

ROOF OF AFRICA

Stay in a former trading post in lofty Lesotho and explore the mountains on foot or Basotho pony

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Lesotho's villages of thatched rondavels perch atop precipices, roads whizz over passes with names such as God Help Me (2 381 m) and waterfalls crash into green ravines. Patterned blankets worn by shepherds on sure-footed ponies, perhaps accompanied

by a conical Basotho hat or balaclava, are pops of colour against the moody canvas of the Drakensberg and Maluti ranges. Everywhere you go in South Africa's altitudinal neighbour, serene vistas of soaring mountains and traditional life greet you.

With about two million people between the 3 000 m-plus peaks atop the Sani Pass, the Mountain Kingdom is one of the world's highest countries by any measure, with an average elevation of more than 2 000 m and the highest low point of any nation at 1 400 m.

GIANT BASOTHO HAT

There is a smattering of craft shops and museums in the 1 000 m-plus 'lowlands' bordering the Free State and Eastern Cape – capital Maseru even has a craft shop housed in a giant, two-storey Basotho hat. These are worth a stop if you

pass by, but it's best to head for the hills as quickly as possible, whether you've come for hiking, fishing, pony trekking, mountain biking or skiing. The chunk of mountains covering most of Lesotho can roughly be divided into northern, central and southern sections, and given the slow travel times, you may focus on the area closest to the border you cross. Despite the overhaul of Lesotho's road network courtesy of the Chinese, it's impossible to do a complete circuit of the country without a 4WD. This is no great loss though, as some of the best views come from ascending or descending passes, such as the awe-inspiring Mafika Lisiu (3 090 m), rather than staying on the central plateau.

Resort (afriski.net). With 1.8 km of slopes, four lifts, equipment rental, lessons and accommodation, Afriski offers skiing and snowboarding from June to August, and pizzas year-round in Africa's highest restaurant, Sky Restaurant. Continuing the superlatives, Sani Mountain Lodge (sanimountain.co.za) has Africa's highest pub and hikes including Southern Africa's loftiest peak, Thabana Ntlenyana (3 482 m) – and from here it's all downhill, via the Sani Pass to KZN.

DAMS & DONKEYS

Central Lesotho is an epic land of both man-made and natural sights, with the 186 m-high Maletsunyane Falls in the latter

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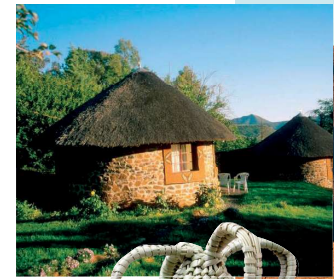
HIGHER & HIGHER

With border crossings near Fouriesburg and Ficksburg, the northern highlands is home to one of Lesotho's most beautiful and accessible national parks, Ts'ehlanyane. Stay in comfort at the park's five-star Maliba Lodge (maliba-lodge.com) and embark with Basotho guides on hikes, pony treks and village visits. To really immerse yourself in the indigenous forest and frosty peaks, hike or ride 32 km to Ts'ehlanyane through some of the country's most stunning scenery from Bokong Nature Reserve.

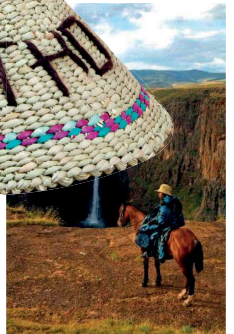
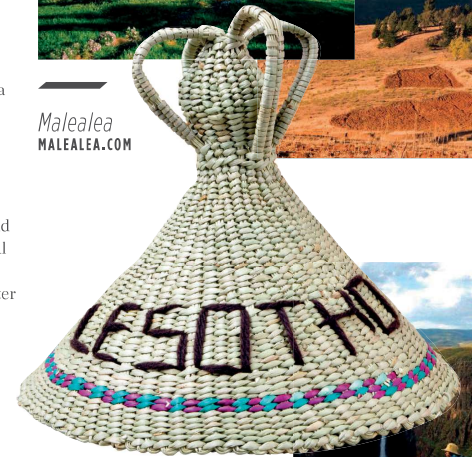
Heading east from here takes you on a mountaintop journey over Lesotho's three highest passes (all more than 3 220 m), first to the Afriski Mountain

category (it's much taller than 108 m-tall Victoria Falls). Misty Maletsunyane is home to the world's longest commercially operated, single-drop abseil, and explains the name of nearby Semonkong (Place of Smoke). Stay at Semonkong Lodge (see side for website), one of Lesotho's atmospheric lodges in former trading posts that once supplied remote villages and now offer community-run activities, including guided hikes and pony treks, which is hard to say no to!

When you've finished Semonkong's pub crawl by donkey, head to Katsse Dam for a tour of this 710 m-long engineering marvel, which supplies Gauteng with water and generates hydro-electricity. It's connected by the 32 km



Malealea
MALEALEA.COM



Mohale Tunnel to the 145 m-high dam of the same name, where tours and boat cruises are offered.

DOWN SOUTH

South Lesotho has some of the most dramatic scenery, with pink cliffs, yawning valleys and big skies around the Orange River, known as the Senqu in Lesotho, as well as fossilised dinosaur footprints and the remote Sehlabathebe National Park. Malealea Lodge, a trading post from 1905, with rondavel accommodation, offers 'Lesotho in a nutshell', from local choir performances at sunset to multi-day pony treks, with nights spent in Basotho village huts en route to spots such as Semonkong.

Semonkong
SEMONKONGLodge.COM

ESSENTIALS

Visa not required by South Africans. Vehicle with care, you can reach most places in a 2WD car with good clearance. Best trading-post lodges:

Roma
(tradingpostlodge.com)
Ramabanta
(tradingpost.co.za)

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