the Maloti Drakensberg experience

Maloti Drakensberg
Transfrontier Programme
The Kingdom of Lesotho’s Maloti and South Africa’s Drakensberg mountains prove, in every sense, the high point of any Southern African eco-visit. With their lowest point rising 1,388m above sea level, spectacular mountain vistas and rolling grasslands are rendered friendly and accessible by remote highland villagers’ rich and welcoming Basotho and Zulu cultures.

Bounding the central Southern African plateau, the magnificent snow-capped peaks and vertiginous waterfalls comprising the glorious sun-bathed Great Escarpment ensure that this unique African sierra’s vast array of natural and cultural attractions surpasses every visitor’s expectation. Dinosaur footprints, accompanied by the oldest known eggs to be discovered with intact embryos, mark progress made some 300 million years ago and predate a Stone Age human history painted into perpetuity by San rock artists a mere 4,000 years ago. Magnificent high-altitude rivers (their cold, clear waters ideal for fly-fishing), lakes and dams (abounding with rare aquatic species) form, by way of the Malibamat’so River and one of the most efficient storage dams on the continent, the Katse Dam, a vital source of fresh water for Lesotho and South Africa.

The Maloti Drakensberg, internationally renowned for its richly bio diverse fauna and flora and boasting World Heritage and Ramsar status, is home to more than 350 recorded bird species, of which at least 40 are endemic and 10 are threatened. An abundance of hiking, mountain-biking and pony trekking trails as well as 4x4 and off-road motorcycle tracks make this the quintessential adventure destination. For those keen to take it to another level, hot-air ballooning, paragliding and hang-gliding are all on offer. Back on terra firma (well, kind of) abseil the longest commercially operated single drop at Maletsunyane Falls (204m), go rock climbing, white-water rafting and, in winter, ice-climbing or skiing.

We invite you to enjoy our short exploration of the Maloti Drakensberg and trust it will inspire you to summit the spirit of adventure epitomised by the towering heights of this mountain masterpiece.
the northwest Maloti Drakensberg

Eastern Free State & Northwestern Lesotho

All roads entice the traveler to the soaring sandstone wonders of the Golden Gate Highlands National Park and the nearby eclectic town of Clarens—spurring them to enter Lesotho. Whether fly-fishing, skiing at Afriski, visiting the Ha Kome Cave Village outside Teya-Teyaneng or marveling at the engineering of Katse Dam, scaling Sentinel Peak or exploring one of myriad sites of historical value, the Maloti Drakensberg welcomes, challenges and satisfies the most adventurous spirit. See pages 4 to 7

West & Central Lesotho

Fortify yourself and stock up in Lesotho's capital, Maseru, a short drive from Thaba Bosiu, the mountain fortress at which a young King Moshoeshoe I forged the Basotho nation, before plunging into a land of contrasts, culture and crafts as, from Maseru to Roma and the Mohale Dam, you navigate a land of stunning beauty to explore ancient art, natural splendours, human extremes and 21st Century engineering excellence. See pages 18 to 21

Making the region easy to explore, we have split it into quarters where we add further details and indicate pages on which we highlight specific features.

the northeast Maloti Drakensberg

KwaZulu-Natal Drakensberg & Lesotho Eastern Highlands

This, the wild and untamed mountains of Africa’s Great Escarpment, is the heart of our World Heritage Site, The Maloti-Drakensberg Park. Our proud trans-boundary site is composed of the uKhahlamba Drakensberg National Park in South Africa and the Sefalabathebe National Park in Lesotho and is synonymous with names like The Amphitheatre, Giant’s Castle, Cathedral Peak and Sani Pass, giving it its nickname, “The Berg”. Renowned not only for its stunning mountain vistas, but its arrays of floral and fauna biodiversity and a wealth of rock paintings. See pages 10 to 13

the southeast Maloti Drakensberg

Eastern Cape Highlands & Southern Lesotho

Scenic drives and high-altitude mountain passes cutting through broad valleys of green, abounding in crystal-clear streams take you to Lesotho’s most remote and unspoilt places. Ideal for year-round wild-water fly-fishing, this favoured Maloti Drakensberg region – blessed with an abundance of historic and prehistoric sites, wild flowers, birding opportunities and winter skiing – offers extreme adventure and the exhilaration of rejuvenation to its visitors. See pages 24 to 27

getting around the Maloti Drakensberg

The Maloti Drakensberg, encompassing some 15 000km², comprises the landlocked mountain Kingdom of Lesotho, South Africa’s Eastern Free State, KwaZulu-Natal Drakensberg and Eastern Cape Drakensberg and Witteberge.

The Maloti Drakensberg in relation to Lesotho and South Africa
The vulture restaurant at Golden Gate National Park attracts more than just vultures.

