

Port Elizabeth – sitting on the dock of the bay

Written by {ga=micheller}

Thursday, 25 November 2010 15:13

It's one of the biggest cities in South Africa, a laid-back seaport that stretches down Algoa Bay, its harbour crowned by the iconic architecture of the new Nelson Mandela Bay stadium.

Known as the 'Friendly City' to outsiders, grumblingly as the 'Windy City' by residents and simply as 'PE' to almost everyone, Port Elizabeth started out as a 1820s British settlers' town. (It must be said that the sheltered bay was actually marked as early as the late 1400s by both Bartholomew Dias and Vasco da Game, the famous Portuguese explorers who navigated the coastlines of Africa.)

Today Port Elizabeth is one of the most bustling places in South Africa, but still retains a friendly small town vibe. To prepare for the 2010 FIFA World Cup South Africa™ the waterfront has been revamped and upgraded; some say it will one day rival the popular Cape Town waterfront, with is 800km away along the coastline. A series of highways and interchanges will take you right through PE's old town, the CBD area that was once booming. This ill-considered improvement project of the 60s and 70s destroyed many of the historical buildings on the harbour-front, which have since fallen into disrepair.

Still, if you're a history buff, then you won't be disappointed with the Donkin Heritage trail! This 5km walk takes you to 47 historical sites in the Old Hill area of Port Elizabeth – starting at the city market square, and taking you past the replica of the Diaz Cross, the library and its gothic architecture (by far one of the most beautiful buildings in Africa), up the 204 steps of the Campanile bell tower to look out over the bay, and to Number 7 Castle Hill, which is one of the old settler cottages still standing in the city. The beautiful city hall and its clock tower are also a must-see.

As Port Elizabeth is situated directly along South Africa's well-travelled garden route, visitors often stop by to enjoy the city's beaches for a day or two, which include St Georges Beach and Humewood beach which both have Blue Flag status. The beachfront is often buzzing with all manner of water sports – kite-surfing is probably what will catch your eye first, the Windy City is the perfect place to take advantage of the updrafts! Other water-sports are surfing, body surfing, body boarding, boardsailing, scuba-diving and boating. Professional surfing contests are usually held in Jeffery's Bay, which is a little way down the coast from PE.

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The oldest cricket ground in South Africa is also in Port Elizabeth. St George's Park is home to the Warriors, one of the best cricketing teams in the country. The breathtaking Nelson Mandela Bay Stadium with its roof with a petal design is nicknamed the 'Sunflower'; it seats almost 50 000 spectators, and hosts soccer and rugby matches, as well as the occasional concert.

For something a little different, try the Township Tour that takes you on a guided walk through township life and even a visit to a local shebeen (a drinking establishment that used to be outlawed) for a pint or two with the locals.

Port Elizabeth may lose that charming small town atmosphere as the city expands, with a second harbour development underway in the form of the Coega project, the upgrades to the Port Elizabeth International Airport, and the fantastic new facilities along the waterfront that includes Bayworld: a complex that features an oceanarium, a snake park, and a museum.

Make no mistake, the Friendly City is bursting at the seams with undiscovered potential!