

SOUTH AFRICA

with Eswatini (Swaziland)

14 days

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Day 1 Arrival in Johannesburg

We arrive in Johannesburg, South Africa's financial heart and largest city.

The local Sotho people call this region Gauteng, meaning "Place of Gold," and the name tells the story perfectly. Back in 1886, an unemployed miner discovered a stone with traces of gold, setting off a chain of events that would transform an open pastoral landscape into one of the world's great mining centres almost overnight. People came from everywhere, drawn by the promise of riches beneath the earth.

Today's Johannesburg has evolved far beyond its mining origins. As we settle into our hotel in Sandton, we're in the economic powerhouse not just of South Africa, but of the entire region. The city pulses with energy as the "New South Africa" continues to develop into a vibrant cultural melting pot.

Overnight in Johannesburg (Sandton).

Included Meal(s): Dinner, if required.

Day 2 Johannesburg & Soweto

Soweto is actually one of Africa's largest cities, with an estimated two million residents, though its history carries some of the continent's most difficult chapters. The name simply stands for South Western Township, reflecting its location outside Johannesburg. This was where thousands of Black workers were forced to live to provide labour for the gold mines, and where some of the most significant events in the struggle against apartheid took place.

Our tour reveals Soweto's complexity—affluent neighbourhoods exist alongside shanty towns, and we visit Baragwanath, one of the world's largest hospitals. We see the former homes of Nobel Laureates Desmond Tutu and Nelson Mandela, and stop at the Hector Pietersen Memorial to learn about the 1976 Soweto Uprising, when student protests against inferior education led to nationwide demonstrations.

The Apartheid Museum provides a compelling and necessary experience. Large photographs, metal cages, and monitors with continuous footage transport us to the townships of the 1970s and 1980s. We can almost feel ourselves dodging police bullets or tear gas canisters, or marching alongside thousands of school children in their fight for justice.

Before returning to Sandton, we get a panoramic view of central Johannesburg, seeing how the city has evolved from its gold rush origins into today's commercial hub.

Overnight in Johannesburg (Sandton).

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 3 Johannesburg - the 'Panoramic Route' - Hazyview

Leaving Johannesburg, we head through the vast wilderness of Mpumalanga, the "Land of the Rising Mist." The landscape transforms as we travel from the grasslands of the High Veld, with its large farms and ranches, down to the drier Low Veld with its rocky hills and acacia scrub forest. This expansive terrain of mountains, valleys, rivers, waterfalls, and ancient forests carries the history of pioneers and fortune-seekers in its many Gold Rush towns and farming communities.

We pass through Lydenburg, the "town of suffering" established by Voortrekkers in 1849, which sits at the bottom of Long Tom Pass. The pass earned its name from the large artillery piece used by Afrikaners during the Anglo-Boer War and ranks among the country's most scenically dramatic mountain routes, connecting Sabie on the escarpment with Lydenburg on the Drakensberg plateau.

The day's highlight comes at the Blyde River Canyon, where the great escarpment creates some of Africa's most spectacular scenery. The canyon's cliffs rise 600-800 metres (2,000-2,640 feet) from the river bed, and at the Three Rondavels viewpoint, we see three enormous rock

spirals rising from the canyon's far wall, their tops resembling the rounded roofs of traditional African huts.

Nearby, Bourke's Luck Potholes show what decades of swirling water can accomplish. Where the Treur River meets the Blyde River, the constant tumult has created extensive erosion over time, resulting in a series of cylindrical rock sculptures that look almost lunar in their otherworldly appearance.

From here, we continue to Hazyview, our base for exploring Kruger National Park.

Overnight in Hazyview.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 4 Kruger National Park

An early morning departure takes us into South Africa's largest game reserve, named after Paul Kruger, who first initiated setting aside this area as a protected reserve in the 1890s. We transfer to open safari vehicles for a full day exploring the southern sector of this remarkable park.

Kruger covers an enormous area of flat veld broken by rivers, with mixed vegetation and terrain that officially became a national park in 1926. The statistics are impressive: the park supports more wildlife species than any other African reserve, with over 137 mammal species, 49 fish species, 112 reptile species, and nearly 500 bird species. As we drive through this diverse landscape, we watch for lions, leopards, cheetahs, elephants, zebras, and many other African animals, each sighting adding to our understanding of how these ecosystems function.