**Where dinosaurs of old coexist with modern engineering feats**

This easily accessible region is the perfect base from which to explore the Free State Highlands, the northern Berg and Maloti Mountains. The most convenient entry is from South Africa’s powerhouse, Gauteng, home to Southern Africa’s largest airport, O.R. Tambo International. Driving from Johannesburg on the N3 to Harrismith (where you can pick up more detailed information from the N3 Gateway Tourism Association), turn onto the picturesque R71. It passes Sterkfontein Dam (a 10km detour on the R76) on its way to an Eastern Free State highlight, the towering orange sandstone cliffs of the magnificent Golden Gate Highlands National Park. Just inside the Park, visit the Basotho Cultural Village. It features a vulture bird hide, a soon-to-be-opened dinosaur education centre (see feature on the right) and numerous accommodation options. Thereafter, the road continues to the bustling village of Clarens, brimful with craft shops and places to eat and stay. Should you need replenishments, the attractive sandstone buildings of Bethlehem, a commercial centre, lies 40km to the north. From Clarens, continue along the R711 to Fouriesburg and then turn right to enter Lesotho at the Caledonspoort gate.

Drive through Butha-Buthe and, just northeast of the town, you will find the Liphofung Caves and Historical Site with its San engravings and small museum. You have the option to head east on the A1 from here, over the spectacular tarred Moteng Pass towards the Oxbow and Afriski Ski and Mountain Resort. Afriski is 3 222 meters above sea level. It offers skiing in winter and mountain biking and fly-fishing in summer. From Afriski, you can continue on the A1 into the Central Drakensberg (more details on page 10) by way of the border post at the Caledonspoort gate.

The real Jurassic Park

The world’s oldest known dinosaur nesting site lies in the Free State’s Golden Gate Highlands National Park. Palaeontologists found 10 nests containing 34 eggs and skeletons thought to be over 190 million years old. The find shows that the region was an early Jurassic nesting site used by Massospondylus carinatus, a plant eater. An R83.5 million education centre will continue to shed light on the area’s Jurassic origins for generations to come.
renowned Sani Pass. Alternatively, return to Butha-Buthe and travel south along the A5 through Hlotse (Leribe), Peka, Teya-Teyaneng and on to Lesotho's capital, Maseru. The Leribe Craft Centre at Hlotse and the many craft shops in Teya-Teyaneng make this route of particular interest to crafters. Yet another option is to take the B27 outside Butha-Buthe to the upmarket lodge at Ts’ehlanyane National Park, from where you can walk, go bird-watching or enjoy the high-altitude flora. Just past Hlotse, you’re able to turn left onto the A8 (B25) to Katse Dam. On your way to this masterpiece of structural engineering, you’ll find Bokong Nature Reserve, with its hiking trails leading to a waterfall surrounded by stunning flora.

The awe-inspiring wall of the Katse Dam, one of Africa’s most efficient storage dams

Katse Dam

The monumental Katse Dam on Lesotho’s Malibamat’so River is Africa’s second-largest double-curvature arch dam. It forms part of the Lesotho Highlands Water Project, Africa’s largest water transfer scheme, and it feeds water to South Africa’s economic powerhouse, Gauteng, at 30m³ per second. The dam lies just below the confluence of the Bokong River, which forms the western arm of the Katse reservoir. This engineering masterpiece consists of 2 320 000m³ of concrete, soars to a height of 185m and is able to store 1 950 million m³ of water. A well-equipped visitors’ centre overlooks the dam wall. (See page 31 for more on the LHWP)

The Ha Kome Cave Dwellings, a National Heritage Site, lie north of the Phuthiatsana River, beneath the overhanging sandstone cliffs of Pulane Mountain’s Bokhopa Peak, 25km southeast of Teya-Teyaneng in the Berea district. Comprising a group of five distinctive mud homes built out from the sandstone cliffs, the village was home to members of the Basia clan under Chief Teleka escaping the Lifaqane, or “time of troubles” (1815-1840), when cannibalism was rife among starving Basotho and other Nguni peoples. Parking at the top of the hill followed by a 20 minute walk will bring you to the Ha Kome Visitors Centre where you will be given a guided tour of the village and its surrounding communities.

Ha Kome Caves

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Lesotho is home to a friendly, deeply cultured nation with a richly storied history, honed by the extremities of their country’s mountainous topography, the lowest point of which lies at 1,388m above sea level. The dominant nation today is the Basotho, although the region is home to a cosmopolitan brio of Nguni-speaking peoples.

The first thing to strike you when entering the mountains of Lesotho is the number of blanket-adorned men on horseback. These colourfully bedecked easy riders, replete with gumboots and bright balaclavas (or the traditional mokorotlo) in winter, are members of the welcoming Basotho, a nation born of extreme hardship and war brought together by a young visionary named Moshoeshoe. During the early 1800s, with the rise of Shaka, King of the Zulu, and the increasing impact of colonial rule, central Southern Africa was thrown into a state of turmoil. Moshoeshoe strategically gathered the various Sotho-speaking splinter groups on a steep sandstone slope named Butha-Buthe in the Maloti Mountains and, later, on the mountaintop at Thaba Bosiu, a 2km² sandstone plateau. The mountain provided a natural fortress allowing the fragmented Sotho to forge a single nation, the Basotho. Visiting Thaba Bosiu is a deeply moving experience allowing you to relive the courageous birth of a people’s national identity. (See page 19 for more information.) It was during this time of turmoil that scattered groups that had evaded Shaka’s military exploits turned to banditry and cannibalism for survival.

