

South Africa: Country and Culture

Introduction

South Africa, officially the Republic of South Africa, is the southernmost country in Africa. The country has a long history with many groups struggling to control its resources and land, but it has become a multiethnic society with vibrant traditions.

Population: 53 million

Capital: The South African government is located in four different cities.

Cape Town is the seat of Parliament and the legislative capital.

Pretoria is the executive capital with the President and Cabinet.

Bloemfontein is the judicial capital with the Supreme Court of Appeal.

Johannesburg is the seat of the Constitutional Court of South Africa.

Language: South Africa has 11 official and many more unofficial languages. The official languages are Afrikaans, English, Ndebele, Northern Sotho, Sotho, Swazi, Tswana, Tsonga, Venda, Xhosa, and Zulu. The most commonly spoken languages are Zulu, Xhosa, and Afrikaans.

Currency: South African Rand



Flag of South Africa

Geography and Climate

Although its land mass is one-eighth the size of the United States, South Africa has many neighboring countries—one of which, the small country of Lesotho, lies entirely inside the borders of South Africa. To the north South Africa's neighbors include Namibia, Botswana, and Zimbabwe. Its eastern neighbors include Mozambique and Swaziland.

South Africa's southern border includes more than 1,700 miles of coastline stretching along the Atlantic and Indian Oceans. The country's geography and climate are as varied as the languages and people who live there. Because the country is in the southern hemisphere, its coldest days are in July and its warmest days are in January—the reverse of what we experience in the Midwestern USA.



South Africa is largely a dry area with its western regions being semi-desert and the east seeing more precipitation. The spring, fall, and winter have many sunny days because most of the rain falls in the summer. The eastern coastline is lush and well-watered without much frost. The southern coast is also very green but less tropical. The southwestern corner of the country, known as the Cape of Good Hope, has wet winters and hot, dry summers, and a famous wind that blows nearly all year round.



History

South Africa's long history traces to prehistoric days. The country is called the Cradle of Humankind and home to a UNESCO World Heritage site because it contains some of the oldest archaeological and human fossil sites in the world. Thousands of years ago, the Khoisan and then Bantu, Xhosa, and Zulu peoples inhabited the southern tip of Africa. People migrated within the region over time and created communities, some of which included ironworks that date to 1050 CE.

European contact began in 1487 with the Portuguese followed by English and Dutch, all seeking a way to reach India to control the lucrative spice trade. Over the centuries, the European powers fought with each other and with powerful tribes like the Zulu and Xhosa for control of the region's resources including fertile lands and minerals such as diamonds.

In the early 1900s, a South Africa dominated by people of Dutch origin gained independence from Britain. During this time, racial segregation became more enforced as a way to control the indigenous population. In 1948, this harsh system of segregation, called apartheid, became law in South Africa. Under apartheid, the rights of blacks and other ethnic groups were severely and violently restricted. This system lasted until 1994, when South Africa held elections in which all citizens could finally participate. Today the country still struggles with challenges that linger from apartheid.

Learn more at www.artsmidwestworldfest.org

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People and Culture

South Africa is often called the “Rainbow Nation,” a term coined by activist and leader Desmond Tutu to describe the country’s multicultural diversity.

Black South Africans make up around 80% of the population and belong to a variety of ethnic groups. Because of its colonial past, South Africa has a large number of Afrikaans, who are descended from Dutch settlers, and English speakers, from when the British began colonizing the region in the 1800s. French, Germans, and Portuguese settlers arrived beginning in the 1600s and brought many slaves from India and modern-day Indonesia. Because of this, Islamic and Hindu cultures and traditions are also prominent in South Africa.

The art, dance, and music of black African culture have been greatly influenced by this legacy of colonialism and the work of Christian missionaries. Songs today reflect a number of different styles such as gospel, jazz, and rock, but the music often has a strong local influence. For example, styles such as kwaito (house music), mbube (Zulu vocal), and kwela (jazzy street music often with a penny whistle) incorporate indigenous sounds.

Visual art in South Africa is also fusing traditional and modern. Artists draw inspiration from the masks, statues, and figurines of tribal culture, but they also employ European techniques and mediums.

Dance forms also reflect a fusion of tradition with colonial elements. Gumboot dance, for example, is an African dance that arose in the mines of South Africa, where black Africans were given rubber, knee-high Wellington boots to protect their feet. Gumboot dance became an alternative to drumming, which authorities restricted, and an accompaniment for work songs.

Food

The cuisine of South Africa is heavily meat-based and has produced the distinctively South African social gathering known as a braai, or barbecue. Braai is widely popular and includes meat, especially boerewors or spicy sausages, and mielies (maize) or Mielie-meal often eaten as a porridge, and pearl millet, a staple food of black South Africans. Pastries such like koeksisters and desserts like melktert (milk tart) are also very popular.

Indian food like curry is also popular, especially in the city of Durban with its large Indian population. Another local Indian specialty in Durban is the “bunny” or “bunny chow,” which consists of a hollowed-out loaf of white bread filled with curry.

The Portuguese community also has unique cuisine with spicy peri-peri chicken being a favorite. In fact, there is a South African Portuguese-themed restaurant chain called Nando’s that now has restaurants in the USA, United Kingdom, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, Malaysia, Kenya, and beyond.

Resources

National Geographic Kids: China
<http://kids.nationalgeographic.com/explore/countries/south-africa/>



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Nelson Mandela, activist and first black African President of South Africa.
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Fans at 2010 World Cup in South Africa.
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Band at market in Durban, South Africa.
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