

Lesotho

Lesotho (le-soo-too) is called Southern Africa's 'kingdom in the sky' for good reason. This small but stunningly beautiful, mountainous nation is nestled islandlike in the middle of South Africa. It's an intriguing anomaly in a region of modernity, and makes a fascinating travel detour from its larger neighbour.

The country offers not only superb mountain scenery, but a proud traditional people, endless hiking trails, and the chance to explore remote areas on Basotho ponies.

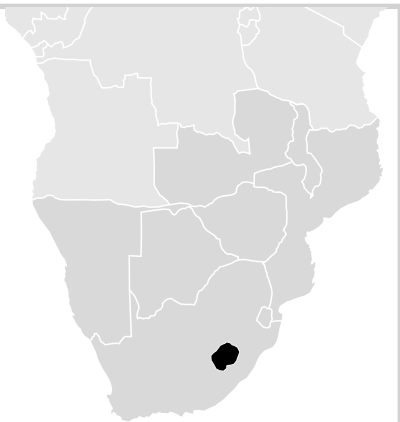
The 'lowland' areas (all of which are still above 1000m) have craft shopping and dinosaur footprints, while the highlands in the northeast and centre feature towering peaks (over 3000m), and verdant valleys.

Lesotho came into being during the early 19th century, when both the *difaqane* (forced migration) and Boer incursions into the hinterlands were at their height. Under the leadership of the legendary king Moshoeshe the Great, the Basotho people sought sanctuary and strategic advantage amid the forbidding terrain of the Drakensberg and Maluti Mountains.

Getting around is reasonably easy – ordinary hire cars will get you to most places; public transport is extensive, albeit slow. Hiking and pony trekking from village to village are the best ways of exploring.

FAST FACTS

- **Area** 30,355 sq km
- **Capital** Maseru
- **Country code** ☎ 266
- **Famous for** Ponies, royalty, dams, Basotho hats and blankets
- **Languages** South Sotho, English
- **Money** Loti (plural maloti)
- **Phrases** *Khotso* (hello, or literally 'peace'); *kea legoha* (thank you)
- **Population** 1.8 million



HIGHLIGHTS

- **Lodge living** (p137, p138, p132 and p132) Experiencing a unique lodge-village experience at Semonkong, Malealea, Roma or Ramabanta.
- **Sani Top** (p135) Absorbing the awesome vistas from Sani Pass and hiking the challenging wilderness hikes of the northern highlands.
- **Ts'ehlanyane National Park** (p135) Reveling in the nature and hikes (and even the luxury lodge) of this under-rated wilderness.
- **Off the beaten track** (p137) Hiking from Semonkong in the beautiful Thaba Putsoa mountains to the Ketane Falls.

ITINERARIES

- **One week** From **Maseru** (p128), head south to **Morija** (p137) where you'll find Morija Museum & Archives, a great museum with Basotho culture displays. Continue to **Malealea** (p138) or **Semonkong** (p137) – the 'gems' of Lesotho – to go pony trekking and hiking. You may be able to squeeze in a trip to **Quthing** (Moyeni; p139) to check out the 180-million-year-old dinosaur footprints.
- **Two weeks** Visit **Teyateyaneng** (p133), north of Maseru, the craft centre of Lesotho, or slightly further north, **Bokong Nature Reserve** (p135). Get a taste of the mountainous 'lowlands' by heading to **Morija** (p137), **Malealea** (p138) or **Semonkong** (p137), **Roma** (p132) and **Quthing** (p139). Continue northeast via **Qacha's Nek** (p137) to the remote **Sehlabathebe National Park** (p136) or **Mt Moorosi** (p139).
- **One month** Head northeast to **Teyateyaneng** (p133) and **Butha-Buthe** (p134), with a side trip to the beautiful **Bokong Nature Reserve** (p135) or **Ts'ehlanyane National Park** (p135). Then take in some of the country's most impressive scenery on a circuit to **Mokhotlong** (p135) and up to the magnificent **Sani Top** (p135). Return to Maseru via **Thaba-Tseka** (p134) and the **Katse Dam** (p133), or via the **Mohale Dam** (p132) and **Roma** (p132), before heading east to **Morija** (p137) and following the two-week itinerary. Note: unfortunately it's difficult to circumnavigate the country – the road between Sehlabathebe in the east and Sehonghong in the northeast requires a 4WD.

HOW MUCH?

- **Traditional dance/cultural group** M30-60
- **Internet** M10 per hour
- **Coffee** M10
- **Banana** M3
- **Genuine (wool) Basotho blanket** M650

LONELY PLANET INDEX

- **1L petrol** M6.50 (but fluctuates)
- **1L bottled water** M8-10
- **Bottle of beer** M10
- **Souvenir T-shirt** M100-150
- **Bag of fat cakes (fried savoury doughnuts)** M1-3

CLIMATE & WHEN TO GO

Clear, cold winters, with frosts and snow (and unpredictable changes) in the highlands, await you in Lesotho, so pack warm clothing. During summertime (late November to March), dramatic thunderstorms are common, as are all-enveloping clouds of thick mist, and roads can be affected by flooding rivers. Temperatures at this time can rise to over 30°C in the valleys, though it's usually much cooler in the mountains, even dropping below freezing. Most of Lesotho's rain falls between October and April. Throughout the year, the weather is notoriously changeable.

Visits are possible at any time, with spring and autumn optimal.

HISTORY

Lesotho was settled by Sotho peoples as late as the 16th century. The Khoisan, and possibly some Nguni people, lived among them, intermarrying and mingling their languages.

The early society was made up of small chiefdoms. Cattle and cultivation were the economy's mainstays. Their products were traded for iron from the northeast of South Africa.

By the early 19th century white traders were on the scene, exchanging beads for cattle. They were soon followed by the Voortrekkers (Boer pioneers) and pressure on Sotho grazing lands grew. Even without white encroachment, Sotho society had to accept that it had