Testimony to Moshoeshoe’s stature as a peacemaker was his treatment of captured cannibals. Instead of killing them, even though his own grandfather, Peete, fell prey to the marauders, he assured them of his forgiveness and they became his loyal subjects. Moshoeshoe’s strategic diplomacy resulted in the British annexing Lesotho in 1869, ending a three-year siege by the Boers. Lesotho regained independence from the British in 1966 and it now functions as a hereditary monarchy under the leadership of King Letsie III.

Today, many Basotho live as subsistence agriculturalists, keeping livestock including cattle, sheep and Marino goats.

San rock art provides a treasured record of our mountain peoples. Created by San communities that inhabited this area for more than 20,000 years, paintings were being added as recently as the early 20th Century. Their rock art tells of rising turmoil in the region at the time Shaka was consolidating his power base and Europeans expanded their colonial presence. These catastrophic intrusions and wars ultimately saw the demise of the Drakensberg San, a culture killed or driven out by invaders. Descendants of the region’s San peoples, sometimes referred to as the “Secret San,” have merged with other cultural communities and live in the area today.

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Globally, Lesotho is renowned for its mastery of weaving. Handwoven mohair and woolen tapestries are works of art imbued with distinct and unmistakable character, noted for their beauty, softness and strength. Originally influenced by missionaries, the talent of many Basotho women today finds independent cultural and artistic expression in such finely crafted handwork. The traditional Basotho hat, or mokorotlo, is the best known of a range of fine Basotho grass works. Its conical shape is seen throughout the Kingdom and is the official symbol of Lesotho.

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Folklore and bloodshed, known as the Lifane or Mfecane (“time of troubles”), Many of the Nguni and Sotho-speaking peoples sought refuge in the rugged and harsh Maloti Drakensberg Mountains. Moshoeshoe strategically gathered the various Sotho-speaking splinter groups on a steep sandstone slope named Butha-Buthe in the Maloti Mountains and, later, on the mountaintop at Thaba Bosiu, a 2km² sandstone plateau. The mountain provided a natural fortress allowing the fragmented Sotho to forge a single nation, the Basotho. Visiting Thaba Bosiu is a deeply moving experience allowing you to relive the courageous birth of a people’s national identity. (See page 19 for more information.) It was during this time of turmoil that scattered groups that had evaded Shaka’s military exploits turned to banditry and cannibalism for survival.

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A world heritage site complemented by sumptuous mountain resorts

Within 250km of Durban’s King Shaka International Airport and known affectionately as “the Berg”, the Drakensberg range abounds with natural and scenic splendour complemented by resorts with more than sufficient facilities to keep the whole family happy.

A 3 hour drive on the N3 national road is the primary route linking Durban and its airport to the most southerly Drakensberg resorts by way of the R617. A superabundance of parks, reserves and private resorts in the KwaZulu-Natal section of the Drakensberg has resulted in it being split into three sections; the Southern Drakensberg, Central Drakensberg and Northern Drakensberg. Each section has its own Marketing Association and you would be well advised to look at each association’s website (referenced on the inside cover).

Decide what you wish to see and where you want to go before setting off. Once in the Drakensberg, you will find the roads to be feeder roads linking mountain resort to mountain resort and you might find yourself returning regularly to a main road snaking through the foothills roughly parallel to the mountains.

The Southern Drakensberg boasts more than 2 500 beds and nine different routes. The R617 is its main artery from Durban and the Eastern Cape and the Southern Drakensberg’s two main villages are Underberg and Himeville, with Underberg forming the main hub from where you can easily reach Bushman’s Neck and Garden Castle, Drakensberg Gardens and Cobham. If you have a 4x4 vehicle, you can also travel from Himeville up the precipitous world-renowned Sani Pass into the Lesotho Highlands. It is the only access road into Lesotho from KwaZulu-Natal and it is, without a doubt, a breathtaking drive.

Having topped the Sani Pass, the road to the northern Drakensberg is almost equidistant from these commercial centres. Royal Natal National Park’s main features are the Amphitheatre, Sentinel, Tugela Falls (the second-highest waterfall in the world at 948m) and Mont-Aux-Sources. It is an extremely popular hiking area and Bergville acts as a gateway to the northern resorts. (See feature on the next page.)
The mythical magic of the Drakensberg (Dragon Mountains) entrances every visitor with its blend of spectacular scenery, rich history and heart-warming hospitality. From the awesome magnificence of its towering peaks to the quaint charm of its well-placed camps, this is a place where awestruck tourists feel their tensions fall away and their spirits soar like eagles. The Maloti Drakensberg Transboundary World Heritage Site is a transnational property spanning the border between Lesotho and South Africa. It comprises the Sehlabathebe National Park (6 500ha) in Lesotho and uKhahlamba Drakensberg Park (242 813ha) in South Africa.

