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Introduction to South Africa

South Africa is a large, diverse and incredibly beautiful country. The size of France and Spain combined, and roughly twice the size of Texas, it varies from the picturesque Garden Route towns of the Western Cape to the raw subtropical coast of northern KwaZulu-Natal, with the vast Karoo semi-desert across its centre and one of Africa’s premier safari destinations, Kruger National Park, in the northeast. In addition, its big cities attract immigrants from across Africa, making them great, bubbling cultural crucibles.

Many visitors are pleasantly surprised by South Africa’s excellent **infrastructure**, which, especially in the Western Cape, is comparable with developed nations. Good air links and bus routes, excellent roads and plenty of first-class B&Bs and guesthouses make South Africa perfect for touring. If you’re on a budget, the network of hostels and backpacker buses provide cost-efficient means of exploring.

Yet, despite all these facilities, South Africa is also something of an enigma; after 25 years of democracy, the “**rainbow nation**” is still struggling to find a new identity. Apartheid is dead, but its heritage still shapes South Africa in very physical ways. This is all too evident in the layout of the towns and cities, where the historically poorer African areas are usually tucked away from the centre.

South Africa’s **population** doesn’t reduce simply to black and white. The majority are black **Africans** (over 80 percent of the population); **white people** make up just under nine percent, as do **coloured people** – the mixed-race descendants of white settlers, slaves from Southeast Asia and Africans, who speak English and Afrikaans and comprise the majority in the Western Cape. The rest are mostly **Indians** (2.5 percent), resident mainly in KwaZulu-Natal and descended from indentured labourers, who came to South Africa at the beginning of the twentieth century.⁰

But perhaps a better indication of South Africa’s diversity is the plethora of official languages, most of which represent distinct cultures with rural roots in different corners of the country. Each region has its own particular style of architecture, craftwork, food and

sometimes dress. Perhaps more exciting still are the cities, where the whole country comes together in an alchemical blend of rural and urban, traditional and thoroughly modern.

