

A little ode to Marshalltown

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Above: The Thunder Walker with its Zwipi Underground Bar & Scatterlings Restaurant.

People often ask me to show them the cool and trendy parts of the city. They want to experience the vibe where the streets are filled with gorgeous people, the walls teeming with street art and the bars hiving with partying crowds. They want to be wowed, mesmerised and inspired. They want to be surprised, delighted and even a little shocked at how Jozi is so different from what people have told them. Of course, I mention to them all the best-known downtown districts from Maboneng to Braamfontein and even Maker's Valley with its super-impressive Victoria Yards. I also recommend the Fashion District and the mythical Little Addis (Ethiopian Quarter) which you will never find or know that it exists if you have not been there before. It is no wonder that our JoburgPlaces Fashion District & Little Addis tour is our most popular.

Don't get me wrong, I appreciate all these trendy and fascinating areas. I often hangout in Maboneng, I live in Braamies, I buy groceries in Newtown and I love disappearing into Little Addis for the best coffee in Joburg. But there is another district in the city that is my first love. It is almost never mentioned as the must-experience district of the city. Perhaps it is because it is not hip, nor young and energetic. Yet it is the real city. It is the part of town where Joburg is just Joburg, without trying to be anything else. Many people work here, many businesses operate here, and the better inner-city apartments are found around here too. This is Marshalltown.

I may be somewhat biased here. I have lived in Marshalltown for nearly three years previously and I have operated various venues on the fringes of this area – or right in its heart. I was involved in creating the first version of the 1Fox Precinct with the original Market Shed, four years ago, I was involved with Joziburg Lane and Hangout Jozi at One Eloff and last year JoburgPlaces operated from

City Central at 87 Commissioner Street for a while. By December 2018, we finally opened our own dream project, The **Thunder Walker** with its **Scatterlings Restaurant** and **Zwipi Underground Bar** – right on **Gandhi Square**. Marshalltown is where my love affair with the Joburg inner-city starts and remains. Our JoburgPlaces Marshalltown walking tour is also our best tour by far, in my opinion.

It is the area from Gandhi Square going west to the Magistrates Court that I enjoy the most. However, there are many worthwhile places to discover east of Gandhi Square too. Marshalltown is officially south of Commissioner Street down to near the M2 Highway, and between Absa and the Magistrates Court. Before I tell you about some of these secrets of Marshalltown, let me just set the scene by starting on Gandhi Square.

We only opened Scatterlings and Zwipi at the Thunder Walker to the public in December 2018 and already Gandhi Square has surprised me over and over. It is the most truly public space in the city. The metro buses stop here. A constant stream of commuters – from all walks of life – criss-crosses the square.

The square is not perfect, but it is clean and has the most wonderful, casual atmosphere even though it is busy. It is a very large paved expanse and it can do with some greenery to soften the harsh sunlight and warm reflection off the paving. The lights on the square is another frustration as it seems the city council has some issues with electricity supply from the parking under the square. What works for the square is that it is leased by a private body representing property owners in the area and has good security, daily cleaners and more, without ever feeling that it is not a public space.

So why do I like Gandhi Square so much? Because it is a real space. You won't find hipsters or trendies trying to look cool at an artisanal coffee house or bar. What you will find though are a whole lot of real people, working, living and playing in the city and using this space as city inhabitants should. In the past two weeks I have observed the following from our sundowner tables out on the square:

- an old Chinese guy walking his dog at 8pm on a Thursday night. He probably just had a lovely dinner in his apartment around the corner and went for a walk just like people in Paris would do.
- a young father and his I imagine 5-year old son, enjoying the square with their push-bike scooters.
- a whole bunch of kids on their bicycles ordering take-aways from Pizza Hut and cycling around the square
- a random dude on his skateboard at sunset making the most of the public space
- a mother and child sitting on the bench next to the Gandhi sculpture eating and early picnic-like dinner while waiting for two more kids to meet them before they make their way home.

On weekend nights Croco Blue and Chesa Nyama play loud music and the square fills up with late night revellers parking and making their way to the magnetic dance floors. At day time, shoppers descend on Dischem in their multitudes. The many takeaway shops from Mochacho's to Nando's, Steers and MacDonaldis do a roaring trade all day long, while fancy financial institutions such as Sanlam, Hollard (Kaizer Chiefs), Bayport and Absa all have walk-in centres on the edges of the square. Gandhi Square is the heart of the real city – this is no mall but a genuine place for pedestrians, but also not super-hip, cool or pretentious.

There is so much to do and explore around Gandhi Square and all throughout Marshalltown. Just walk west down Main Street which forms a wonderful outdoor city and mining museum. Stop for the world's best coffee at Cramers, have lunch at City Perk Café, outside in the pedestrianised Hollard Street. Devour pizza at Ben's Pizza in Loveday Street or stop for cocktails and beers at Capello's sidewalk tables.

This is only the introduction. For the next month, I will be writing regular posts about what to do, see and experience in Marshalltown – and where to stay in the real city too. It is high time that Marshalltown gets the recognition it deserves!

- Gerald Garner, JoburgPlaces



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