

South Africa – Sun, Sea and Studying

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A Study Destination

South Africa has been a stable, peaceful and progressive democracy since 1994, when the first democratic elections were held and the African National Congress came to power. Nelson Mandela was elected president and he led the formerly reviled apartheid nation on the road to freedom and democracy. Since then there have been three more free and fair elections.

In 1994, the incoming government wrote one of the world's most progressive constitutions, and set about dismantling apartheid laws and institutions and building a society based on equality, non-discrimination and human rights for all. Since then, the government has focused on growing the economy and improving the quality of life of all South Africans. After decades of isolation and sanctions, South Africa rejoined Africa, and the world, and became an active participant in the international economy and politics. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), headed by Archbishop Desmond Tutu, helped to exorcise the ghosts of apartheid through public hearings held around the country where its victims told their stories, and through processes of amnesty, restitution and prosecution achieved some kind of normalisation for the country.

The general election in April 2009 has signaled a new chapter for the country. One of the first changes that the new president, Jacob Zuma, introduced was the renaming of the Department of Foreign Affairs to the Department of International Relations & Cooperation. This is not simply a name change but deliberately initiates a new focus on what is called "development cooperation" which emphasises the strengthening of partnerships, especially within Africa, for the purpose of mutual development across the continent.

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A Place to Visit

South Africa's eventful history, rich natural environment and its geographical position at the southern tip of Africa, on a key shipping route, have forged a country of contrasts, rich in diversity and charged with energy. There are worlds of diverse humanity and teeming wildlife; of rich oceans and desolate mountains, semi-desert and forests, thorny bush and savannah; of modernity and tradition; of Africa and Europe and Asia; of rich and poor, of black and white.

The people are friendly, the weather is wonderful, the scenery is breathtaking and this middle-income country is sufficiently developed to be very user-friendly - it offers rich world comforts at an affordable cost in a challenging and interesting developing country setting.

South Africa has become a popular conference venue, has held rugby and cricket World Cups and is presently gearing up to play host to the 2010 FIFA Football World Cup, the first time this huge event will be held on African soil.

This has also precipitated a huge increase in accommodation with almost 100,000 graded rooms ready and waiting for the event.

The Republic of South Africa takes up an area of 1,221,037 square kilometres - equal to the combined land mass of Germany, Italy and France.





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The tourism industry is booming. In 2008 foreign arrivals reached an all time high of 9.5 million people, up 5.5% on the previous year - considerably higher than the global tourism growth rate and amounting to a foreign direct spend of R74 billion. In contrast, and according to the UN World Tourism Organisation, international tourist arrivals declined to just 2% in 2008 from 7% in 2007.

The travel scene is highly developed. There is comfortable accommodation everywhere, the roads are good and the financial infrastructure is excellent. Shopping malls in cities are modern and stock all major local and international brands. The biggest city is Johannesburg, which is the economic heartland of South Africa. According to the 2009 Mercer Cost of Living Database, Johannesburg is the cheapest city in the world, replacing Asunción in Paraguay. Other big cities are Cape Town, Durban - which is home to the busiest port in Africa - Pretoria, Port Elizabeth and Bloemfontein.

A Beautiful Country

South Africa is a scenically beautiful country. It has the third highest level of biodiversity in the world, is internationally renowned for conservation and boasts eight World Heritage Sites, four of them natural wonders - the Cape Floral Region, Greater St Lucia Wetland Park, the Vredefort Dome created by a meteorite strike 3,000 million years ago, and the mountainous uKhahlamba-Drakensberg Park.

There are 3,000 kilometres of beautiful beaches stretching form South Africa's eastern, western and southern borders, and enclosing 1.2 million square kilometres of mountain ranges and bushy foothills, sub-tropical forests, grassland, scrubland and the central semi-desert.

To the north lie borders with Namibia, Botswana, Zimbabwe, Swaziland and Mozambique. The country completely surrounds the mountain kingdom of Lesotho. The landscape changes strikingly, from the wild west coast lapped by the cold Atlantic and the mountains and winelands of the Cape, up a verdant east coast aptly named the Garden Route, past glorious beaches on the warm Indian Ocean to the rolling hills of the Zulus. The Drakensberg mountains separate the sub-tropical east coast from the highveld, a high-lying plateau that stretches north across the Karoo semi-desert, the golden fields of the Free State and the bushveld of the north.

South Africa is the only country with an entire floral kingdom, which surrounds Cape Town.

Some 18,000 plant species grow within its boundaries, of which 80% occur nowhere else. The country is home to more mammal species than Europe and Asia combined. There are over 900 species of birds, over 100 types of snakes and some 5,000 species of spiders. Vast stretches of South Africa are committed

to game reserves, providing safe havens for wildlife. There are 22 national parks - the famous Kruger Park is the size of Wales - some 200 provincial reserves and scores of private game parks. The reserves offer incredible game viewing and are home to hundreds of thousand of antelope, which graze alongside big game such as buffalo, hippo, rhino, lion, leopard, cheetah, giraffe and elephant.

