

The diversity of the scenery, people and cultures, the wildlife, climate and vegetation make South Africa one of the most interesting and attractive places to visit in the world. The land surface is a large 1 220 430kms² with Cape Town as the Legislative Capital, Bloemfontein as the Judicial Capital and Pretoria as the Administrative Capital. The currency used in South Africa is the South African Rand, and most hotels have foreign exchange facilities and most shops and travel agencies accept traveller's cheques. The Mpumalanga region is well known for its spectacular wildlife and historical interest, whilst the Cape region is famous for the amazing Garden Route, Oudtshoorn situated in the Great Karoo, its winelands and of course- Table Mountain. Kwazulu Natal's extraordinary scenic diversity encompasses wilderness, sandy beaches, the soaring peaks of the Drakensberg Mountains and the farmlands, towns and hills of the Midlands.

KRUGER NATIONAL PARK

This enormous and magnificent park is one of the most popular public-entry game parks in the world. Its density of permanent game is unrivalled with hundreds of different species; 507 birds, 336 trees, 147 mammals, 114 reptiles, 49 fish and 34 amphibians!

Few visitors leave South Africa without visiting Kruger Park or one of the private reserves along its border, but it is also frequented by locals in their own vehicles, as you can drive yourself around and stay overnight in one of the many public rest camps. There are also a few exclusive private lodges that have taken been granted concessions within Kruger.

The far north of the park is the wildest and most difficult area to access and because of this, it has alluring qualities for the real adventurer. However, the central and southern parts of the park have the best facilities for visitors, with an excellent network of roads and game-viewing waterholes.

With greater ecological co-operation across African borders, several countries bordering South Africa have agreed to take down some fences, and those between Kruger and Mozambique's Limpopo National Park and Zimbabwe's Gonarezhou, have been demolished to create the Greater Limpopo Transfrontier Park. This unique political innovation is creating a colossal wilderness area extending 15,000 miles (24,000km).

ANIMALS & BIRDS

Sighting the "Big Five" has become something of a quest for many people when on safari, and Kruger National Park has more than its fare share of these, with an estimated 1,800 lion, 9,125 elephant, 25,000 buffalo, unknown number of leopards and 2,300 black and white rhino. These animals became the 'Big Five' because they are the five most dangerous animals to hunt - when injured they attack! It should certainly not be a pre-requisite of a safari to see these or even a priority, as there are plenty of other fascinating animals and birds in the African bush.

With approximately 500 bird species, some of them unique to this area, there is enough on the ground and in the air to keep anybody's binoculars busy. Some of the biggest and most impressive birds to be seen here are the ground hornbill, martial eagle, lappet-faced vulture, kori bustard and saddle-billed stork.

SEASONS

Rainy Season: The subtropical climate has hot rainy summers starting in October and ending around March. The summer rains transform the arid park into a lush flowering paradise, but the increased foliage does make animals harder to see.

Dry Season: The winter months from April to September are extremely pleasant with warm dry days and cold nights. Traditionally, the best game viewing is in winter as the vegetation becomes sparse and water is restricted to rivers and artificial waterholes.

KRUGER NATIONAL PARK SPECIALITIES

- Animal density and variety
- The "Big Five"
- Self-drive safari
- Wonderful subtropical climate
- Plenty of birds
- Very safe safari environment

FACTS

The park was established in 1926

The surface area of Kruger National Park is 7,580 miles² (19,633 km²)

The park has 88 miles (140 km) of well-surfaced roads

Off road driving is prohibited

There are almost 254 known cultural heritage sites in the Kruger National Park, including nearly 130 recorded rock art sites

Night drives can be booked in advance in a guided vehicle.

This is a malarial area.

KGALAGADI

There is something very compelling about the Kalahari and it is probably nothing like you imagine. It is not a flat sand desert, nor is it rippling with endless pale dunes. On the contrary, it is undulating with rich red sand dunes and well vegetated with shrubs, patches of trees and even some grasslands.

It seems like a pretty inhospitable place for man to live, yet the San Bushmen have inhabited the Kalahari for at least 10,000 years. Their legacy of rock art and engravings tells us about their past lives, but very few San are left to continue that nomadic hunter gatherer lifestyle.

Kgalagadi Transfrontier Park

Since 1948 South Africa and Botswana have co-operated in the management of two adjacent Kalahari parks. In 1999 the first cross-border collaboration of its kind united the two parks into one under the name, Kgalagadi Transfrontier Park. This has unified the southern Kalahari into one huge conservation area, twice the size of Kruger National Park, and will hopefully serve as a model for future transfrontier conservation projects.

This vast wilderness of the Kalahari fulfils the need for space and solitude and encourages a certain slowness into a hectic safari.

ANIMALS & BIRDS

The park was previously called Kalahari Gemsbok National Park, as the animal most at home in this arid region is the gemsbok (also called Oryx). This large horse-like antelope is supremely adapted to the desert environment and can go for months without water as it reabsorbs its own waste fluids and barely sweats. Its core temperature can rise far beyond that which would kill most animals, and to avoid literally boiling its brains, blood is first passed through the nostrils to cool it down.

