

SO WHAT'S WITH





# PE, THEN?

Gareth Cliff on national radio once described Port Elizabeth as the armpit of South Africa. Others refer to it as the Windy City or – glibly – as the Friendly City. There's no smoke without fire, right? Long-time Capetonians **Nick Dall** and **Des Louw** spent the best part of a week separating fact from fiction. And they had such an amazing time they're already planning to go back



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arco, his brother-in-law, explains born-and-bred Port Elizabeth architect Niel Basson, 'is one of those Cape Town hipsters who looks down on you if you don't sport a beard, live in Woodstock and skateboard to work'.

I notice a skateboard propped up against the wall of abundantly bearded Marco's upper-Woodstock lounge and we all share a laugh.

'We've been trying to tell him how amazing PE is for years,' continues Niel (who, coincidentally, sports a beard, shares his offices with two artists and lives in the Baakens Valley, PE's take on Woodstock), 'but...'

'Look,' Marco says, 'the perception of PE isn't good. When I used to go on holiday with my folks we'd drive past and it would just be this industrial looking, weird place. Later, when my band did gigs there we got in and out as quickly as we could. But,' he glances at his wife, Terri, 'we went to stay there for a month in Feb this year and it was... un-be-live-able. You're surrounded by beaches, you can surf before you go to work and after you knock off and...'

'And,' Terri interjects, 'the food is s-o-o good. At a PE restaurant the person actually making the food is the owner, not some franchise employee, and you can really tell the difference.'

**ONE SUCH PERSON** is Ana Lumbreras de Beer who grew up in Pamplona, Spain. Ana met her South African husband, Steven, when they worked at the same London hotel in their 20s. 'I fell in love with Steven and we came back to PE and got married.' That was 31 years ago and Ana – whose accent is as charmingly Spanish as ever – is now proudly PE.

'When all my children left home I was getting bored because I didn't have anyone to cook for. So I opened a restaurant... Silly, but that's what I did.' Having tasted the gooey crunchiness of the chicken and ham *croquettas* at Todos Locos, Ana's fabulous 'pinchos bar' in Richmond Hill, and after sampling the fragrant perfection of her paella, I can report that there was nothing silly about her decision. Nothing whatsoever.

As I struggle to digest one course too many I ask Ana what makes PE special. 'My husband, I suppose, and all the other people of PE. I have made beautiful friends here.



FROM ABOVE  
After more than three decades in the seaside town, Ana Lumbreras de Beer has brought the Spanish tradition of pinchos to PE. Paella is a speciality at her eatery, Todos Locos – which means 'everyone is crazy'

Also, PE is the best city to bring up children; we have the best schools. And it *is* the Friendly City; the people are very nice. I go to Cape Town and I love it, I think it's beautiful. But I wouldn't be able to drive in Cape Town. There's too much traffic, you can't park anywhere... I'm not a great driver you know...'

**ANOTHER ACCIDENTAL ARRIVAL** is Kevin Kimwelle, a Kenyan community architect (call him a regular architect at your peril) who came here to study in 2004 and kinda ended up staying. We get to know Kevin over a meal of injera and *wat* (sourdough crepe and spicy stew), bought from a hole in the wall Ethiopian place around the corner from his Victorian semi in Central PE, and he promises to show us both sides of his adopted city in the morning.

'When you arrive in PE,' says Kevin over an after-dinner coffee, 'you cry. You think what have I done and career-wise it's suicide. But after a while you grow to like the fact that it's so small, the beaches are so close, there's a community, there's no traffic... My supervisor always says why are you so obsessed with PE? Come to Cape Town! And I will someday, but I'll miss PE.'

We meet Kevin at the Donkin Reserve before the flag – a 12m x 8m whopper that's the largest in SA – has even been hoisted and admire the pyramid that Sir Rufane Donkin erected in memory of his wife, Elizabeth (PE is named after her, not a queen), while the sun rises over the ocean. From there we walk down a steep serpentine pathway, past garish off-licences and closed cellphone shops, and into town. It's only 7am but we manage to wheedle our way into the Feathermarket Hall – the opulent edifice where millions of pounds worth of ostrich feathers were traded at the turn of the last century – and the recently revamped opera house.

