

Slicker cities

African metropolises may not be obvious tourist hotspots – but some of the continent's cities are evolving into standalone destinations. **Lizzie Williams** explores five top spots for urban tourism

According to the UN, over half of Africa's population will live in cities by 2050. In fact, already more than 500 African cities have populations over 250,000 and three – Cairo, Kinshasa and Lagos – have reached megacity status (populations over 10 million). Africa's turbocharged urbanisation is driven by several factors, such as high fertility and migration from rural areas for better life chances. The outcome of such unprecedented transition rather depends on Africa's leaders. Some cities are already overstressed, with people living in poor conditions, but when the right steps are taken, innovation, employment and economic growth have followed smoothly.

So what does this mean for urban tourism in Africa and how has it changed in the last 20 years? In other places in the world, tourists head to cities as destinations in their own right, to see the landmarks and historical sites and enjoy good shopping and restaurants. African cities, on the other hand, have tended to be seen as chaotic with few sights worth visiting, merely airport stopovers on the way to somewhere else. But thanks to booming economies, this is changing rapidly. Many are now very pleasant places to spend a few days. Greater prosperity means local demands for better lifestyles, and emerging middle classes want decent restaurants, shopping and leisure options and the opportunity to appreciate their history, culture and environment, whether it's a museum, concert, beach or wildlife reserve. As visitors, we can benefit from these attractions too, and enjoy the vibrancy, friendliness and authenticity that make the continent's cities uniquely African. →

HIGH AND MIGHTY: The massive and ornate Holy Trinity Cathedral in Addis Ababa, the Ethiopian capital, is the final resting place of Emperor Haile Selassie and his wife Empress Menen Asfaw



5 things not to miss

- 1 Lose yourself in the characterful Addis Mercato. Weaving in all directions, the largest market in Addis (some say Africa) sells everything imaginable; the challenge is knowing where to look.
- 2 Discover Ethiopia's many rich cultures at the Ethnological Museum. In Haile Selassie's former palace, the collections range from orthodox Christianity to the importance of coffee.
- 3 Admire the stained-glass windows, mosaics and paintings in St George's Cathedral in the Piazza, the old Italian district.
- 4 Learn about Ethiopia's natural, political and art history at the National Museum. Exhibits include archaeological relics, costumes and royal family memorabilia.
- 5 See ancient Amharic bibles and Haile Selassie's tomb at the Holy Trinity Cathedral and Museum, Ethiopia's most sacred orthodox Christian site after Lalibela.

yet but that's part of the appeal – it might be time to brush up on your Amharic.

Why visit?

A traffic-choked sprawl of no discernible beauty 20 years ago, Addis only inspired many visitors to head out as quickly as possible to explore the ancient relics and soaring mountains elsewhere. But today this would be a shame. There are worthwhile museums, areas like the Mercato and Piazza are compellingly lively, and a huge highlight is an Ethiopian feast followed by incredible coffee – preferably brewed over a charcoal brazier in the delightful coffee ceremony. In the flourishing café and bar scene, traditional Ethiopian jazz is making a comeback (it was banned during the socialist period), and there is great shopping for beautiful handicrafts.

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: Ethiopia's capital is now a bustling metropolis with plenty of draws; the annual Meskel ceremony, which celebrates the finding of the true cross; a vendor sells spices and grains in the sprawling Addis Mercato



Addis Ababa

In the highlands bordering the Great Rift Valley, Ethiopia's once poverty-ridden capital is now on the rise thanks to a swiftly expanding economy. While highways, five-star hotels and gleaming office and apartment blocks take shape, the city retains its unique heritage of orthodox religions, traditional dress and customs, reflected by magnificent churches and energetic markets on jacaranda-lined streets.

It's a good place to get an understanding of Ethiopia's ancient culture and sample the cuisine, plus there are wonderful museums and places to stay.