The late afternoon brings our return to Hazyview, where we can reflect on the day's encounters with African wildlife in their natural habitat.

Overnight in Hazyview.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 5 Hazyview, South Africa - Mbabane, Eswatini (Swaziland)

Today's journey takes us south toward the Kingdom of Eswatini, formerly Swaziland, an independent country completely surrounded by South Africa and Mozambique—actually smaller than Kruger National Park. Before crossing the border, we visit Matsamo Cultural Village, a traditional Swazi village that demonstrates the country's rich cultural heritage. Our guided tour introduces us to Swazi customs and traditions, followed by a traditional lunch and opportunities to interact with villagers, providing insights into daily life and cultural practices.

Entering Eswatini, we notice the country's natural beauty immediately—majestic mountains form backdrops to our journey through this landlocked kingdom. As one of Africa's last remaining monarchies, Eswatini offers glimpses into traditional African culture where life moves at a relaxed pace and many customs remain unchanged. The route to Mbabane, the capital, passes through rural landscapes where local people tend farms and herds, living in harmony with the land.

Before reaching our hotel, we stop at Ngwenya Glass, a pioneering glassblowing operation that has created exquisite glass art since the 1980s. Originally founded as a Swedish aid initiative, Ngwenya Glass has evolved into a thriving enterprise that supports local conservation programmes while producing stunning glassworks. All pieces are crafted from 100% recycled glass, reflecting the organization's commitment to sustainability. We watch skilled artisans shape and blow glass into intricate forms, demonstrating techniques passed down through generations.

Overnight in/near Mbabane.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast, Lunch and Dinner

Day 6 Mbabane, Eswatini - Mkuze Game Reserve, South Africa

Leaving our hotel, we travel south and descend onto the Swazi Lowveld, which shares similar climate and vegetation with the lowveld regions

we experienced in South Africa around Kruger Park. Before departing the kingdom, we visit Swazi Candles, where artisans create both traditional paraffin wax candles and 100% organic soya candle tea lights. The colourful, handmade product range includes wax-encased LED lights, pure vegetable glycerine soaps, and marula oil body balm. We interact with the craftspeople as they demonstrate their techniques.

Our route continues through sugar cane plantations and the bustling commercial centre of Manzini before crossing back into South Africa and KwaZulu-Natal province. Our destination is Mkuze Game Reserve, which boasts exceptional habitat diversity: from the eastern slopes of the Lebombo Mountains along its boundary to broad stretches of acacia savannah, swamps, various woodlands, and riverine forest. The reserve also contains rare sand forest, creating conditions that support more than 420 different bird species—making it renowned among ornithologists.

The Mkuze River curves along the reserve's northern and eastern borders, with fig forest stretching along its banks. Fish eagles swoop over the pans, snatching prey they spot from their perches in the fever trees. The reserve sits beneath Ghost Mountain, a former battlefield with a dramatic silhouette resembling an old woman's head. Local legend holds that the mountain contains the tombs of previous chiefs and has been the scene of numerous bloody conflicts, earning its reputation as haunted and the site of paranormal activities.

Overnight in Mkuze.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 7 Mkuze - Hluhluwe-iMfolozi Game Reserve - Fly to Gqeberha (Port Elizabeth)

This morning we leave Mkuze and head to Hluhluwe-Imfolozi Park, the oldest proclaimed nature reserve in Africa. The park is known for its rich wildlife and conservation efforts; this is the only state-run park in KwaZulu-Natal where all of the "big five" wild animals can be found (elephant, rhino, lion, buffalo and leopard).

Established in 1895, the park consists of two game reserves – Hluhluwe in the north and iMfolozi to the south, which were joined by a corridor in 1989 to form the current single park. The park is particularly famous for its role in rhino conservation, having been the home of Operation Rhino in the 1950s and 60s, which saved the white rhinoceros from extinction. Due to conservation efforts, the park now has the largest population of white rhino in the world. The park covers 960 km² of hilly topography 280 kilometres north of Durban in central Zululand, and offers visitors self-guided auto trails which provide information on both the management and natural history of this remarkable conservation success story.