In front of the imposing public library – whose resplendent terracotta façade was manufactured in England and assembled, like a giant jigsaw puzzle, by local artisans in 1903 – we admire the stern statue of Queen Victoria. A few years back, during the Rhodes Must Fall protests, Kevin tells us, the statue was vandalised with a bucket of bright green house paint. Afterwards, a local ➤





sculptor and conservation technician – Josua Strumpfer, whom we later meet – spent more than a month cleaning it off. Green is a notoriously recalcitrant hue and because authorities had to wait a couple of months till the furore had died down, the paint had had time to permeate the porous Sicilian marble. Josua did an amazing job, but if you look carefully you can still see the odd splodge of paint on the kerb a few metres from Her Highness.

Luvo Ndima (the wonderfully funny and knowledgeable owner of Jama Tours, [jamatours.co.za](http://jamatours.co.za)) picks us up at Kevin's place and drives us to the townships north of the city. En route we pass the brooding Dickensian mills of the Algorax factory – producer of carbon black, a sooty substance used in the manufacture of car tyres – and the contrasting Elysian expanses of the Swartkops lagoon. After popping in for a quick visit with the guys from Bambanani Fresh Art – self-taught cobblers who operate out of a shipping container in the established township of Motherwell – we reach Joe Slovo West, a sprawling expanse of RDP houses and makeshift shacks that has sprung up as a result of rampant urbanisation in the Eastern Cape.

**FROM ABOVE**  
**Kevin Kimwelle works closely with residents in designing housing and other amenities. He built a packing and storage facility for recycler Hilda Daba**

**'MY SUPERVISOR ALWAYS SAYS WHY ARE YOU SO OBSESSED WITH PE? COME TO CAPE TOWN! AND I WILL SOMEDAY, BUT I'LL MISS PE'**  
**KEVIN KIMWELLE**

Kevin shows us one of the projects he's been involved in (a community centre built from recycled pallets and old wine bottles that apparently sparkle like jewels at night) before taking us to meet Hilda Daba, a single mother who's forging a new life for herself and her children thanks to entrepreneurial verve.

'My husband was abusive,' she says. 'For nine years I hoped he would change, but eventually I had to leave him.' She built herself a shack in Joe Slovo West and put her name on the list for an RDP house. Two decades later she finally received the keys.

'In 2015, I started collecting beer bottles. I pay the kids R1 per bottle and I get R1.30 from the company so my gain is 30 cents,' she explains. Hilda also has a job as a domestic worker and there are some days when she can't buy bottles because she doesn't have money. 'I have to wait three or four months till I have enough empties to fill a truck,' she says. 'But it helps with the school fees.'

One day, Kevin saw Hilda sorting empties in her backyard and asked her what she was up to. 'This is my business,' she explained. Inspired by her gumption, Kevin and his team built Hilda a packing and storage facility from which nobody could steal her bottles. 'Now other people in my area are doing the same,' says Hilda. 'But I don't mind. People are still coming to me with bottles.'

'I like everything about PE, because this is my home. There's no other home. I love PE. I like the beach, even though I can't swim. I just go and put water on myself, like this,' Hilda says, laughing raucously and gesticulating with both hands. 'I like St George's Beach, but the kids these days love the Boardwalk.'

**ST GEORGE LENDS HIS NAME** to a lot of things in PE: a beach, a suburb, a cricket oval and – most famously, perhaps – a brass band. Since 1996, the St George's Park Brass Band has provided a unique, toe-tapping soundtrack to (almost) every single provincial and international cricket match played in PE. 'I was there when we started,' says Jonathan Afrika when we meet up before the band's weekly practice session, 'and now my son is playing the drums with me. Over the years I've seen lots of members come and go, usually due to work commitments or getting married, but the spirit of the band is still exactly the same.'

The band draws its members from seven or eight church bands across the northern areas of PE. 'I have a three-year-old and a six-year-old and my wife travels for work three days every week,'

HILDA'S





**'THE YOUNG GUYS START OFF ALL LEKKER, BUT BY DAYS FOUR AND FIVE IT'S ONLY US OLD-TIMERS WHO STILL HAVE THE ENERGY TO PLAY'**  
**JONATHAN AFRIKA**

says current chairman Bernard Leander, who's been playing the trumpet with the band for 18 years. Some weeks it would be far simpler for Bernard to skip practice, but being one of the few band members with his own car he knows that if he doesn't make it, seven youngsters will also miss out. 'There's a lot of gangsterism and drugs in our areas,' says Jonathan, 'and we know from experience that just one hour of music a week can save a kid.'