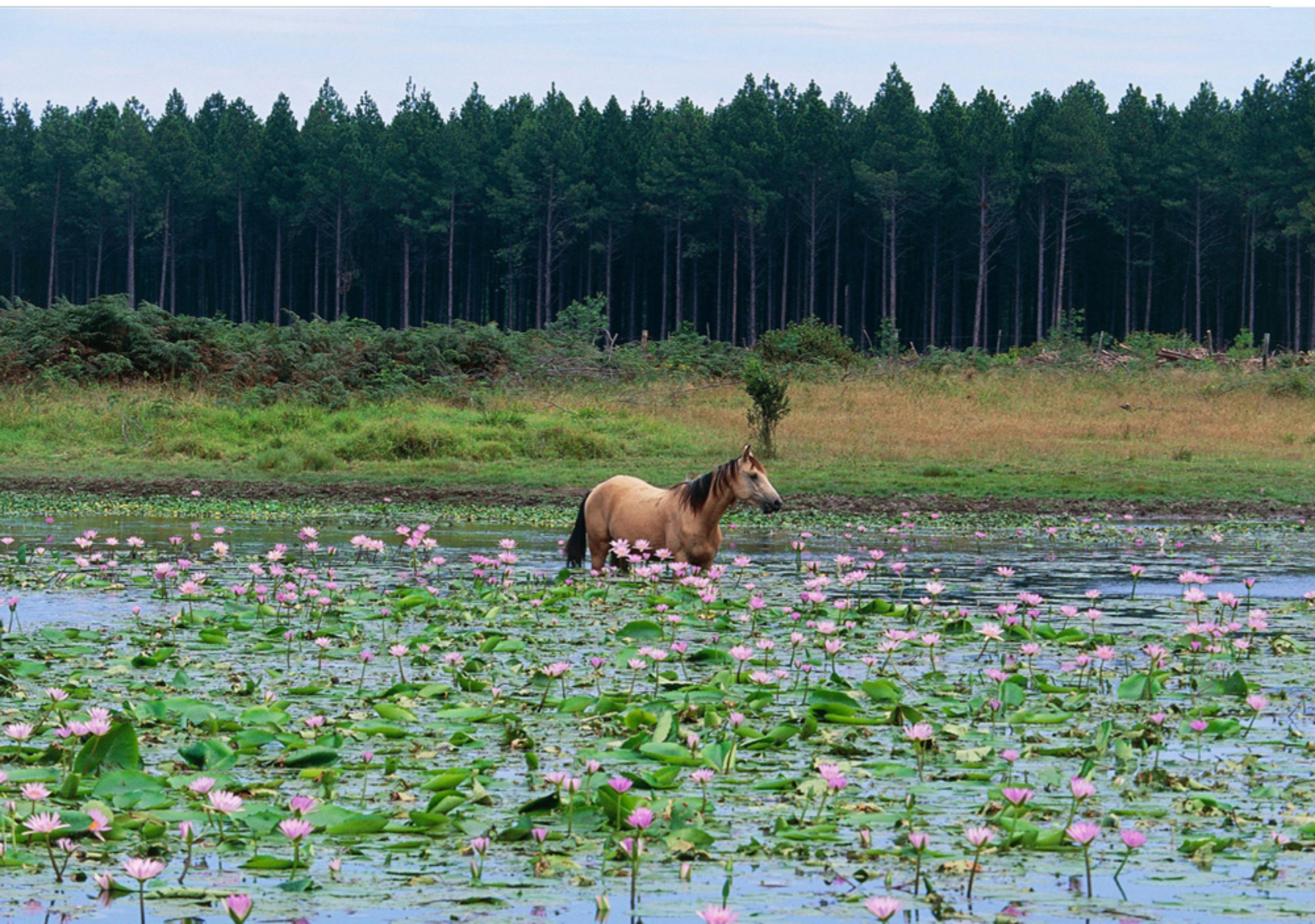
Crime isn't the indiscriminate phenomenon that press reports suggest, but it is an issue. Really, it's a question of perspective – taking care, but not becoming paranoid. The odds of becoming a victim are highest in downtown Johannesburg, where violent crime is a daily reality; there is less risk in other cities.