The Maloti Drakensberg is renowned for its spectacular natural landscapes and importance as a refuge for threatened and endemic species as well as its wealth of San rock art. The mountains cover an area of some 5 000 km² and rise to 3 482 metres at Thabana Ntlenyana in Lesotho. The Park has four main habitats containing 2 153 plant species (101 of which are endemic), 299 bird species, 48 mammal species, 48 reptile species and 26 species of frog. Such biodiversity and species richness is also found in the many invertebrate groups; 33 millipede species, 44 dragonfly and damselfly species, 74 butterfly species and 33 species of robber fly.

If you’re of an energetic disposition, you may enjoy hiking, climbing, horse-riding, fishing, sailing or power boating. Should you prefer more sedentary pursuits, secluded pools, crystalline streams and shaded valleys extend gentle invitations to relax and unwind. Explorers are well-catered for and can search for caves and rock shelters housing the largest, best-preserved and most concentrated groupings of San paintings in Africa south of the Sahara. More than 35 000 individual artworks, made over a period of 4 000 years, are stored at some 600 sites.

Starting with resorts in the south, and working your way north of the Maloti Drakensberg Park World Heritage Site, on the South African side in KwaZulu-Natal, visitors can visit: Bushmans Nek; Garden Castle; Cobham; Vergelegen; Lotheni; Kamberg; Highmoor; Giant’s Castle; Injisuthi Monks Cowl; Didima; Thendele (Royal Natal); Mahai / Rugged Glen.

In Lesotho: Sehlabathebe National Park.
Thrilling ways to Explore the Mountains

Following seven hours in the saddle, you’ve pitched camp and, advised by your Basotho guide, you ready yourself for a traditional dinner with the local chief at... where are we?
This is the fourth day out of Malealea, so it must be...?

Be it a ride, a day’s outing or an organised tour lasting a week or more, pony trekking is perhaps the best way to explore Lesotho’s mountains, passes, waterfalls, San rock paintings and wonderfully rich and warm Basotho culture.

Beneath snow-capped peaks and chilled waterfalls, through sun-drenched highlands of green dotted with distinctively-roofed, stone-walled rondavels beside fields of golden maize or ice-green agave, through precipitous gorges or across Afro-alpine meadows dressed in clumped grass or tussocked heather, you’ll find yourself rocking to the rhythm of your sure-footed Basotho pony, the world’s most reliable trekking companion, while being taught a smattering of Sesotho by your knowledgeable guide.

Confronted by an array of exploration methods, from pony trekking and hiking through every form of mechanised transport, you’ll find yourself questioning your initial perception of Lesotho as an impenetrable mountain mystery. As a seasoned pony trekker, 4x4 driver, off-road rider, endurance runner, mountain biker, hiker or slackpacker, you now realise that the Mountain Kingdom has conspired, over vast stretches of geological time, to shape an easily accessible explorer’s Paradise.

But with your pony now being cared for and several inquisitive village children eyeing you out through their giggles, your stomach tells you that a delicious traditional meal and an evening spent with the chief and other members of the village should bring the day to a perfect close.

BACKGROUND PHOTO
Pony trekking is one of the favoured methods of for exploring the Highlands

PHOTO © STEVIE NEWBOULD
Adrenaline Sports

The Apex of Adventure

If you enjoy the adrenal rush of high-adventure sport, the Maloti Drakensberg offers it in spadesful. Its spectacular mountains and crystal-clear air provide ideal conditions for summer and winter enjoyment.

The wild and rugged extremes of the untamed Maloti, marrying stark contrasts of ice, rock, water and sky, allow us to transcend our limitations and explore the full potential of our mental, physical and emotional resilience in communion with nature. If high, or high-altitude, adventure is your form of self-expression, pitting your skills against challenges posed by the Maloti will lead you to an abiding self-actualisation.

Whether tacked to a sheer Giant’s Castle wall of ice; suspended 100m beneath the roaring splendour of Semonkong’s 192m-high Maletsunyane Falls; carving a fresh piste of a kilometre or more at Afriski Ski and Mountain Resort, Tiffendell or Mahlasela Pass (3 222m); focusing on keeping your 4x4, quad or off-road bike aimed at a distant, seemingly inaccessible rural village beyond the Sani Pass; simultaneously testing six senses as your canoe, kayak or raft hits tumultuous churn on a surging waterway; straining every sinew to crest a high and rocky ridge on your mountain bike, or listening to the stillness of an air column as your paraglider soars ever-rising thermals, you will know, “This, my good friend, is life lived to the full.”