Resources are another struggle. 'We got funding to buy some new trumpets last year,' says Bernard, 'but brass instruments lose their tone after a couple of years.' Especially when they're played eight hours a day for five days straight. At the moment the band has 27 instruments and 35 members and Bernard selects a team – based on attendance, commitment and ability – for each cricket match. The Test matches are the real challenge, says Jonathan. 'The young guys start off all lekker, but by days four and five it's only us old-timers who still have the energy to play.'

At 7pm on the dot, band practice starts. Guys who a minute before were joking about girlfriends and discussing the weekend's Premier League football results are suddenly all focus and joy under the gentle command of conductor Owen Tsoko, a one-time band member who went on to complete a degree in music. I'm a diehard cricket fan and I've heard the jazzy ditties a hundred times on TV, but I'm overwhelmed by how loud and all-consuming the real thing is. You literally can't hear yourself speak, let alone think, and it's impossible not to move to the beat.

For the next 20 minutes or so, I forget about the harsh fluorescent lights and the uncomfortable plastic chair as the music subsumes me. And then, out of nowhere, a tap on the shoulder tells me it's time to go and we troop out into a windswept parking lot lit by a

## BEST OF BAAKENS

- ➔ Eat drink and be merry at Food Truck Friday (not every Friday and not always on Friday). [facebook.com/BaakensFoodTruckFriday](https://www.facebook.com/BaakensFoodTruckFriday)
- ➔ Rediscover what it feels like to use your hands on Workshop Wednesday (one Wednesday a month). [facebook.com/pg/thewerk/](https://www.facebook.com/pg/thewerk/)
- ➔ Sip on a Car Park John Pale Ale on the rooftop terrace at Richmond Hill Brewing Company ([facebook.com/RichmondHillBrewingCo](https://www.facebook.com/RichmondHillBrewingCo)) and wash it down with a burger from Frederick & Son. [frederickandson.co.za](http://frederickandson.co.za)
- ➔ Sample the only vodka in the world (we think) that's made from 100% queen pineapples at Brickmakers Distilling Co. [facebook.com/brickmakersdistillery](https://www.facebook.com/brickmakersdistillery)





CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT  
Jonathan Afrika (standing, blue jacket) – *Give me Hope Johanna* was the St George's Brass Band's first song and is still a favourite. Janice Mendelowitz, Steven Carter (Joff) and S'bosh Mnikina of Bambanani Fresh Art



rising moon to say our goodbyes. 'People talk about the famous St George's Park Brass Band. But I don't see it like that. I'm doing a duty for my community,' says Bernard before shaking our hands and scurrying back into the hall in time for the next song.

**NEXT DAY WE'RE GIVEN A TOUR** of the Baakens Valley (where Niel Basson, the hipster architect, hangs out) by Joff (real name Steven Carter), one of PE's most prominent graffiti artists. 'We're like a family unit in the valley,' he explains as we trek up the hill to view a piece he did on a crumbling wall that's slowly being absorbed by the steep-sided ravine that forms Baakens' western border. 'We all look out for each other.'

Joff, who also directs TV commercials and music videos, says he could definitely earn more in Cape Town or Jo'burg, but because PE is both slower and cheaper he's able to focus on his own work as well. 'I'm taking the next couple of months off to work on an upcoming exhibition. I wouldn't be able to do that in a bigger city.'

He shows us around the gentrified warehouses where he – and loads of other creatives – have studio space. 'A few years ago this was chemical factory with a dodgy reputation,' he explains. 'Now we get 5,000 people pulling in for Food Truck Friday and the warehouses over the road are being done up too. For a lot of people in the creative industry their mission has always been to move to Cape Town. But now people are staying in PE.'

We meet some of these people at WERK\_, a maker space and entrepreneurial incubator that would be totally at home in Portland or San Francisco. We chat to Janice Mendelowitz, a veteran printmaker who has turned her hand to silversmithing. 'Both jewellery and printmaking are very process-orientated; you use a lot of tools.' Janice shows me a petrifying contraption that's straight out of the Spanish Inquisition she uses to make silver wire and a metal roller that looks like a pasta maker. 'I set old broken pottery in silver,' she says, showing me a gorgeous Delft pendant. 'It involves loads of steps and takes forever but I'm loving it. I still teach printmaking though. In fact, if you come later tonight you can do a printmaking class with me.'