The history

Meaning 'new flower' in Amharic, Addis Ababa was founded in 1886 by Emperor Menelik and became Ethiopia's capital in 1905. Many of its four million inhabitants

still live in poverty, but the government's masterplan is to make it a globally competitive middle-income city by 2025. Transformation has included mass housing developments, malls and a modern urban rail service, and the airport's new terminal is scheduled for completion in 2018. Addis isn't mobbed by tourist hordes quite



ABOVE: Nairobi's CBD in the late afternoon sunlight, with the 12.9-hectare Uhuru Park in the foreground – the city is greener than you might expect. **LEFT:** A giraffe in Nairobi National Park, with the ever-growing metropolis beyond. **BELOW:** The Karen Blixen Museum, the former home of the author of *Out of Africa*

Nairobi

Kenya's colourful capital encompasses businesspeople attached to cell phones and Maasai warriors in full regalia strutting down the street. It's the commercial, technological, financial and airline hub for East Africa, yet while Nairobi is modern enough to get free Wi-Fi and a cappuccino, it's also old enough to get a feel for its colonial past and multi-ethnic enough to experience Kenyan culture. While world-famous safari parks are within striking distance, Nairobi is an exciting, slightly maddening concrete jungle that perfectly counterpoints the natural wildernesses found in the rest of the country.

The history

Nairobi grew from a humble railway workers' camp in 1896 to the capital of British East Africa by 1907. It became the meeting place for European settler-farmers from the 1920s, many landless Kikuyu moved in after the 1950s Mau Mau rebellion, and the city swelled further after independence in 1963. Expansion has been one of the fastest in sub-Saharan Africa, resulting in slums and a distortion of population figures – officially around 3.5 million but probably more like six

million. Urban economic growth continues and the skyline is becoming even shinier with residential towers in Westlands and corporate skyscrapers on Upper Hill. Modern malls now feature in almost every affluent neighbourhood, middle-class housing estates are being built on former farmland, the much-needed Nairobi Bypass was recently completed, and many hotels hope to entice safari-bound tourists to stay a while.

Why visit?

Twenty years ago, Nairobi had a reputation as a somewhat dated crime-ridden city – most tourists headed straight for the parks from the airport. But today the CBD has been cleaned up, transport, such as those bone-shaking matatus, has been regulated; crime has fallen too. There's an interesting range of sights, great souvenir shopping, groundbreaking art projects, a burgeoning fashion scene, and a clutch of wildlife attractions. Nairobi also has the country's best restaurants and a good live music scene. Families enjoy lazy lunches around hotel pools and friends meet after work on Fridays, or Furahiday; *Furaha* means 'joy' in Kiswahili.



5 things not to miss

- 1 Take a half-day game drive in Nairobi National Park, so close to the city centre you can photograph a zebra against a background of high-rises.
- 2 Watch baby elephants at the David Sheldrick Wildlife Trust, a rescue centre that re-releases orphans into Kenya's parks. An endearing treat is to see them splashing around in their waterhole.
- 3 Visit the colonial farmhouse at the Karen Blixen Museum. At the foot of the Ngong Hills, this is the former home of *Out of Africa* author Karen Blixen (aka Isak Dinesen).
- 4 Eyeball a giraffe from a tower at the Giraffe Centre. This rescue and rehabilitation centre for Rothschild's giraffe is great for children and photographers.
- 5 Get an overview of Kenya's history, culture and wildlife at the thoroughly modern National Museum. Exhibits include archaeological finds, ethnological displays, natural history, sculpture and local art. →



5 things not to miss

- 1 Take a journey through the thought-provoking Apartheid Museum. The story of South Africa's darkest decades of oppression and the fight for freedom is compellingly told.
- 2 Ride on the City Sightseeing open-top, hop-on hop-off bus around downtown Jo'burg. Stop off at the museums and the Carlton Centre; the 'Top of Africa' on the 50th floor offers panoramic views.
- 3 Explore the former prison at Constitution Hill. Once known for its brutal treatment of criminals, political prisoners and passive resisters, it's now a fascinating democracy museum.
- 4 Visit the successful urban renewal project Maboneng Precinct. Refurbished buildings house art studios, quirky boutiques and coffee shops, while Sunday's Market on Main is a vibey food market.
- 5 Learn about anti-apartheid resistance, visit the museums and have a township *shebeen* lunch on a Soweto tour. Other experiences include bungee-jumping off the Orlando Towers, nightclubs and weekend markets.