No matter how far out there you go, in the Maloti Drakensberg, all roads lead you to yourself. Knowing no official borders, these magnificent mountains lend themselves to the ultimate adventure for anybody of any age or level of fitness.

Hot-air balloons, their kaleidoscopic colours adding value to any skyscape, drift silently over the Maloti Drakensberg for hours at a time. Such flights, which lift off from the Free State, Eastern Cape and KwaZulu-Natal, offer never-to-be-repeated visual experiences to those less into realising themselves than they are into appreciating the unsurpassable grandeur and haunting beauty of a mountain system adding inestimable value to a world in which we all find ourselves.
Of Kings, Curios, Culture and Caves

A wide range of amenities and plentiful accommodation options make Lesotho’s capital, Maseru, a sprawling city of 330 000 on the Caledon River, a great base from which to launch road trips through exquisitely scenic landscapes of soaring mountain passes, valleys and gently undulating, grass-covered hills.

Driving from Johannesburg, your easiest approach to Maseru and central Lesotho is by way of South Africa’s R26, which runs southwest along Lesotho’s western border through Fouriesburg, Ficksburg and Clocolan to Ladybrand and, from there, through the 24-hour Maseru Bridge border post. (See more on Maseru on page 20.)

From the capital Maseru, drive 35km southwest along the A2 and A5 to Roma, the town founded by Roman Catholic missionaries in the broad Tloutle valley in 1862, is home to the National University of Lesotho and forms the country’s educational and spiritual heart. From here, a further 80km will take you through Ramabanta and across the spectacular Baboon Pass mountain route to Semonkong, home to the 192m Maletsunyane Falls, Southern Africa’s second-highest straight-drop waterfall. (See more on the falls on page 20.)

Alternatively, set out from Maseru along the A2 through Morija and the Gates of Paradise Pass to Malealea. Like Roma, Morija was originally a mission station and, today, it has an outstanding mission press and book depot. Semonkong and Malealea boast top-notch tourist facilities offering

Thaba Bosiu Cultural Village

Thaba Bosiu, 24km from Maseru, is the birthplace of the Basotho people and a national monument imbued with great significance. The complex stands at the foot of the sandstone plateau where King Moshoeshoe I, the founder of the Basotho Nation, established what turned out to be a formidable fortress capable of protecting his people during the Lifaqane (Mfecane).

Thaba Bosiu, which means “Mountain at Night”, was believed to possess supernatural powers enabling it to grow into a tall mountain during the hours of darkness. This left enemies scaling it stranded on its cliffs and vulnerable to attack in the morning. Thaba Bosiu offers excellent on-site accommodation and a restaurant, museum, cultural village and amphitheatre.
penny trekking, mountain-bike trails and much more, as well as high-quality accommodation options. Further south, 125km from Maseru, lies Mohale's Hoek. Here you will find dinosaur prints and San rock paintings. At Motlejoe, just two kilometres south of Mohale's Hoek, you can explore the cave hideout of Motlejoe, a notorious cannibal during the Lifqane of the 1820s, when roving bands prevented farmers growing crops and people were forced to practice cannibalism to survive.

From Maseru, a 25km drive along the B21 will take you to the historically significant Thaba Bosiu mountain fortress, birthplace of the Basotho nation, and its impressive Cultural Village (see feature on page 19). Alternatively, use God Help Me Pass on the A3 to reach Mohale Dam, categorised as a high dam at 145 metres. It is reputedly the highest rock filled concrete-face dam in Africa and it forms part of the Lesotho Highlands Water Project, diverting water to the still larger Katse Dam. The Katse Dam is a further 150km away, across mountain passes marking the A3 and A25 routes (see more about Katse and Mohale Dams on pages 6 and 30).

Somewhat off the beaten track but en route to Mohale Dam, you will find the Basotho Pony Trekking Centre at Setibeng, from where you can take a two hour hike on a guided pony trek to the magnificent Qiloane Falls on the Makhaleng River.

The city of Maseru

Maseru, meaning “red sandstone”, is Lesotho’s cosmopolitan capital and only city. Situated on the Caledon River close to the Lesotho-South Africa border, its architecture, with thatch huts and concrete office blocks vying for attention, reflects stark contrasts and contradictions. Offering a plethora of hotels, guest lodges, bed and breakfasts, guest houses and self-catering units, Maseru makes for convenient stopover for recharging and stocking up before you head off to enjoy the rest of the Maloti Drakensberg.

Makoayane Square, in the city centre, is home to a war memorial commemorating both World Wars. The memorial consists of a curved screen wall with bronze panels on which are inscribed the names of 951 WWII and 45 WWI Lesotho soldiers, many of whom served in the Africa Pioneer Corps.

Also in the CBD, you will find an information centre, museum and craft centre at Kingsway’s eponymous Mokorotlo building, deservedly a favoured subject for visiting photographers.