The summers are hot and the winters are mild, with an average of eight hours of sunshine a day. The entire coastline is a watery playground for swimmers, surfers, divers and anglers. Indeed, South Africa is sports-mad and offers every kind of outdoor activity, from hiking and biking to ostrich riding, river rafting, mountain climbing, ballooning and bungee jumping.

People

South Africa's population in mid-2009 was 49 million, according to Statistics South Africa. The two most populace regions, each with just over 10 million people, are Gauteng - a small province that includes the cities of Johannesburg and Pretoria - and the Zulu-dominated east coast province of KwaZulu-Natal.

The largest of South Africa's nine provinces is the Northern Cape, which has the smallest number of people, with just over a million inhabitants.

South Africa's population is diverse. There are four main race groups: black (African), white, coloured (people of mixed race) and Indian. Four in five people are African (79.3%) and the rest are either white (9.1%), coloured (9%) or Indian (2.6%). Just over half of all people (52%) are women.

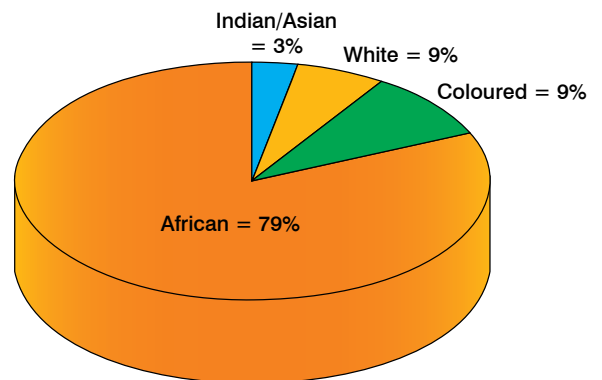


Figure 1 - Population by race. Statistics South Africa, 2009 mid-year estimates

Languages

South Africa has 11 official languages. Of the indigenous African languages, the most commonly spoken is isiZulu, which is home tongue to nearly a quarter of the population, followed by isiXhosa. Afrikaans - the language evolved from Dutch settlers - is the first language of 13% of people. English is the home language of just 8% of South Africans but is the country's lingua franca and is spoken by most people. Road signs and official forms are in English, which is also the language of the cities and of business.

South Africa has eleven official languages. English is the most commonly spoken, followed by Afrikaans, Zulu and Xhosa. The others are Pedi, Tswana, Sotho, Tsonga, Swati, Venda and Ndebele.





Politics

South Africa has a proportional representation electoral system, with general elections every five years. There are two ballots, one to elect members of parliament's National Assembly and the other for provincial parliaments. An upper house, the National Council of Provinces, comprises 10 delegates each from nine provinces. Local elections are run separately. There is also a House of Traditional Leaders, for chiefs of rural areas still under tribal authority.

Parliament elects a president who has a maximum of two terms. Nelson Mandela was the new South Africa's first president, and he stepped down after just one term. President Zuma is the country's new president following the fourth democratic elections in 2009. Pretoria is the administrative capital of South Africa, the legislative capital is Cape Town and the judicial capital is Bloemfontein.

South Africa's success in rising above centuries of racial hatred through reconciliation has been internationally acknowledged as a major political achievement of the 20th Century.

The country boasts four Nobel Peace Prize winners - Chief Albert Luthuli, Archbishop Desmond Tutu, Nelson Mandela and FW de Klerk, the apartheid leader who ended the reviled system.

Arts and Culture

South Africa's political history and melting pot society drive an energetic world of culture that draws on its African roots and diverse influences to forge a distinct identity in the fields of art, music, dance, theatre, film, literature and fashion. There is a fascinating mix of African, European and Asian cultures.

Cultural experiences abound, including the World Heritage Sites of Robben Island off Cape Town, where Mandela and other political prisoners were incarcerated, the Iron Age citadel of Mapungubwe, the San (Bushman) terrain of the Richtersveld and the Sterkfontein caves outside Johannesburg, with rich hominid and mammal fossils that tell the story of our earliest ancestors.

There are scores of museums. The cities buzz with cultural events and craft markets, coffee bars, pubs and clubs. There are annual festivals of everything from rock music, dance to poetry and jazz, cinema complexes, art galleries and more than 100 active theatre venues. South Africa's film, music and fashion industries

are booming. The country has become a top site for shooting international movies, its locally produced films and music earn global awards, and its fusion fashion is making a distinctive mark on the world.

South African cuisine is renowned for its variety, derived from the culinary traditions of a diverse people.