A few doors down we find Clinton Victor putting the finishing touches to a hand-stitched handbag. 'A couple of years back my wife was doing lots of markets – she sells jewellery – and, being a dutiful husband, I went and sat with her, getting bored out of my mind.' Until one day, at a market in Bathurst, he bought himself a handmade leather bag.

'I loved that bag so much. I studied architecture and every

week we pumped out cardboard models of our designs, using many of the same tools that I now use to make leather bags. I understood all the principles, I just needed to teach myself to stitch. I still do draughting on the side, but this is my passion and I'm actually making more money from it.'

What does Clinton like about PE? 'The laidbackness. It's not that mad rush like Jo'burg or Cape Town. It's like a town that's a city if you get what I'm saying.'

**NOWHERE IS THE LAIDBACKNESS** more evident than in Schoenmakerskop, a rugged oceanside enclave of about 100 houses with one restaurant and no shops. 'I grew up in that ugly green house next door,' says Shelley Wattrus, as we stand on her balcony watching a humpback whale frolicking in the bay beyond. 'It was the best place to be a kid.' Shelley and her husband, Doug, spent their working lives in KwaZulu-Natal but came back to Schoenies, as it's affectionately known, to retire. 'There's nowhere else where you can have this,' she gestures at the apricot-infused sunset, 'but be only ten minutes from a real shopping centre.'

'And a proper hospital,' laughs Doug.

Beers in hand, we stroll down to the sea and – at a place called Submarine Rock – we bump into Andre and Isobel Lemmer. 'We've been here about 30 years,' says Isobel, 'so we're relative newcomers.' Andre, a retired academic who's written a book about Schoenies, takes us back to 1647, when a Portuguese man o'war called the *Santissimo Sacramento* ran aground here. The handsome teak ship sailed into trouble en route from Goa to Lisbon, eventually striking the rocks of Schoenmakerskop one torrid June night. Hundreds of crew members died and of the 72 survivors only nine made it to Delagoa Bay (now Maputo), the nearest European settlement. In 1977 – more than three centuries after the wreck – a salvage team removed more than 40 cannons from the ocean, one of which stands as marker at the start of the Sacramento Trail, a lovely cliffside walk to the west of Schoenies.

'If you had to keep travelling in that direction,' says Andre, pointing towards the horizon, 'your first landfall would be the Antarctic shelf. There's nearly enough room to fit in another Africa between us and them.' And there's a Woolworths five kays to the north.

Our hosts walk home before it gets dark, but we sit in silence on the gazania-carpeted dunes as the rising tide slowly engulfs Submarine Rock and our time in PE draws to a close. Above us the wing lights of an aeroplane flicker and beyond us – direction Antarctica – the chokka boats twinkle on the inky bay. If this rugged, beautiful, passionate, creative and surprising city is the armpit of South Africa, then I don't know much about anatomy. ■

## MARCO AND TERRI'S TOP NOSH

- ➔ Todos Locos: authentic paella and *pinchos* with a stylish setting and a lovely host. [facebook.com/TodosLocosPE](https://facebook.com/TodosLocosPE)
- ➔ Natti's Thai Kitchen: proper Thai food in an old Victorian house with super laidback vibes and no liquor licence. [facebook.com/nattisthaikitchen](https://facebook.com/nattisthaikitchen)
- ➔ Fernando's Chicken House: old school Portuguese place with mean homemade chilli sauce. [fernandospe.co.za](https://fernandospe.co.za)
- ➔ Fushin: the best sushi in town, plus tempura, Asian tapas, and Kobe-style grills. [fushin.co.za](https://fushin.co.za)
- ➔ Banneton Bakery & Café: wood-fired bread, great coffee and excellent breakfasts. [bannetonbakery.co.za](https://bannetonbakery.co.za)

The Proteas take on Australia in the second Test at St George's Park, 9-13 March. [ticketpros.co.za](https://ticketpros.co.za)



PE

**FIND IT AT BA.COM** British Airways flies daily to Port Elizabeth from Johannesburg, Cape Town and Durban.

FROM LEFT

Shelley Wattrus, Isobel Lemmer, Andre Lemmer and Doug Wattrus – Schoenmakerskop is believed to be named after Volcker Schoemaker, a soldier who deserted and settled in the Eastern Province