Lancer’s Gap Pass, just east of the city, is a popular place from which to view Maseru.

The Place of Smoke

The Maletsunyane waterfall, on the river of the same name and one of the highest single-drop waterfalls in Africa, generates a plume redolent of smoke as tons of water plummet from a basalt ledge into a spectacular 192m deep gorge. The nearby village of Semonkong, or The Place of Smoke, takes its name from this phenomenon. Moreover, when the plunging water hits the basin below, its reverberating echo is said by local legend to be the wailing of people drowned in the torrent.

Maletsunyane Falls deservedly holds the Guinness World Record for the longest commercially operated single-drop abseil. Managed by Semonkong Lodge, you will, following professional on-site training, repel a staggering and unforgettable 204 metres. Not content with one record, Maletsunyane Falls saw Australia’s Derek Herron successfully shoot a basketball from the top of the falls to claim a second Guinness World Record in December 2017.

If abseiling into a bottomless abyss is not your preferred activity, Semonkong offers slightly less hair-raising activities, such as pony trekking, hiking, mountain biking and fly-fishing. Alternatively, touring the Semonkong community might satiate your need for adventure in a setting that clearly sees its plenty.
The Flora and the Birdlife

Birds of a Feather
A wide range of habitats in the Maloti Drakensberg ensures an equally varied number of bird species. More than 350 have been recorded across its mountain streams, wetlands, steep grassy slopes, sandstone cliffs, basalt precipices and buttresses. Generally, birding in the Highlands is best undertaken during summer (October–April) with a view to both your species list and the biting chill of incoming summer rainstorms.

Conservation laws governing many parts of the Maloti Drakensberg seek to protect globally endangered species such as the Bearded Vulture, the Cape Griffon and the Wattled Crane. A number of species, such as the Orange-breasted Rockjumper, the Drakensberg Siskin and the Mountain Pipit, are endemic to the Maloti Drakensberg.

Alpine floral Splendour
The Maloti Drakensberg supports an amazingly diverse and stunningly colourful diversity of vascular plant life, with more than 3 000 recorded floral species, many of which are endemic, that is, they are found nowhere else. The region boasts greater floral biodiversity than Switzerland or Germany and is home to more than twice as many species as Britain.

There is something to be seen everywhere but, more often than not, the Afro-alpine plants of the remote higher altitudes offer the most reward. These plants are frequently small, but exquisite. Although rare in distribution and restricted to small habitat units, they are locally abundant. Given Lesotho’s grassland biome, the Basotho use the rounded woody shrub, *Helichrysum trilineatum*, as fuel. Its branches burn readily when green and it is collected in large bundles and transported to the cooking fire by donkey. Livestock is not deprived of grazing as most animals turn up their noses at this hardy little shrub, which rarely exceeds a metre in height. Endemic to the small, high mountain habitats of the Grassland, Savanna and Succulent Karoo Biomes, this attractive plant produces a profusion of bright yellow flowers between August and February but frequently surprises and bursts into colourful bloom at any time of year. Sought after floral species may be seen throughout the year, but the peak flowering months are November to February.
High-flying Mountain Passes, Fly-fishing, Paragliding, hiking and Skiing

The Eastern Cape Highlands and Southern Lesotho region of the Maloti Drakensberg is engaging not only for its historic and prehistoric relics (including numerous rock art and fossil sites), but also for its scenic drives and the many mountain passes cutting through beautiful green valleys and crossing crystal-clear streams. The Eastern Cape Highlands, in particular, are renowned for their year-round wild-water fly-fishing. Summer is an excellent time for viewing wild flowers and birding, and winter brings snow and skiing.

Located on the most southerly side of the Maloti Drakensberg, the Eastern Cape Highlands provide the perfect entrance point into Lesotho for visitors coming from KwaZulu-Natal’s South Coast, Durban, Port Elizabeth, East London and Cape Town. If coming from the East Coast on the N2, call in at Kokstad and visit its museum before turning off onto the R56 to Matatiele. The Matatiele Nature Reserve, close to the town, is favoured by birders. If you have an off-road vehicle, it’s well worth making a 47km detour to visit the 127 year old Mariezel Mission, and if you’re a keen hiker experience the Mehloding Hiking trail that takes you through villages and to rock art with overnight accommodation. Continue driving onto the Ongeluksnek Nature Reserve on the Lesotho border. The rugged Ongeluksnek pass is strictly for off-road vehicles and experienced 4x4 drivers. The track is usually rutted, muddy and difficult to negotiate, but the challenge offers rewards. For most travellers to enter into Lesotho, you must take the road north to the Qacha’s Neck border post and then head west along the A4 through Moorosi, with its historical San paintings and Chief Moorsi’s mountain fortress, which dates back to 1879. From Moorosi to Moyni (Quthing), the A4 takes you through some of Lesotho’s most remote and unspoilt terrain. The region contains many prehistoric and historic remains, including San rock art and dinosaur tracks. You can also travel east along the B45 from Qacha’s Neck to the rugged but beautiful Sehlabathebe National Park. Alternatively, continue along the R56 from Matatiele to Mount Fletcher and Maclear. From Maclear, you can take a scenic round trip. Set out on the R56 through the quiet,
This is an invitation for off-roaders to tackle ten...yes, 10, mountain passes while soaking in the scenery of the beautiful Eastern Cape Highlands. The challenge is to complete 10 high-altitude passes in seven days. Don’t kid yourself. It really isn’t as easy as it sounds. Most tourists, even hardened off-roaders, will not be up to completing 10 passes.

