby the government began cutting off services to the building and the owner of the building fled. And then what happened was this other, uhh, thing, which is called hijacked building, occurred, which is where somebody else comes in when the owner is gone, and they basically take illegal ownership of it and start charging people rent. And so then it became this very poor building where there was no electricity and the lifts didn't work and people were living on the fifty-fourth floor. And the building was designed for two thousand, five hundred inhabitants. And then there were ten thousand inhabitants. And it was this kind of high-rise slum in one building. And it was quite incredible.

Wendy: Yeah, and, uhh, one thing that really struck me was the garbage situation. Because, like you said, the lifts aren't working, the elevators aren't working, and so people are not going to walk down fifteen-twenty flights of stairs to take out their garbage. So what they did instead was dump it into the inner courtyard on the inside of the building. And this became a huge dump that kept growing and growing and growing and it actually reached all the way up to the fourteenth floor. So people who lived on lower floors had to then walk up the stairs so that they could get to the top of the dump and be able to dump their garbage down into the courtyard of the building.

Nick: And so there were also all these gangsters there and there was all kinds of crime going on, all kinds of prostitution going on, drugs, everything. And so it had just descended from this very wealthy, high-class building into this very unusual, uhh, urban slum. And finally in recent years it's been cleaned up a lot, now it's been renovated and it's a kind of a middle-class type of building. And so all of the bad stuff is gone and there's a new owner and that's why that all took place. Uhh, and so now, yeah, like I said, it's middle class, because the wealthy prefer to live in these outer suburbs now. Umm, but it's just really interesting, now you have this mix of people, but the reputation of being this awful slum building is still there a little bit. And the area around it is, umm, you know, considered a little bit dangerous or certainly a poor area as well. But it was just quite fascinating how it went from this wealthy building to this awful slum and now this middle-class building so it's kind of had, umm, everything in its history.

Wendy: Yeah.

Nick: And so that's, uhh, just a look at a couple of the poorer areas or interesting areas of Jo'burg and now for us it's back to Portugal.

Wendy: Yep, our trip is finally over and it's been a wild ride and we've really enjoyed it but we are looking forward to getting home.

¹⁰ downward spiral: where something gets worse and worse

Comprehension Questions

1. What surprised Nick and Wendy about Soweto?
2. How do some people in the poorer parts of Soweto get electricity?
3. When the Ponte Tower was in its slum phase, what did residents do with their garbage?

Exercises

Use the words and expressions in the footnotes of the transcript to fill in the gaps.

1. She was _____ by the size of the pyramids in Egypt. She hadn't expected them to be so big and imposing.
2. The pink butterfly wallpaper was _____ in the heavy metal bar. You could hardly imagine something looking more out of place.
3. It used to be a dangerous area but it's been cleaned up a lot and it's quite an _____ neighbourhood now. A lot of wealthy families have moved there.
4. Have you seen the new _____ that they're building in the city centre? It's going to be eighty storeys high!
5. The city centre of Lisbon was rebuilt after the 1755 earthquake so the architecture is quite _____. Everything fits together well.
6. She grew up in a _____ but rose out of those very poor conditions to become highly educated and highly successful. It's a great story.
7. He just started his new job so he doesn't have a great _____ of what it's all about just yet. Hopefully he'll settle in shortly.
8. A group of hippies started living in basic _____ on the beach but the local government kicked them out because it was public land.
9. First he lost his job, then his girlfriend left him and his uncle died, so his whole life is in this huge _____ at the moment. It's just getting worse and worse.
10. There was only one _____ near our area at the concert. The lines were enormous and it was filthy inside.

Discussion Questions

Discuss these questions with a partner or in the [English in 10 Minutes Listeners group on Facebook](#):

1. Have you ever been to Johannesburg? If so, what did you think about it? If not, would you like to go? Why or why not?
2. Do you think tourists should visit places like Soweto? Why or why not?
3. Which of the two places that Nick and Wendy talked about in this episode - Soweto or the Ponte Tower - interests you the most? Why?

Answers

Comprehension Questions

1. They were surprised by its size and by the fact that it contains some reasonably affluent areas as well as desperately poor areas.
2. They don't have electricity supplied to them so some people hook up wires to the street lights and 'steal' electricity that way.
3. They threw their garbage into the inner courtyard of the building and this garbage dump eventually became fourteen floors high.

Exercises

1. blown away
2. incongruous
3. affluent
4. skyscraper
5. homogeneous
6. slum
7. grasp
8. shacks
9. downward spiral
10. port-a-loo