We continue by road to Durban, South Africa's "Garden City." The Voortrekkers opened this area to white settlement in the early 19th century, though Portuguese navigators had been sailing this coast since the late 15th century. Vasco da Gama became the first European to sail along this coastline, naming it Natal to commemorate his Christmas Day arrival. The 1899 war between the British and Boers ended in 1910 with reconciliation and the formation of the Union of South Africa—an agreement signed in what is now Durban's modern Main Post Office.

Flight schedules permitting, we may drive through Durban briefly before heading to the airport for our flight to Gqeberha* (formerly Port Elizabeth), South Africa's fifth-largest city and third-largest port. The city's name change reflects its indigenous heritage: "Gqeberha" comes from the Xhosa and Southern Khoe name for the Baakens River flowing through the city.

Occasionally, due to ever-changing flight schedules, we may spend this night in Durban and take the early flight to Gqeberha tomorrow morning.

* The pronunciation can be a bit tricky, as the "Q" represents a "click" sound with the tongue, then 'be' (like bare), and finally 'gha' (similar to the 'G' in Afrikaans + a short 'ah'). If it's easier, the town is also colloquially referred to as "PE."

Overnight in Gqeberha (Port Elizabeth).

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 8 Gqeberha - 'The Garden Route' - Knysna OR George

Our journey along the world-famous Garden Route begins this morning, following a path parallel to the ocean through landscapes featuring lakes, mountains, beaches, and steep cliffs. This section resembles the Oregon coast with its sand dunes and excellent surf beaches. We stop for lunch at Storms River Mouth in Tsitsikamma National Park, located on the Indian Ocean shores. Here we can walk a short section of the

renowned Otter Trail, widely considered one of the world's finest hiking routes, stretching 41 km (25 miles) over five days from Storms River Mouth to Nature's Valley.

Continuing to Knysna, we arrive in a charming coastal town offering tremendous water and mountain views alongside a relaxed lifestyle. George Rex founded the town in 1817—he was reputed to be an illegitimate son of King George III. Initially established as a timber port around its picturesque lagoon, Knysna has evolved into a town with a riviera atmosphere, complete with sidewalk cafés and shops that invite leisurely exploration.

Depending on accommodation availability, we may overnight in Knysna or continue to nearby George.

Overnight in Knysna or George.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 9 Knysna OR George - Mossel Bay - Oudtshoorn

Our morning takes us down the coast to Mossel Bay, where Portuguese explorer Bartolomeu Dias arrived on February 3, 1488, proving to his sponsors that Africa had a southern tip and making it theoretically possible to sail from Europe to India. We visit the Dias Museum Complex, marking the spot of this historic landing. The 500-year-old Post Office Tree, now a national monument, still stands at the site, housing a post box shaped like a shoe.

We then head inland over the Outeniqua Mountains to the Little Karoo (Klein Karoo), a semi-arid yet fertile valley surrounded by formidable mountain ranges. This region serves as South Africa's ostrich capital, with thousands of these unusual birds dotting fields throughout the area. At the turn of the century, ostrich feathers were so fashionable that demand created wealthy "feather barons" who built magnificent mansions known as "Feather Palaces." This fine architecture remains visible around the pleasant town of Oudtshoorn.

Our day includes a tour of one of the area's ostrich "show farms," where we learn about these remarkable birds and their role in the region's economy and history.

Overnight in Oudtshoorn.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 10 Oudtshoorn - Swellendam - Cape Town

From Oudtshoorn, we travel through the Huis River Pass with its striking rock formations and the farming town of Ladismith, named after the Spanish wife of British Cape Governor Sir Harry Smith. We cross our second mountain range of the day to reach Swellendam, South Africa's third-oldest colonial town, established in 1745. The town features several buildings in the charming Cape Dutch style, characterized by whitewashed walls and black thatched roofs.

Our route continues through vast wheat-growing and sheep-farming areas on the way to Cape Town. In the late afternoon, we cross the Hottentots Holland Mountains—our third mountain range of the day—through the centre of South Africa's apple-growing region. This brings us to Cape Town, one of the world's most isolated and beautiful cities.