Another animal that epitomises the Kalahari is the meerkat (also called suricate). These cute mongooses scamper around in gregarious packs, foraging for scorpions, beetles, lizards and mice and scatter at the first sign of danger from an eagle or other predator.

Large-scale migration can occur in such a huge park and gemsbok, springbok, blue wildebeest, eland and red hartebeest follow their instincts in order to find better pastures. Such a good supply of food attracts carnivores like lion, leopard and cheetah. Other distinctive creatures of the Kalahari are small monogamous bat-eared foxes, sociable weavers who live in the feathered equivalent of an apartment block of nests, and the King of the Kalahari - the black-maned lion.

Augrabies Falls National Park

The Kalahari sands of the Northern Cape are transformed by the mighty Orange River, which brings life to South Africa's hottest driest area. Along its banks vineyards thrive and soft fruits like peaches and apricots grow willingly.

The river widens to over 1 mile (2km) across and flows gently until it suddenly meets the narrow cataracts at the Augrabies Falls. The whole river is forced under great pressure through narrow rocks just a few feet across, before plunging 211 feet (65m) into a deep pool. It is thought that there is a fortune in diamonds, washed down by the river into this pool, but its depths are impenetrable so the curiosity continues. The incredible power of this water has cut a deep and impressive ravine through sheer granite rock for several miles below the falls.

The National Park is well organised and well visited, with several driving and walking trails offering viewpoints over various sections of the river.

SEASONS

Summer: Spring and early summer from September to December is dry and warm, but by January it is very hot (up to 102°F (39°C), and the rain arrives. If you brave the very hot late summer months of January to March, you might be entertained by formidable light and sound extravaganzas from thunder and lightening storms.

Winter: The cooler winter months of April to September are probably the best times to visit the Kalahari as the days are clear and warm, but nights can get very cold.

KALAHARI SPECIALITIES

- Gemsbok - highly adapted to the Kalahari
- Space and solitude
- Black-maned lions
- Meerkats
- Social weaver nests
- Augrabies Falls
- Red dunes
- San Bushmen
- San Rock art and engravings

FACTS

This is not a malarial area

NAMAQUALAND

In the north-west corner of South Africa is Namaqualand - famous for an extraordinary springtime transformation of the lifeless scrubland, into a veritable explosion of colours from a multitude of small flowers.

People come from all over the world to witness this spectacle, which usually peaks anytime from mid- August to mid-September. If you are driving towards the sun you may not see what the fuss is all about, but as soon as you turn your back to the sun, the full impact of thousands of yellow, white, orange or purple flowers, will astound you.

The flora is characterised by a phenomenal variety of daisies, but there are also violets, pelargoniums, mesembryantheums, gladioli and numerous other species. Aloes also puncture this landscape of the Northern Cape and you know you are in an area of very low rainfall when you start seeing 'Quiver Trees' (Kokerboom - aloe dicotema), so named because the bushmen used the fibrous branches as a quiver for their arrows.

Namaqualand is home to the Nama people, who are direct descendants of the Khoikhoi bushmen, as can be seen in their pale skin and fine features. Their culture suffered when the apartheid regime prohibited their strange multi-click language from being taught in schools and forced them to re-locate to other areas. However, their cultural heritage and customs are slowly returning and their language - which is

classified by UNESCO as Endangered - is being taught again and they hope to add it to the school curriculum in the area.

Spring flowers carpet the route all the way down the west coast of South Africa almost to Cape Town, so even if you don't make it up to Namaqualand, whose capital is the isolated town of Springbok, there other opportunities to see the flowers.

NATURAL HISTORY

Most of the plants of Namaqualand are indigenous and some succulents are so rare they are found nowhere else in the world. Antelopes such as springbok and bontebok are at home in these areas and can be found in some of the reserves and you may also see tortoises and chameleons - the masters of camouflage.

SEASONS

Summer: Namaqualand is hot and dry with an average of 86°F (30°C) during the mid-summer months of December to February.

Winter: in the winter the north-westerly wind brings rain which may fall between May and September but the coldest months are June, July and August where temperatures can drop below 40°F (5°C).

Days are often clear and bright but the wind can be very chilly.

Spring: the spring flowers emerge in force from July through to September but there are no guarantees as to when they will peak, although late August is a good bet.

NAMAQUALAND SPECIALITIES

- Walking through carpets of spring flowers
- Flower shows all along the West Coast
- Quiver trees

FACTS

This is not a malarial area.

PILANESBURG NATIONAL PARK

Next door to the famous leisure and entertainment resort of Sun City, is the Pilanesberg National Park. It may not be very large 212 miles² (550km²) compared to Kruger or some of the other great African parks, but it has a real wilderness feel to it and most of the big animals you could wish to see.

It lies amongst the only significant hills in the area which rise skywards out of the flat highveld plain. This massif is a 1,200 million-year-old volcanic relic of four concentric mountain rings.