Some restaurants serve authentic African food and others specialise in 'settler' food - Cape Dutch, Malay, Indian and Portuguese. There are also plenty of international restaurants, along with fast food joints. To wash it down, South African wines are among the best in the world, and fine local and international beers are drunk at every opportunity thanks to SAB Miller, the second largest brewer in the world.

The Economy

South Africa has a large, diverse and growing economy that generates a quarter of Africa's entire Gross Domestic Product. The country has a strong economic infrastructure, rich mineral and metal resources, strong manufacturing and service sectors and a burgeoning tourism market. Economic policy focuses on boosting economic growth and investment in order to generate jobs and reduce income inequalities - two major challenges.

Like the rest of the world, South Africa has felt the effects of the global credit crunch and is officially in a state of recession. That said, the country has escaped many of the harsher impacts of the global downturn due to strict banking (and lending) regulations.

There has also been a huge infrastructural boost in preparation for the 2010 World Cup and according to African Business magazine some 15 out of the top 16 companies on the continent are South African, as are 54 out of the top 90.

Economic growth has averaged 3.5% a year since late 1999, achieving the longest period of expansion in the country's history. It is expected that the economy will shrink by 1.8% in 2009, but the forecast for 2010 is still expected to show a 2.1% growth.

Growth has begun to deliver more jobs, although unemployment remains high. During 2009 the unemployment rate dropped to 21.9% - the lowest rate since 2001 when it was 29% according to Statistics South Africa. The Government's goal is to halve



The only street in the world to house two Nobel Peace Prize winners is in Soweto. Nelson Mandela and Archbishop Desmond Tutu both have houses in Vilakazi Street, Orlando West.





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unemployment between 2004 and 2014, to a maximum of 14%. The total number of South Africans with jobs by mid-2009 was 17.5 million.

South Africa's Rand currency has strengthened during 2009 and currently trades at around R7.80 to the dollar, 12.7 to the British pound and 11 to the Euro. Consumer inflation was 6.7% in July and is expected to come down further as the conservative inflation targeting continues to impact.

While under apartheid the economy and the public and private sectors were white-dominated, now, a booming economy and black economic empowerment and affirmative action policies have created a burgeoning middle-class comprising all race groups.

Development

One of South Africa's major problems, poverty, is gradually easing. The 2008 Development Indicators report revealed a reduction in poverty since 2000, with the proportion of the population living below R462 a month decreasing from 58% in 2000 to 48% in 2005. Nine million people have been lifted out of poverty since 1996 and - thanks to economic growth and more efficient tax collection - more than 12 million people now receive social grants. The expansion of social grants has raised the income of the poorest 10% and 20% of the population - but levels of income inequality remain high because the rate of improvement of income for the poor has not matched that of the rich.

Since 1994 the government has made major strides in improving the lives of millions of poor people. Despite the number of households growing by around four million and increasing demand for social services, according to the government's 2008 Development Indicators:

- 2.5 million subsidised houses have been completed or are in progress, providing shelter to some 8.8 million people.
- 87% of households have access to water of reasonable standard compared with 61% in 1994.
- 73% of households have access to sanitation, against 50% in 1994.
- 72% of households have access to electricity, compared with 61% in 1994.
- Immunisation coverage has reached 86% of people.
- Severe malnutrition for children under five years has been reduced by more than 60%.

More and more South Africans are becoming educated. Almost all children are now enrolled in primary school, and while only two-thirds of young people were attending secondary school in 1990 the proportion had grown to 93% by 2004.

Adult literacy is steadily improving and stands at 82%.

South Africa is, nevertheless, grappling with a major HIV/AIDS epidemic, which has been reducing the life expectancy of

its people, to 60 years for men and 64 years for women. Statistics South Africa estimates the overall HIV prevalence rate to be 11%, or around 5.4 million people, and AIDS claims hundreds of thousands of lives each year. There has been an associated rise in cases of tuberculosis since 2001. In recent years the government has rolled out anti-retroviral treatment for people living with AIDS. Mass campaigns and other interventions are gradually thwarting the spread of the deadly virus. According to the HSRC's South African National HIV Prevalence, Incidence, Behaviour and Communication Survey, 2008, the following indicators predict a stabilisation of the epidemic:

- Reduction in HIV prevalence among children.
- Reduction in the new infections among teenagers aged 15 to 19 years.
- Substantial increase of condom use among youth and all other age groups.
- Increase in the population reached by communication programmes.

Development achievements have been remarkable in the years since 1994. But much remains to be done to uplift the lives of millions of people still mired in poverty, to further reduce levels of HIV/AIDS and crime, to deliver basic services to all South Africans, and to improve the health system and education in schools and colleges so that they are able to produce the skills that the country's burgeoning economy needs.



Four of the five fastest land animals live in Africa - the wildebeest, lion, and Thomson's gazelle (all about 50 mph), and the cheetah (70 miles per hour).