Even so, it’s well worth tackling a few. Ben Macdhuí Pass (3001m) will really challenge your acrophobia as it’s the highest high-altitude summit in South Africa. The Carlislehoek-spruit Pass (2563m) also qualifies as an extreme pass – and it’s the main access road to the Tiffindell Ski Resort. However, before you set out, please note that it’s recommended that novice drivers do not tackle this route in poor weather. The Volunteershoek Pass (2581m) close to the Lesotho border connects the Wartrail farming valley with Tiffindell Ski Resort. With an average gradient of 1:14, it’s steep.

Ben Macdhuí Pass

Carlislehoek-spruit Pass

Volunteershoek Pass

Naude’s Nek Pass

Lundin’s Nek Pass

Joubert’s Pass

Bastervoetpad Pass

TTT (2720m), or the Tiffindell-Tenahead Traverse, consists of four small passes over 27km and connects the Tiffindell Ski Resort in the west to the Tenahead Mountain Lodge in the east. The Otto du Plessis Pass (2157m) ranks 31st nationally in the Most Altitude Gained category and rewards the brave with great views. The moderately steep 10 kilometre Barkly Pass (2187m) is tarred and links Elliot and Barkly East.

If travelling from either the N6 or Alikwadu’s hot springs, you can follow the R58 to Lady Grey and drive along the R392 by way of scenic Sterkspruit to the Lesotho border post at Telle Bridge. From there, you should follow the northern A2 route to Maseru through Mohales Hoek.

The Ben 10 Challenge!

pictuesque towns of Ugie and Elliot and travel along the R58 to Barkly East before taking the R396 through the quaint hamlet of Rhodes (the only village in South Africa to be declared a National Monument). You then return to Maclear over the stunning Naude’s Nek Mountain Pass. This route is marked by numerous rock art and dinosaur footprint sites as well as some of the country’s best fly-fishing streams. You may wish to drive north from Rhodes to the Tiffindell ski resort where you’ll be presented with some exciting winter sport options.

If travelling from either the N6 or Alikwadu’s hot springs, you can follow the R58 to Lady Grey and drive along the R392 by way of scenic Sterkspruit to the Lesotho border post at Telle Bridge. From there, you should follow the northern A2 route to Maseru through Mohales Hoek.

TOP Herders near Moyeni, Lesotho  PHOTO © DEBBIE NEWBOULD

LEFT A serene picnic spot at the foot of Volunteershoek Pass  PHOTO © STEVE NEWBOULD

BELOW Winter snows near Barkly East  PHOTO © FRED STEYNBERG

OPPOSITE PAGE, FAR RIGHT A well prepared 4x4 is needed for the more challenging dirt-road (or should that be rock-road) passes  PHOTO © DEBBIE NEWBOULD

OPPOSITE PAGE Naude’s Nek Pass is on many bucket lists. Not too difficult in summer, it can be treacherous in winter  PHOTO © STEVE NEWBOULD
The Maloti Drakensberg experience

Dinosaur Trails

History kicked off in the Maloti Drakensberg about 200 million years ago, and evidence of it lies in the fossilised footprints of dinosaurs that have been uncovered throughout Lesotho as well as in the Golden Gate National Park (see page 5). Several of these trackways have been preserved in their original position and are open to the public. The most notable and important sites in Lesotho are at Qalo outside Butha-Buthe, Morija, Mastishe, Hlotse (Subeng Stream and Tsikoane), Matsieng, Maphutseng near Mohale’s Hoek, and Moyeni. The Morija Museum houses many excellent specimens complemented by explanatory information.

Please note that fossil excavation is strictly prohibited as the remains of dinosaurs and other reptiles, as well as some of the earliest mammals, are resources of global value and importance.

Rocking into the past

Of San and Dinosaurs

The San Rock Art

The Maloti Drakensberg’s inspirational rock art makes this region one of the finest outdoor art galleries in the world. The sheer number of works – some 45,000 paintings in 2,000 sites – is unrivaled.

