

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 island-like 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 superb mountain scenery, 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 footsteps, 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, Moshoeshoe the Great, the Basotho people sought sanctuary and strategic advantage amid the forbidding terrain of the Drakensberg and Maluti Ranges.

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

FAST FACTS

- **Area** 30,350 sq km
- **ATMs** Only in Maseru
- **Borders** South Africa (Lesotho is surrounded by South Africa)
- **Budget** US\$30 to US\$50 per day
- **Capital** Maseru
- **Languages** Southern Sotho (Sesotho), English
- **Money** loti (plural: maloti); US\$1 = M7.40, €1 = M10.62
- **Population** 1.8 million
- **Seasons** summer (late November to March), winter (June to September)
- **Telephone** Country code ☎ 266; international access code ☎ 00
- **Time** GMT/UTC +2
- **Visa** Free two-week entry permit on arrival for most nationalities (but confirm on arrival)



HOW MUCH?

- **Traditional dance/cultural group** US\$4 to US\$8
- **Internet** US\$1.35 per hour
- **Coffee** US\$1.35
- **Banana** US\$0.40
- **Genuine (wool) Basotho blanket** US\$90

LONELY PLANET INDEX

- **1L petrol** US\$0.90 (but fluctuates)
- **1L bottled water** US\$1 to US\$1.35
- **Bottle of beer** US\$1.35
- **Souvenir T-shirt** US\$13.50 to US\$20
- **Bag of fat cakes (fried savoury do-nuts)** US\$0.15 to US\$0.40

HIGHLIGHTS

- **Sani Top** (p899) Enjoy high and stunning vistas from atop Sani Pass.
- **National Parks** (p899) Revel in the splendid isolation and nature of the country's national parks.
- **Semonkong** (p897) Enjoy locally run tours of this isolated village, abseil from great heights or trot to the local race day, where Basotho ponies show what they're made of.
- **Malealea** (p898) Explore rugged, mountainous regions with breathtaking scenery and traditional Basotho villages.
- **Thaba-Bosiu** (p897) Discover the mountain stronghold of King Moshoeshoe the Great, where the struggle for Lesotho was won.

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 summer, dramatic thunderstorms are common, as are all-enveloping clouds of thick mist. 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. You can visit Lesotho any time; each season

has attractions. Many believe the best time to visit is in April to May, when visibility is high after the rains. September and October is another good time.

ITINERARIES

- **One Week** From Maseru (p894), head south to Morija (p898), where you'll find Morija Museum & Archives, a great museum with displays on Basotho culture. Continue to Malealea (p898) or Semonkong (p897) – the 'gems' of Lesotho – to go pony trekking and hiking. If you have time, head to Quthing (p898) to check out the 180-million-year-old dinosaur footprints.
- **Two Weeks** Visit Teyateyaneng (p900), the craft centre of Lesotho or, slightly further north, Bokong Nature Reserve (p899). Get a taste of the mountainous 'lowlands' by heading to Morija (p898), Semonkong (p897), Malealea (p898) and Quthing (p898), and continue northeast to the remote Sehlabathebe National Park (p899).
- **One month** Take in some of the country's most impressive scenery on a clockwise circuit to Mokhotlong (p900) and up to the magnificent Sani Top (p899), visiting Leribe (p900) and other towns and sights along the way. Return to Maseru (p894) via Likalaneng and Roma (p897), before heading south to Morija (p898) and following the two-week itinerary. Note: the road between Sehlabathebe in the east and Sehonghong in the northeast requires a 4WD.

HISTORY

Neighbouring South Africa has always cast a long shadow over Lesotho, fuelling a perpetual struggle for a separate identity on an ever-diminishing patch of territory.

The first inhabitants of the mountainous region that makes up present-day Lesotho were the hunter-gatherer people known as the Khoisan. They have left many examples of their rock art in the river valleys. Lesotho was settled by the Sotho peoples in the 16th century.

Moshoeshoe the Great

King Moshoeshoe (pronounced 'mo-shwe-shwe' or 'mo-shesh') is the father figure of Lesotho's history. Around 1820, while a local chief of a small village, he led his villagers