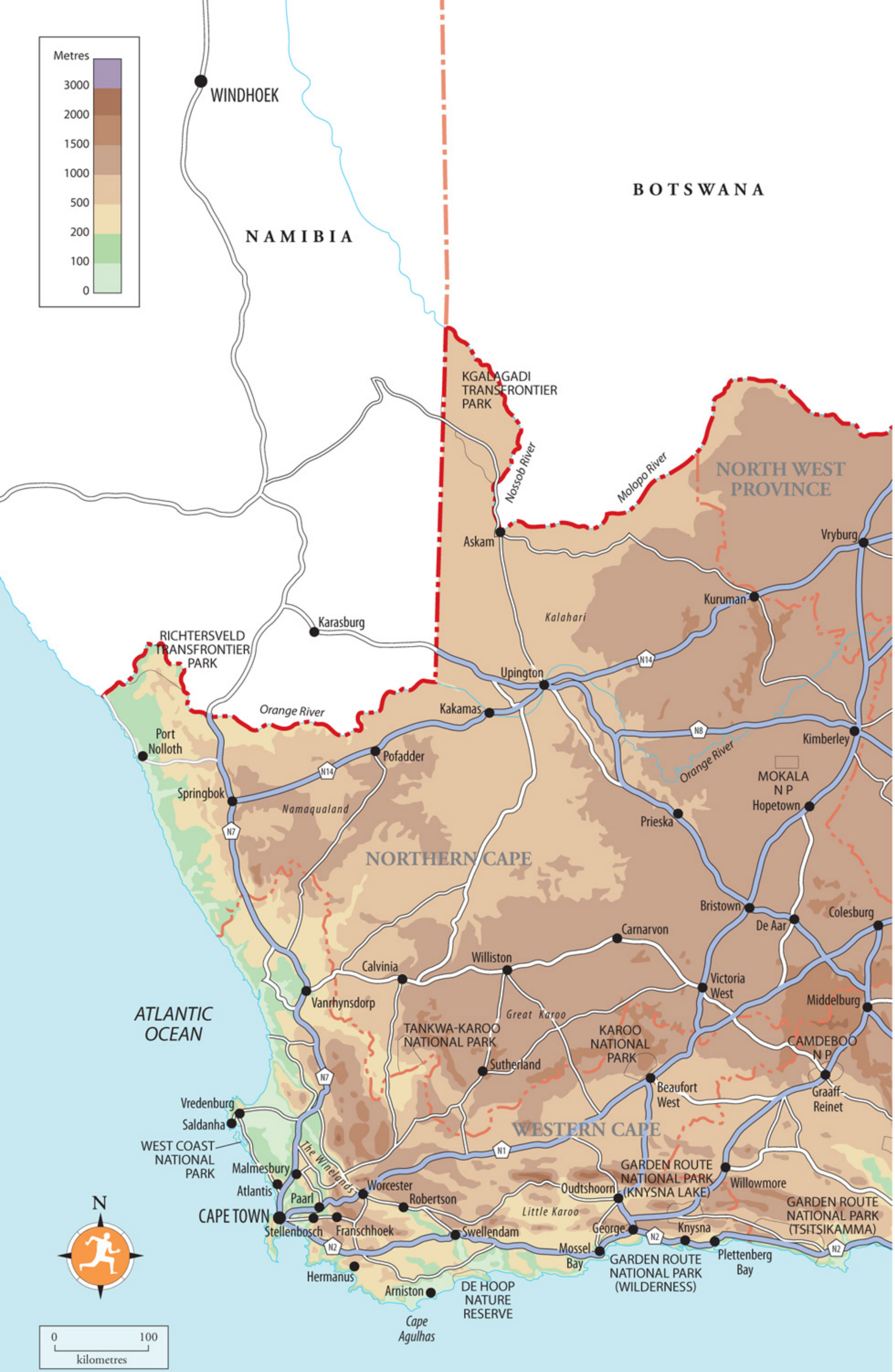
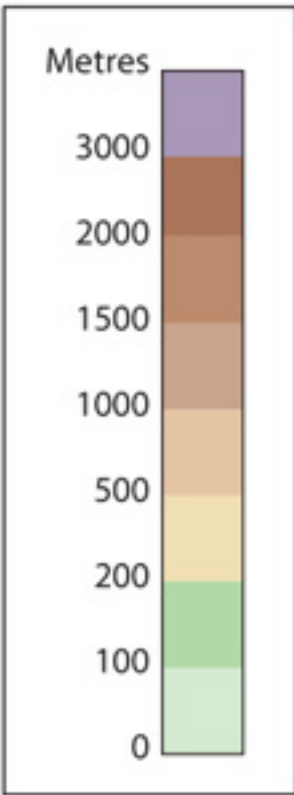
Where to go

While you could circuit South Africa in a matter of weeks, it's more satisfying to focus on a specific region. Each of the nine provinces has compelling reasons to visit, although, depending on the time of year and your interests, you'd be wise to concentrate on either the **west** or the **east**.

The **west**, best visited in the warmer months (Nov–April), has the outstanding attraction of **Cape Town**, worth experiencing for its unbeatable location beneath Table Mountain. Half a day's drive from here can take you to any other destination in the **Western Cape**, a province that owes its character to the longest-established colonial heritage in the country. You'll find gabled Cape Dutch architecture, historic towns and vineyard-covered mountains in the **Winelands**; forested coast along the **Garden Route**; and a dry interior punctuated by Afrikaner *dorps* (towns) in the **Little Karoo**.