Johannesburg

Jo'burg has flourished from a mining camp into South Africa's economic and industrial powerhouse, and today this immense urban space sprawls from the tangle of highways in the Central Business District (CBD) across 2300sq km of suburbs in the Greater Johannesburg Metropolitan Area. There are still glaring disparities and reminders of how apartheid once shaped the city – the juxtaposition of affluent

Sandton's skyscrapers next to the township of Alexandra, for example – but with a multicultural population, Jo'burg is now more integrated than ever, with the fast-paced, contemporary flavour of a city experiencing a renaissance.

But the last 20 years of extensive urban renewal projects and a newborn sense of civic pride have seen the problems of inner-city strife drop away considerably. Meanwhile, suburban development has been tremendous: home to about 9.2 million, the metropolitan area is considered as Africa's fourth largest urban agglomeration. Tourism has risen dramatically to match the pace with which Jo'burg has shrugged off its shaky past.

Why visit?

Twenty years ago, tourists gave Jo'burg a wide berth; but the city has evolved from a crime-tainted safari stopover to a cosmopolitan hub that is coaxing visitors to linger. It has played a crucial role in South Africa's history, and there are many places of interest and museums. The neighbourhoods are fascinating too: from the wealthy northern suburbs, with their boutique hotels and glitzy malls, to inner-city districts that are being rejuvenated with galleries, street art, bohemian cafés and food markets. Improved transport means you can hop aboard the Gautrain, buses or a guided tour, and discover excellent restaurants – Jo'burgers have high standards – and shopping options from township crafts to high-end designer labels.

The history

Established when gold was discovered on the Witwatersrand in 1896, Johannesburg started life as a 'whites only' enclave when the first migrant black miners were forced to live in rudimentary hostels, and later apartheid policies pushed the black population into townships outside the city centre. When apartheid was breaking down in the 1980s, people surged into the CBD as businesses moved out to the suburbs, and by the mid-1990s it had a reputation for soaring crime.



APARTHEID MUSEUM



5 things not to miss

- 1 Soak up the vibrant atmosphere in Jemaa el Fna. With its street entertainers, market stalls and alfresco eateries, this central square is the geographical heart and spiritual soul of Marrakech.
- 2 Admire the imposing minaret of the 12th-century Koutoubia Mosque. The tallest feature on the medina skyline is set amid glorious gardens, best seen silhouetted against the crimson sunset.
- 3 Explore the marbled courtyards and flowering gardens at the 19th-century Bahia Palace. The interior is a dazzling display of decorative tiles, painted ceilings and stained glass.
- 4 Ride round the city walls on a calèche. These horse-drawn carriages are as much a part of the city as the mosques and motorbikes, great for a sightseeing tour or to reach your dinner destination in style.
- 5 Sleep in a historic, atmospheric riad hotel. Some of the best-value and chicest places to stay, these might feature gilded, carved and tiled interiors and citrus-scented courtyards. →

Marrakech

With a turbulent history featuring sultans, princesses, magicians and fortune-hunters, Marrakech sums up all of Morocco's exotic North African charm. It's long grabbed the heart of travellers, lured by its maze-like alleyways where the cries of street vendors and clatter of donkey carts compete with calls to prayer from lofty minarets. Yet while these heady sights still enchant, Marrakech is no longer simply a destination for bohemians and backpackers. The happening arts and design scene, fine restaurants, boutique hotels and fashionable nightlife also bring sophistication and a certain glamour to the city.

The history

Marrakech was founded in 1062 by Sultan Youssef ben Tachfine, credited with construction of the ochre-coloured defensive walls that give the nickname of the 'red city'. The French captured Marrakech in 1912, and built the commercial and residential quarter of Guéliz shortly before Morocco reinstated a king at independence in 1956. Fuelled by rural migration from the Atlas Mountains and increasing investment, today's city is home to two million and a vital component of Morocco's economy. The influence of a middle class and wealthy foreign residents is evident in malls,

golf courses and five-star resorts and spas, and smart commuter suburbs are under constant construction. Just a short hop from Europe, Marrakech receives more than 30 per cent of Morocco's visitors, which now tops 10 million a year.

Why visit?