The Pilanesberg is the highest peak towering 1,950 feet (600 metres) above Mankwe Lake, which sits in the heart of the ancient volcano. The volcano's circular bowl was

recognised as being the perfect situation for a national park with its tall sides creating natural boundaries.

The area was farmed until 1979 until Operation Genesis was launched to rehabilitate the land and stock it with game. This was one of the most imaginative game-stocking enterprises ever undertaken and the Pilanesberg became a great success story. There are currently around 10,000 head of and it is a very popular game park for locals and overseas visitors alike - many of whom make the short trip from the nearby resort of Sun City.

ANIMALS & BIRDS

This park is home to good populations of a whole range of Africa's game, including the 'Big Five'; elephants, black and white rhinoceros, buffaloes, lions and leopards and you will also see giraffes, zebras, hippos and a wide variety of antelopes including the very attractive sable, eland, kudu and gemsbok. There are also cheetahs and hyenas and jackal.

Birdlife is good with over 300 species and bird lovers will be interested in the huge stroll-through aviary at the Manyane gate. Also in this area is a 'vulture restaurant' - created to help save the shy and endangered Cape vulture from regional extinction.

SEASONS

Rainy Season: It rains during the summer months of November to March, with thunder and lightning showers predominantly in February and March. Temperatures hover around 79-86°F (26-30°C).

Dry Season: April to September is the cool dry winter season with bright clear warm days and cold nights, particularly in the mid-winter months of June to August. The winter is the best for game viewing as the foliage has died back and animals frequent waterholes.

PILANESBERG SPECIALITIES

- Proximity to Sun City
- Small park with lots of animals including the 'Big Five'
- Attractive scenery
- Good choice of safari lodges in the area
- No malaria

FACTS

The Pilanesberg covers an area of 135,908 acres (55,000ha)

The volcanic peaks in the Pilanesberg area average about 9,750 feet (3,000 metres) high.

The park has 88 miles (140 km) of well-surfaced roads

It is approximately 2½ hour's drive north-west of Johannesburg.

This is not a malarial area.

NDUMO GAME RESERVE

Ndumo is a small but spectacular park and something of a well kept secret. Proclaimed back in the 1920's, it is one of South Africa's oldest reserves and considered to be one of the finest in KwaZulu Natal. Tembe Elephant Park is just adjacent. These parks are in a hot humid subtropical region just south of the Mozambique border and close to Swaziland. Ndumo is full of riverine floodplains fed by the Pongola and Usutu Rivers, and looks similar in places to Botswana's Okavango Delta. Large, attractive water pans are lined with giant fig trees and yellow-barked fever trees.

ANIMALS & BIRDS

Unusually, both black and white rhino are found in Ndumo, plus buffalo, hippos, crocodile, giraffe and several antelope species. Its tropical climate gives rise to lush thick undergrowth, which makes some wildlife, particularly lion, leopard and hyena, hard to spot.

Conditions are perfect for attracting large numbers of birds and some people consider this to be the best bird watching in South Africa. It is the southern most range for several species and migrants also call in to boost sightings to over 400 species. You could be lucky enough to see the southern banded snake eagle, gorgeous bush shrike; Pel's fishing owl and other rarely seen birds.

TEMBE ELEPHANT PARK

This remote reserve lies deep in an area of sand forests, pans and wetlands on the border between KwaZulu-Natal and Mozambique and is home to South Africa's last free-ranging elephant population. There are now about 100 elephants in the area, many of them rescued from Mozambique during the civil war. Tembe also has a spectacular variety of birds and other animals – including white rhino and leopard.

SEASONS

Rainy Season: In this sub-tropical region the wet summer months from October to March are hot and humid.

Dry Season: The dry season lasts from April to September and the temperatures are very pleasant with warm to hot days and cooler nights.

NDUMO SPECIALITIES

- Both black and white rhino
- Tracking rhino on foot
- Ndumo Wilderness Camp in an area not open to the public
- Thick tropical forests
- Exceptionally good bird sightings

THEMBE SPECIALITIES

- Elephants
- Remoteness
- 4x4 trails

FACTS

This is a malarial area

KOSI BAY NATURE RESERVE

Kosi Bay Nature Reserve in South Africa lies on the coast in the northern part of KwaZulu-Natal and includes the unique Kosi Bay lake system, fig and raffia palm forests, mangrove swamps, sand dunes, deserted beaches and rewarding coral reefs. This area is home to a large variety of birds and animals, including humpback whales on their northerly migration to calve in Mozambique and loggerhead and leatherback turtles.

SEASONS

Rainy Season: In this sub-tropical region the wet summer months from October to March are hot and humid.

Dry Season: The dry season lasts from April to September and the temperatures are very pleasant with warm to hot days and cooler nights.

KOSI BAY SPECIALITIES

- Kayaking adventures on Kosi Lakes system
- Seasonal turtle tracking

FACTS

This is a malarial area