

A leap of faith at Orlando Towers

Orlando Towers (Pty) Ltd was established in 2007 by Skyriders (Pty) Ltd, with the concept of developing the disused Orlando cooling towers in Soweto into a vertical adventure facility and tourist attraction for Soweto.

Aimed at drawing local Gauteng adventure enthusiasts as well as adventure tourists to the site of the Orlando Towers, it will also feed a large number of people into Soweto, which is now one of South Africa's largest tourist attractions.

The Orlando Towers vertical adventure facility was the brainchild of Bob Woods back (chairman of RAFAA) in 2001. Woods, a Skyriders director and rope access specialist for many years, was contracted to provide the rope access technicians for maintenance operations on the disused towers, and was awe-struck by their power and magnificence – enough to want to share the “almost religious” experience of viewing Soweto from the top of the towers with the world at large.

His idea was to build the first ever vertical adventure centre in a cooling tower. The adventure experiences will eventually include swinging, bungee jumping, climbing, abseiling, rap jumping, a zip line and more.

Woods worked together with the Johannesburg Property Company (JPC) until the plans for the Orlando Ekhaya Precinct were launched in 2005. Detailed plans for the Orlando Towers vertical adventure centre were finally approved late in 2007, and a lease agreement was signed in November 2007 for the use of the towers as a vertical adventure facility.

Ground was broken in January 2008, and the development of the public facilities was completed at the end of June. The lift up the side of the left tower was completed in mid March, and the stairs and platform installed by the end of July.

The bridge spanning the two towers is still being manufactured off site, and will be subject to stringent engineering standards and testing procedures. On completion, it will be hoisted into position 100 m above the ground by means of a sophisticated hoisting system, purpose designed for the unique bridge.

The site was officially opened on Saturday 12 July 2008.

The process behind the creation of the mural on the cooling towers was in itself intriguing. The scaffolding to hold the artists and a rope grid to guide the sketching were lowered from a helicopter. The 100-metre high mural took shape over six months, and the two artists began with hand painted black outlines that merely suggested what was to come. Over time, the colours finally revealed identifiable images. The shared anticipation in this gradual 'unwrapping' seems to have contributed to a sense of pride and ownership in Soweto.

As an experienced skydiver (5th in the World Championships), Chris Beasley of Isidingo fame reckons it's the best freefall training he's ever experienced. "It's the perfect spot to train for skydiving and base jumping, with nearly 40 metres of freefall. You can begin to play with lift and aerial direction, not to mention just keeping your wits about you...."

The Tandem Swings is a great way to share the experience with a friend (or someone to hold onto while you're screaming through your freefall).