In the 1960-70s, scruffy Marrakech became a haunt of artists, writers, musicians and budget travellers drawn by its exoticism and cheap prices. More recently, there has been heavy investment in tourism and the cross-section of visitors can now enjoy top-class facilities. But it's still a place to experience Moroccan life in all its hectic glory, especially in the labyrinth of the medina and souks that revolve around iconic Jemaa el Fna. Shopping is *de rigueur*, from spices and silk to leather and carpets, while history-lovers will enjoy the Islamic architecture in the many museums and palaces. Relax in a steamy hammam, sip mint tea at a rooftop café or sit quietly in a garden ablaze with bougainvillea and orange trees. Also head to sophisticated Guéliz, where leafy boulevards are lined with boutiques, concept stores, galleries and many of Marrakech's best restaurants and hippest bars.



OPPOSITE, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: The Sandton City shopping centre's twin towers were given a contemporary facelift in 2013; you can bungee-jump off the graffitied Orlando Towers; the Apartheid Museum. THIS PAGE, FROM TOP: Marrakech's vibrant Jemaa el Fna by night with the Koutoubia Mosque beyond; a pretty courtyard at the Bahia Palace



CLOCKWISE FROM THIS PICTURE: Magnificent Cape Town from the air; the buzzing V&A Waterfront is now a shopping and restaurant hotspot; African penguins on Boulders Beach

CRAIG HOWES / CAPE TOWN TOURISM (2)

Cape Town

Set seductively between mountains and the Atlantic, Cape Town flaunts its extraordinary natural setting with pride. This south-western tip of South Africa has attracted seafarers since the 16th century, and today firmly falls into the ‘city break’ category. Its appeal is obvious – iconic Table Mountain, sweeping beaches, beautiful winelands, interesting sightseeing, and fantastic



places to stay, eat and drink. With ‘brand’ Cape Town continuing to flourish, it is a city worth crossing the world for.

The history

Cape Town’s history is inextricably linked with South Africa’s. The 1652 arrival of the first European settlers; British occupation and the great trek north

by the Voortrekkers; the oppressive apartheid years and the democracy enjoyed today – Cape Town has been at the forefront of it all. It quickly boomed with economic confidence after the demise of apartheid in 1994. More recently, the V&A Waterfront has expanded including the Silo District with the brand new Zeitz Museum of Contemporary Art Africa. Cape Town attracts a steady influx of people seeking a better life and there are still low-income areas, while some

suburbs boast the most expensive real estate in Africa. The population grew by an astonishing 45 per cent between 1996 and 2011 and is today around 3.75 million. Cape Town now attracts a large proportion of South Africa’s 10 million international arrivals and is consistently voted one of the world’s top destinations.

Why visit?

Cape Town was once a must-do as part of an extended tour of South Africa, but now, despite the 12-hour flight from Europe, it’s also widely touted as a destination in its own right. There’s so much to do, it’s hard to know where to start – Table Mountain provides perfect panoramas, a world-class botanical garden beckons from its slopes, the beaches are some of South Africa’s best, and there’s wine tasting on fine estates and scenic drives slicing into the rugged coast. It also offers an irreplaceable range of outdoor activities such as hiking, biking and surfing, shopping is varied and good value, and the foodie scene has exploded – from Michelin-star restaurants to trendy markets.

HILLARY FOX / CAPE TOWN TOURISM



5 things not to miss

- 1 Hike or ride the cable car up Table Mountain for breathtaking views over the City Bowl and the craggy Twelve Apostles.
- 2 Picnic on the lawns, climb the aerial boardwalk or enjoy an outdoor concert at the world-class Kirstenbosch National Botanical Garden on the eastern slopes of Table Mountain.
- 3 Join the buff, the bronzed and the beautiful on the Atlantic Seaboard beaches. The gorgeous white sands are the best spots for people-watching and sunset cocktails.
- 4 Wander around the buzzing V&A Waterfront, with its unrivalled choice of shops, restaurants, entertainment and attractions such as the Cape Town Wheel and Two Oceans Aquarium.
- 5 Take a leisurely day trip around the Cape Peninsula. Enjoy stunning mountain drives, ocean views from Cape Point, penguins at Boulders Beach and quaint fishing settlements on False Bay.