If the west sounds too pretty and you're after a more "African" experience, head for the **eastern** flank of the country, best visited in the cooler months (May–Oct). **Johannesburg** is







**SOUTH AFRICA, LESOTHO
AND SWAZILAND**

FACT FILE

- With a **population** of 56 million people, South Africa has eleven official **languages**: Zulu, Xhosa, Afrikaans, Pedi, English, Ndebele, Sotho, Setswana, Swati, Venda and Tsonga.

- The country is a **multiparty democracy**, the head of state being President Jacob Zuma, with a general election due in 2019. Parliament sits in Cape Town, the **legislative capital**, while Pretoria is the **executive capital**, from where the president and his cabinet run the country, and Bloemfontein is the judicial capital. Each of the nine provinces has its own government.

- South African President **Jacob Zuma's** polygamous tally of four wives (and more ex-wives) is modest compared with the fifteen-wife ménage of Swazi King Mswati III; King Letsie III of Lesotho has been married just once.

- **Nelson Mandela's** widow, Graça Machel, who was previously married to the late president of Mozambique, Samora Machel, is the only woman to have been first lady of two different countries.

- South Africa is the only country in the world to have manufactured **nuclear weapons** and then to have voluntarily dismantled them.

likely to be your point of entry to this area: its frenetic street life, soaring office blocks and lively mix of people make it quite unlike anywhere else in the country. Half a day away by car lie **Limpopo** and **Mpumalanga** provinces, which share the mighty **Kruger National Park**. The king of South Africa's roughly two dozen major parks, Kruger is one of the greatest places on the continent to encounter the Big Five (lion, leopard, buffalo, elephant and rhino).

A visit to Kruger combines perfectly with KwaZulu-Natal to the south, and an excellent route between the two is through tiny, landlocked **Swaziland**, which has a distinct Swazi culture and a number of well-managed game parks. **KwaZulu-Natal** itself offers superb game and birdlife; **Hluhluwe-iMfolozi Park** is the best place in the world to see endangered rhinos, and there are several other outstanding small game reserves nearby, such as Ithala, Mkhuze and Ndumo. For hiking and nature, the high point of the province – literally – is the soaring **Drakensberg**, half a day's drive from Durban. **Durban** is one of the few South African cities worth visiting in its own right: a busy cultural melting pot with a bustling Indian district and lively beachfront. The long strip of beaches north and south of Durban is the most developed in the country, but north towards the Mozambique border lies one of South Africa's wildest stretches of coast.

Long sandy **beaches**, developed only in pockets, are characteristic of much of the 2798km of shoreline that curves from the cool Atlantic along

the Northern Cape round to the subtropical Indian Ocean that foams onto KwaZulu-Natal's shores. Much of the **Eastern Cape** coast is hugely appealing: for walking, sunbathing or simply taking in backdrops of mountains and hulking sand dunes. **Scuba diving**, especially in KwaZulu-Natal, opens up a world of coral reefs rich with colourful fish, and south of the Cape Winelands, along the **Whale Coast**, is one of South Africa's major wildlife attractions – some of the best shore-based **whale-watching** in the world.

With time in hand, you might want to drive through the sparse but exhilarating **interior**, with its open horizons, switchback mountain passes, rocks, scrubby vegetation and isolated *dorps*. Covering nearly a third of the country, the epic **Northern Cape** can reveal surprises, such as the Martian landscapes of the Ai-Ais Richtersveld Transfrontier Park and the lion country of the remote but thrilling Kgalagadi Transfrontier Park. The





neighbouring North West Province has a few accessible and excellent wildlife reserves and Sun City, a surreal casino theme park in the bushveld.

From the open fields and Afrikaner heartland of the **Free State**, you're well poised to visit the undeveloped kingdom of **Lesotho**, set in the mountains between Free State and KwaZulu-Natal. Lesotho has few vestiges of royalty left, but does offer plenty of spectacular highland scenery, best explored on a sturdy, sure-footed Basotho pony.

When to go

South Africa is predominantly sunny, but when it does get cold you feel it, since everything is geared to fine weather.

Midwinter in the southern hemisphere is in

June and July, while **midsummer** is during December and January, when the country shuts down for its annual holiday.