Weather permitting, we take a gondola trip to the top of Table Mountain, a sandstone plateau rising above the city. The flat top stretches approximately 3 km (1.9 miles) wide, reaching its highest point at Maclear's Beacon at 1,085 metres (3,580 feet). Over the centuries, this formation has become one of South Africa's most recognizable landmarks. The steep cliffs and rocky outcrops support various animals and approximately 1,470 plant species—more than the entire British Isles. If weather does not permit, we'll try to accomplish this excursion elsewhere in our program.

Overnight in Cape Town.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 11 Cape Town: Robben Island & City Tour

Our morning boat trip takes us to Robben Island for a guided tour of this historic site, formerly an infamous prison and now a museum. The 3.5-hour excursion includes a visit to the maximum security section where apartheid-era freedom fighters, including Nelson Mandela, were incarcerated. Robben Island provides a poignant reminder of how far South Africa has progressed since the dark days of apartheid.

Back in Cape Town, we take a panoramic tour of the city centre, seeing Parliament, City Hall, and the colourful Bo-Kaap area, where the Cape Malay community has maintained its distinctive culture and architecture for centuries.

Overnight in Cape Town.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 12 The Cape Winelands

A short drive brings us to Stellenbosch, South Africa's second-oldest colonial settlement. After exploring the town centre, we have time for independent exploration on foot, admiring some of the finest examples of traditional Cape Dutch architecture along the famous oak-lined streets.

We continue to one of the area's many wineries for a cellar tour and tasting. The Cape vineyards originated at Constantia with Jan van Riebeeck in 1685 and advanced in 1688 when Huguenot refugees brought vine seedlings and skills from France. The Cape's varied soils and climate allow production of diverse wine varieties, and along today's route, we see several wine estates with their distinctive Cape Dutch houses, thatched roofs, and decorative gables.

We enjoy lunch at one of the area's wine estates, followed by a scenic drive through the winelands before returning to Cape Town. Weather permitting, we may attempt the Table Mountain ascent upon return if it wasn't completed earlier in our visit.

Overnight in Cape Town.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Lunch

Day 13 Cape Town: the Cape Peninsula

Today brings our quintessential full-day Cape Peninsula tour, taking us south along the Atlantic Seaboard with views of Cape Town's most affluent neighbourhoods set against mountain and coastal scenery. We make a photo stop before Camps Bay, a surf-side community featuring the classic view of the town with the 'Twelve Apostles' peaks as backdrop.

Continuing south along the seaside route, we pass through Hout Bay and tackle the famous Chapman's Peak Drive, one of the world's most spectacular marine drives. The 9 km (5.6 mile) route includes 114 curves as it skirts the rocky coastline of Chapman's Peak, the 593-metre (1,946-foot) high southerly extension of Constantia Berg.

Our next stop is the Cape of Good Hope Nature Reserve and Cape Point. The reserve encompasses 77 square kilometres (30 square miles) of the Cape Peninsula as a wildflower, bird, and animal paradise. Wildlife includes eland, springbok, bontebok, baboons, and zebra. Within the reserve, we visit Cape Point and the Cape of Good Hope, the most southwesterly point on the African continent.

After lunch and free time at Cape Point, we head north along the Indian Ocean side of the peninsula, passing through Simonstown. The Dutch founded this town in 1741 as a naval depot, naming it after Simon van der Stel, governor of Cape Colony from 1679 to 1697. Today, Simonstown is known for its distinctly English architecture and atmosphere, and hosts the continent's southernmost train station. Depending on the season, we may stop at Boulders Beach to observe a colony of South African penguins.

Completing our peninsula loop, we pass the well-watered eastern slopes of Table Mountain, through Constantia, Bishop's Court, and past the University of Cape Town campuses. We visit the National Botanical Gardens at Kirstenbosch, home to over 4,000 species of indigenous plants, with 2,600 endemic to the Cape Peninsula. The garden's history dates to the 1660s when the first Dutch settlers arrived. Governor Jan van Riebeeck planted a barrier of Wild Almonds to protect settlers' cattle from the area's original inhabitants—and part of this historical hedge remains in the garden today.

Overnight in Cape Town.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 14 Departure

Our Southern African adventure concludes with departure from Cape Town.

Bon Voyage!

Included Meal(s): Breakfast