

Understand Southern Africa

SOUTHERN AFRICA TODAY 662

Southern Africa is dealing with AIDS and a fragile environmental landscape, but it's often doing so with stable governments and strong economies.

HISTORY 664

Embark on a journey that traces human existence to its very beginning. This is where it all started.

CULTURE 671

Southern Africa is a mosaic of African and European cultures, with cohesion and conflict expressed through literature, art, dance and food.

WILDLIFE 679

From Botswana's world-famous Okavango Delta to the wilds of Zambia's massive protected areas, wildlife is the highlight of the region.

MUSIC IN SOUTHERN AFRICA 695

Music, more than any other cultural expression, has best survived the onslaught of Western influences.

ENVIRONMENT 701

The landscape and its inhabitants are protected through the region's unique reserves and national parks.

Southern Africa Today

Southern Africa's story is as diverse as the nine countries and more than 133 million people that call the region home. In some corners (eg Botswana and Namibia) political stability reigns, in others it looks more like stagnation (eg Zimbabwe and Swaziland). But there are some recurring themes, not least among them a complicated economic and environmental outlook and (finally) a generally positive outlook when it comes to the hitherto catastrophic HIV/AIDS situation.

Best on Film

The Gods Must Be Crazy (1984) Cult comedy starring Botswana's San.

A United Kingdom (2016) Based on the love story of Botswana's first president and his British bride.

Savage Kingdom (2016) Wildlife documentary showing the rivalry between predators in the Savuti region.

Invictus (2009) Covers the historic 1995 Rugby World Cup. Clint Eastwood directs.

Mandela: Long Walk to Freedom (2013) Condensed but enjoyable biography, covering Madiba's journey to South African presidency.

Best in Print

Lost World of the Kalahari (Laurens van der Post; 1958) A 1950s eulogy for San culture.

Cry of the Kalahari (Mark & Delia Owens; 1984) Kalahari wildlife before the tourists arrived.

Don't Let's Go to the Dogs Tonight – An African Childhood (Alexandra Fuller; 2001) A stunning memoir of life and loss and a family's unbreakable bond with Africa.

Disgrace (JM Coetzee; 1999) Booker Prize-winning novel based in post-apartheid South Africa.

The Stone Virgins (Yvonne Vera; 2002) The harrowing, award-winning tale of two sisters caught up in post-independence Zimbabwe.

Political Games

Southern Africa's political map is a snapshot of the continent. There are stunning success stories of the kind that rarely appear in international newspapers – Botswana and Namibia, for example, have stable but relatively open political systems where the ruling parties rarely change but democracy rules. Put simply, both countries may not be perfect but continue to serve as beacons of good governance. Elsewhere, a less robust political situation reigns. South Africa's ruling ANC has been passing through some troubled times under the leadership of Jacob Zuma, while Zambia, Malawi and Mozambique have all seen tumultuous changes of government, albeit, it must be said, without bringing down their democratic systems – of all of these, Mozambique's stability looks the most tenuous. A 2014 coup in Lesotho was a significant black spot for the region. The poorest performers of the region are Swaziland and Zimbabwe, both countries held in a state of stasis for decades, two countries' national lives on hold as their rulers cling to power, seemingly in perpetuity.

AIDS: A Corner Turned?

Nowhere suffered from the horrors of HIV/AIDS quite like Southern Africa. It was a crisis of Biblical proportions, of countless lives cut short and social structures torn asunder. Life expectancy fell to near-apocalyptic levels (life expectancy in Botswana was 35 in 2005), the number of children orphaned by the crisis soared and the impact was felt in every corner of society. The challenges continue – in Swaziland, for example, nearly one-third of the population suffers from HIV/AIDS (28.8%, the highest in the world) and life expectancy at birth is one of the lowest on earth (around 50 years). But there are signs of hope – infection rates are falling across the region, and Botswana (where the government provides