South Africa has distinct climatic zones. In **Cape Town** and the **Garden Route** coastal belt, summers tend to be warm, mild and unpredictable; rain can fall at any time of the year and winter days can be cold and wet. Many Capetonians regard March to May as the perfect season, when the summer winds drop; it's mild, autumnal and the tourists have gone along with the stifling February heat. Subtropical **KwaZulu-Natal** has warm, sunny winters and tepid seas; in common with the **Lesotho** highlands, the province's Drakensberg range has misty days in summer and mountain snow in winter. **Johannesburg** and **Pretoria** lie on the highveld plateau and have a near-perfect climate; summer days are hot and frequently broken by dramatic thunder showers; winters are dry with chilly nights. East of Johannesburg, the **lowveld**, the low-lying wedge along the Mozambique border that includes the **Kruger National Park** and much of **Swaziland**, is subject to similar summer and winter rainfall patterns to the highveld, but experiences far greater extremes of temperature because of its considerably lower altitude.

HOUSE OF THE SPIRITS

For thousands of years, San Bushman shamans in South Africa decorated rock faces with powerful religious images. These finely realized paintings, found in mountainous areas across South Africa, include animals, people, and humans changing into animals. Archeologists now regard the images as metaphors for religious experiences, one of the most significant of which is the healing trance dance, still practised by the few surviving Bushman communities. Rock faces can be seen as portals between the human and spiritual worlds: when we gaze at Bushman rock art, we are looking into the house of the spirits.

ABOVE LILAC-BREADED ROLLER, KRUGER NATIONAL PARK

Author picks

Our authors have visited every corner of South Africa, Lesotho and Swaziland – from the vineyards of the Cape to baobab-dotted Limpopo, via the tumbleweed-strewn Karoo and the peaks of the Drakensberg – to bring you some unique travel experiences. These are some of their favourite spots.

Beach break A favourite family holiday spot is Nature's Valley, with its lagoon and Tsitsikamma forests overlooking the beach. It's quieter than more westerly parts of the Garden Route and its tree-lined lanes are reminiscent of an English village (p.232).

Best wine estate There are so many to choose from, but two outstanding wineries are *Ataraxia* (p.188), with its chapel tasting room near Hermanus, and *Babylonstoren* (p.174) – a perennial favourite for its gardens and restaurants.

Go out on a limb The beautiful timber-and-steel "Boomslang" walkway twists through the forest canopy at Cape Town's *Kirstenbosch National Botanical Garden* (p.111), providing stunning views of Table Mountain and the Southern Suburbs.

Love the dorp An unsung South African pleasure is road tripping through the Karoo to elegantly decaying *dorps* (towns), affectionately known as *dorpies*, to enjoy country hospitality, Cape Dutch architecture and hurl-your-phone-from-the-car relaxation. Meander slowly to the likes of Prince Albert (p.248) and Nieu Bethesda (p.327).

Mountain marvels Built by intrepid colonials such as Andrew and Thomas Bain, South Africa's mountain passes are engineering feats. Crowned by a nineteenth-century British fort, Montagu's scenic Cogman's Kloof Pass cuts through the wrinkly Langeberg Mountains to the Little Karoo (p.237).

Favourite park For scenery it's KwaZulu-Natal's *Royal Natal National Park* (p.398), which offers epic hikes in the Northern Drakensberg, and the nearby *Golden Gate Highlands National Park* (p.438) in the Free State. For wildlife, it's a tough choice, but spotting Kalahari lions purring between the dunes of *Kgalagadi Transfrontier Park* (p.277) is certainly memorable.

Our author recommendations don't end here. We've flagged up our favourite places – a perfectly sited hotel, an atmospheric café, a special restaurant – throughout the Guide, highlighted with the ★ symbol.

FROM TOP PRINCE ALBERT, WESTERN CAPE; TREE CANOPY WALKWAY, KIRSTENBOSCH; WINE CELLAR, BABYLONSTOREN