The techniques used by the San to achieve this visual distinctiveness evident in the Maloti Drakensberg are remarkable, rendering the unique style of their paintings instantly recognisable. There is much that is metaphysical or spiritual about standing in the same place as an artist who, skillfully using black, white and different shades of red, yellow, and brown to define its form, committed the majesty of an eland to perpetuity some 4,000 years ago. Magnificent animals are shown in three dimensional poses, looking back at the hunters closing in on them. Most paintings were, it is thought, created by shamans, healers or medicine people. A shaman would go into a hallucinatory trance, enter the spirit realm and interact with them. The paintings record what was revealed in an altered state of consciousness. Many of the paintings show fantastical spirit creatures, including rain animals (most frequently eland) and partly human, partly animal therianthropes. These suggest that the artist and medicine person took on the powers of the animal.
Fly-fishing in the wild

Fly-fishing combines the exhilarating beauty of the outdoors with the thrill and excitement of reeling in an impressive catch. With pristine rivers and dams, the Maloti Drakensberg is the ultimate fly-fisher’s destination. The Kingdom in the Sky’s crystalline waters overflow with natural bounty and it should therefore come as no surprise that it offers so much to fly-fishing enthusiasts. Teeming with bass and trout, Lesotho’s rivers see fly-fishers catching and releasing from Maseru to Mokhotlong, Qacha’s Nek to Semonkong and Butha-Buthe to Thaba-Tseka. Migrating Yellowfish leap up waterfalls two metres at a time to reach their spawning grounds, while barbel proliferate in lowland waters. On the South African side of the border, limpid dams and rivers teem with elusive Rainbow and Brown Trout tempting passionate fly-fishers to test their skills in rivers and dams stretching from the Free State to the Eastern Cape and KwaZulu-Natal. Fly-fishing South Africa’s indigenous hard-fighting Yellowfish has become extremely popular in recent years as these muscular predators challenge even the most artful anglers.

Southern Africa is a water scarce region reliant on its high water-yield areas. The Maloti Drakensberg is one of the most important. The Lesotho Highlands Water Project, or LHWP, is an intricate network of tunnels and dams that diverts water from the mountains of Lesotho to South Africa, provides water for South Africa’s people and industries and money and hydroelectricity to drive Lesotho’s economy. The LHWP will eventually comprise five dams and approximately 200km of tunnels and water-transfer works across the two countries. The Ash River Outfall tunnel can be viewed from the R712 - 10kms from Clarens in South Africa’s Free State province. The project will transfer about 2 000 million m³ of water from Lesotho to South Africa each year. The two largest dams, Mohale and Katse, are only 150km apart and are connected by stunning passes that are both tarred and well worth visiting (see feature on Katse Dam on page 6).

Life source of the region

Clear Mountain Water

Magnificent waterfalls feed Maloti Drakensberg rivers and dams
PHOTO © STEVE NEWBOLD
**Good to know info**

**South Africa**

**CURRENCY** The Rand (R) is divided into 100 cents. Most traveller’s cheques are accepted at banks and at some shops and hotels. Major credit cards are accepted in most towns. All towns will have at least one bank.

**LANGUAGE** South Africa has 11 official languages. Most people can speak some English.

**TELEPHONES** All towns have modern telephone services. Cellular reception is good in most towns and coverage extends to many major roads and rural areas.

**AIRPORTS** Johannesburg, Durban, Cape Town and Lesotho have International airports.

**ROAD TRAVEL** South African roads are mostly tarred, and generally in good condition. Petrol and diesel are available in most towns.

**MEDICAL FACILITIES** Very good in urban areas, but more limited elsewhere. Many doctors and private hospitals require immediate cash payment. Comprehensive health insurance is recommended.

**Lesotho**

**CURRENCY** Maloti (M), divided into 100 lisente (cents), have an equivalent value to South African rand which are used interchangeably in Lesotho. Note that Maloti are not accepted in South Africa.

**LANGUAGE** The official languages are Sesotho and English. Many Basotho can speak English.

**TELEPHONES** Services are available in main towns.

**AIRPORTS** Lesotho has an International airport, although limited international flights are in place.

**ROAD TRAVEL** Extreme topography means that most roads have sharp bends and steep hills. Many rural roads are dirt roads. Check on the road condition locally before traveling them. Petrol and diesel are available in larger towns. It is advisable to fill up when you see a pump, rather than waiting until your tank is nearly empty.

**POLICE** Headquarters in Maseru +266 5888 1010

**MEDICAL FACILITIES** Emergency responsive services are limited outside of Maseru.

**BEST TIME TO VISIT**

The summer months, December to February, are best to make the most of the long days, however the winter months are also popular with skiers and for the snow capped mountain vistas.

**WEATHER**

Winters (May to July) Little rain, but can be extremely cold and snowy, especially in the highlands.

Summer (December to February) It can get very hot, however relief is brought by frequent afternoon and thunder storms.

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"Kgotso" this friendly greeting of the Basotho people translates as "We greet you in peace"

We invite you to explore the magnificent Maloti Drakensberg, South Africa and Lesotho’s shared natural heritage