



Lesotho

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Why Go?

Lesotho (le-*soo*-too) is a vastly underrated travel destination. It's beautiful, culturally rich, safe, cheap and easily accessible from Durban and Johannesburg.

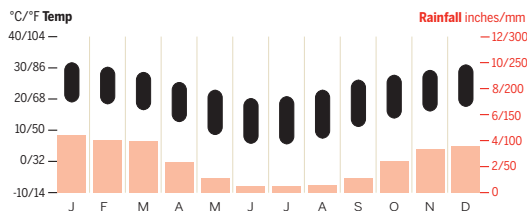
The contrast with South Africa could not be more striking, in both postapartheid attitude and topographical extremes. Even a few days spent in Lesotho's mountain air will give you a fresh perspective on the continent.

This is essentially an alpine country where villagers on horseback in multicoloured balaclavas and blankets greet you round precipitous bends. The hiking and trekking – often on a famed Basotho pony – is world-class and the infrastructure of the four national parks continues to improve.

The 1000m-high 'lowlands' are the scene of low-key Lesotho life, with good craft shopping around Teyateyaneng and the capital, Maseru. But be sure to head inland into the valleys and mountains, where streams traverse an ancient dinosaur playground. This is genuine adventure travel.

When to Go

Maseru



Jun–Aug Hit the slopes in Southern Africa and catch quality international ski competitions.

Sep Celebrate Lesotho culture at the renowned Morija Arts Festival.

Dec & Jan Feel the full force of Maletsunyane, the region's highest waterfall.

History

THE EARLY DAYS

Lesotho is the homeland of the Basotho – Sotho-Tswana peoples who originally lived in small chiefdoms scattered around the highveld in present-day Free State.

During the 19th century, the Voortrekkers and various other white entrepreneurs began to encroach on Basotho grazing lands. On top of this came the *difaqane* (forced migration; see p510).

Yet the Basotho emerged from this period more united. This was largely due to the leadership of the brilliant Moshoeshe the Great, a village chief who rallied his people and forged a powerful kingdom. Moshoeshe first led his own villagers to the mountain stronghold of Butha-Buthe, from which he was able to resist the early incursions of the *difaqane*. He moved his headquarters to the more easily defended hilltop perch of Thaba-Bosiu, from where he repulsed wave after wave of invaders.

By 1840 Moshoeshe's rule was firmly entrenched. Ultimately, he was able to bring various peoples together as part of the loosely federated Basotho state, which, by the time of his death in 1870, had a population exceeding 150,000.

Moshoeshe had also welcomed Christian missionaries into his territory. In return for some Christianisation of Basotho customs, the missionaries were disposed to defend the rights of 'their' Basotho against a rising new threat: Boer and British expansion.

DEFENDING THE TERRITORY

In 1843 – in response to continuing Boer incursions – Moshoeshe allied himself with the British Cape Colony government. While the resulting treaties defined his borders, they did little to stop squabbles with the Boers, who had established themselves in the fertile lowveld west of the Mokhotlong (Caledon) River. In 1858 tensions peaked with the outbreak of the Orange Free State–Basotho War. Moshoeshe was ultimately forced to sign away much of his western lowlands.

In 1868 Moshoeshe again called on the British, this time bypassing the Cape Colony administration and heading straight to the imperial government in London. The British viewed continual war between the Orange Free State and Basotholand as bad for their own interests. To resolve the situation, the British annexed Basotholand.

The decade after Moshoeshe's death was marked by ongoing squabbles over succes-



MALOTI OR RAND?

The South African Rand is most welcome in Lesotho, but even though it's tied to its neighbour's currency, the Maloti is not accepted in South Africa. So use it or, effectively, lose it before you leave the country. Most ATMs will dispense Maloti, so don't get caught with a pocketful.

sion. After briefly changing hands between the British imperial government and the Cape Colony, Basotholand again came under direct British control in 1884. When the Union of South Africa was created in 1910, Basotholand was a British protectorate and was not included; had Cape Colony retained control, Lesotho would have become part of South Africa, and later a homeland under the apartheid regime.

INDEPENDENCE AT LAST

During the early 20th century, migrant labour to South Africa increased, and the Basotho gained greater autonomy under the British administration. In the mid-1950s the council requested internal self-government, with elections to determine its members. Meanwhile, political parties were being formed, led by the Basotholand Congress Party (BCP; similar to South Africa's African National Congress) and the Basotholand National Party (BNP), a conservative group headed by Chief Leabua Jonathan.

Lesotho's first elections in 1960 were won by the BCP, which made full independence from Britain the first item on its agenda. Chief Jonathan became the first prime minister of the newly independent Kingdom of Lesotho, with King Moshoeshe II as nominal head of state.

Chief Jonathan's rule was unpopular, and in the 1970 election, the BCP regained power. Chief Jonathan suspended the constitution, arrested and expelled the king, and banned opposition parties. Lesotho effectively became a one-party state.

Chief Jonathan was deposed in a military coup in 1986, and Moshoeshe II restored as head of state. Yet, following ongoing power disputes between the king and the coup leader, Moshoeshe II was deposed in favour of his son, Prince Mohato Bereng Seeiso (Letsie III).

The BCP split and Mokhehle formed the breakaway Lesotho Congress for Democracy