

South Africa

South Africa has always been a country that has made headlines. When apartheid crumbled and Nelson Mandela walked free – just three months after the Berlin Wall was torn down – it was a pivotal, hopeful moment in history, which spread hope around the world in a way rarely seen since.

Like the rest of the continent, Africa's southernmost nation is capable of worming deep into travellers' imaginations. Indeed, with South Africa's mix of epic landscapes, healthy travelling scene, and vibrant cultures and people such as the Xhosa and Zulu, relatively accessible tastes of Africa are on tap here. Whether you head into a national park on a wildlife-spotting mission, sample some home brew in a township *shebeen* (local bar), or hike through landscapes such as the Drakensberg, this mind-bogglingly diverse country rewards travellers' exploratory efforts.

Once you've recovered from all that, or from adrenalin-pumping activities such as the world's highest bungee jump, reflect on it all over a bottle in the Winelands, a *braai* (barbecue) in the wilderness, a beach session on the Wild Coast, or a tour of Cape Town's galleries. Whatever you choose, it will probably be, as South Africans like to say, *lekker* (tasty).

FAST FACTS

- **Area** 1,233,404 sq km
- **ATMs** Found in cities and most towns
- **Borders** Botswana, Lesotho, Mozambique, Namibia, Swaziland, Zimbabwe
- **Budget** US\$35 to US\$70 a day
- **Capitals** Pretoria (administrative), Bloemfontein (judicial) and Cape Town (legislative)
- **Languages** English, Afrikaans, Ndebele, Xhosa, Zulu, Northern Sotho (Sepedi), Southern Sotho (Sesotho), Venda, Tswana, Swati and Tsonga
- **Money** Rand; US\$1 = R7.4, €1 = R11
- **Population** 49 million
- **Seasons** Cape Town: cold and wet (May to August), sunny and warm (September to May); Durban and Johannesburg: dry (May to September), wet (October to April)
- **Telephone** Country code ☎ 27; international access code ☎ 00
- **Time** GMT/UTC +2
- **Visa** Free 90-day entry permits issued on arrival to citizens of most Commonwealth countries (including Australia and the UK), most Western European countries, Japan and the USA



HOW MUCH?

- **Bottle of red wine** US\$7 to US\$11
- **Car hire per day** US\$27 to US\$40
- **Mango** US\$0.40 to US\$1
- **Township tour** US\$47
- **Surfboard** US\$400

LONELY PLANET INDEX

- **1L petrol** US\$1.10
- **1.5L bottled water** US\$2.20
- **Can of Black Label beer** US\$1
- **Souvenir T-shirt** US\$9.40
- **Roasted mealie (corn)** US\$0.30

HIGHLIGHTS

- **Cape Town** (p1021) Marvel at the city's majestic setting and take a tippie tour of the area's wineries.
- **Kruger National Park** (p1046) Don some khaki and join the rangers on a safari of the most involving kind – on foot.
- **Drakensberg Mountains** (p1044) Hike the peaks of Royal Natal National Park's sublime Amphitheatre.
- **Wild Coast** (p1036) Choose between a hammock and the beach at one of the laid-back hostels.
- **Kgalagadi Transfrontier Park** (p1060) Become hypnotised by the vast and beautiful expanses of the Kalahari.

CLIMATE & WHEN TO GO

South Africa has a temperate climate compared with most African countries, and can be visited comfortably any time. Winter (June to September) is cooler, drier, and ideal for hiking and outdoor pursuits. Because vegetation is less dense, and thirsty animals congregate around water sources, winter is also the best time for wildlife-watching.

Summer (late November to March) brings rain, mists and – in the lowveld – some uncomfortably hot days. Along the Indian Ocean, conditions are sultry and tropical, with high humidity.

More of a consideration than weather are school holidays. From mid-December to January, waves of vacationers stream out of the cities, with foreign visitors adding to the crush.

The absolute peak is from Christmas to mid-January, followed by Easter. Accommodation in tourist areas and national parks is heavily booked, and prices can more than double.

Spring (mid-September to November) and autumn (April and May) are ideal almost everywhere. Spring is also the best time to see vast expanses of the Northern Cape carpeted with wildflowers.

ITINERARIES

- **Two Weeks** Touching down in Johannesburg, spend a few hours at the moving Apartheid Museum (p1049) before heading northeast to safari showpiece Kruger National Park (p1046). The teeming wildlife here will undoubtedly hold you captivated for several days. From Kruger, head south into KwaZulu-Natal, where the dramatic valleys and peaks of the Drakensberg Mountains (p1044) provide an endless array of excellent hikes. Head up Sani Pass (p1045) to the Lesotho border for breathtaking views before returning to the throbbing heart of the country to get a taste of township life in Soweto (p1049).
- **One Month** After a few days in Cape Town (p1021) and a trip to the top of Table Mountain (p1022), tear yourself away from the wonderful Mother City and head to the fertile valleys of the Winelands, with a night or two in Stellenbosch (p1031), then continue the wine tour along scenic Route 62 through the Little Karoo to ostrich-mad Oudtshoorn (p1032). Make your way south to the Garden Route, joining the N2 near arty, lagoon-side Knysna (p1033) and Plettenberg Bay (p1033), a relaxed beach town. Be sure to stop at Tsitsikamma National Park (p1034) along the coast. Move northeast through the striking Wild Coast (p1036), before spending a day or so on the beach in Durban (p1037). Head west to the Drakensberg (p1044) or northeast to President Zuma's birthplace, Zululand (p1043); or hit the park-packed Elephant Coast, where the wilderness areas include iSimangaliso Wetland Park (p1043) and Hluhluwe-iMfolozi Park (p1043), before returning to Durban or heading to Jo'burg for the flight home.

HISTORY

Rock art suggests that, possibly as early as 40,000 years ago, nomadic San hunter-gatherers