



Cruising in Durban

Akintayo Abodunrin

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You don't always get the chance to sail the Durban Harbour at night. When officials of South African Tourism (SAT), announced a boat cruise for hosted media and trade partners from South, West and East Africa on our way back to the hotel after the day's activities at the International Convention Centre, Durban, venue of the 2010 INDABA, my colleagues and I needed no prompting to be part of the trip.

Some hours later, in great spirits, we set out for the world's ninth largest harbour and popular holiday resort for foreign yachts. Legendary explorer, Vasco da Gama, reportedly sighted the Bay on Christmas Day, 1497, when he anchored off the bluff and named the lush area Natal. The name was later changed to Durban in 1835 after the first British governor of the Cape Colony, Benjamin D'Urban.

Our specific destination is Wilson's Wharf, one of the three marinas on the harbour fed by several streams and where the Allen Gardiner, a 20 metre wooden boat built during World War 11, is berthed. A merry group of over 50 people that attempt to board the boat named after Captain Allen Gardiner who in 1835 called the first public meeting in Natal. Sadly, all of us cannot because the cruise which operates all year round, including Christmas day, doesn't take more than 45 passengers on its deck and in its dining room. A quick consultation and some officials of SAT give up their space. Some of us then appropriate the saloon while we (the three Nigerian journalists) and others settle for the deck.

It is a clear, starry night as Mark Folucle, the boat driver who has been at the trade for five years, fires the engine. One of his

assistants tells us the course on the public address system and assures us that dinner and drinks will be served. He urges us to relax and enjoy the cruise.

It is fun sailing the busiest port in the Southern Hemisphere. We cruise the calm waters of the harbour along the Maydon Channel (one time landing strip for the UK Royal Mail flying boats); the Silt Canal, past the protected conservation mangrove swamps and Pelican Island, turning where the Silt Canal ends at the Bluff. We pass several towering vessels bathed in light and anchored in the bay where other recreational activities including canoeing and kayaking, parasailing, fishing from boats and bird watching are going on.

The almost three hours we spend on the cruise is like an hour as drinks, dinner, lively conversation and informative commentary from the crew. National boundaries are broken as all of us (Nigerians, Kenyans, Batswana, Malawians, South Africans) discuss almost every subject - politics, religion, economy, the World Cup and relationships. Though Phumi Dhlomo, Regional Director, Africa and Domestic Markets, South African Tourism and leader of the tour, tries to raise 'Shosholozza' the traditional South African folk song sung in a call and response style, people appear more interested in gisting. Only a few people respond before returning to their conversations.

Folucle, the boat driver, is a widely travelled sailor. He has been to most of the countries in Southern and Eastern Africa. "It has been good driving a boat," he tells my colleague and me when we join him at the wheels. "I enjoy doing it but I won't use the word exciting. I enjoy especially now that I am taking a group on tour." He takes people on the boat cruise everyday but relaxes when he is not cruising. "One of my favourite sports is sailing and when I am not driving a boat, I am sailing."

Dhlomo also explains the objective of the night cruise. "We organised the boat cruise so that people can have a good view of Durban. Most people who visit Durban only see the city during the day; they do not see what the city has to offer at night. Hence the boat cruise offers the perfect opportunity for people to have a good view of the city at night from the Lagoon.

"We also want our trade partners to have a taste of what their customers stand to gain and see when they go on a boat cruise like this so that when they market Durban, they will be able to tell their story from experience and be able to sell the city as a good tourist destination in South Africa. Durban has a lot to offer. There is a clean and interesting beach here, good hotels and the food is also tasty." He couldn't have put it better, Durban is as he says.

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