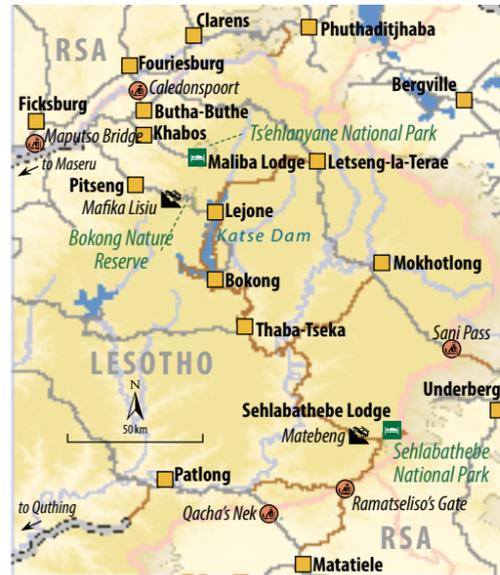
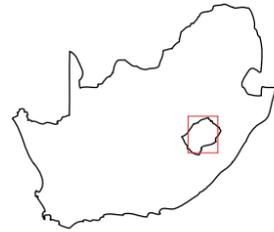


Kingdom of solitude

In Lesotho's national parks, the staff will often be surprised to see you. Visitors are scarce and you'll likely have the whole place to yourself. If that's something that appeals to you, it's time to pack the car and hit the road.

WORDS & PICTURES **EVAN NAUDÉ**





HIGH AND LOW (opposite page, clockwise from top left). Maliba Lodge in Ts'ehlanyane National Park in the Hlotse Valley is surrounded by mountains. If you don't feel like hiking, Sehlabathebe National Park offers an 8 km 4x4 route that winds around the Devil's Knuckles peaks to a grass plain with sandstone formations. The Upper Trail in Ts'ehlanyane National Park will take you through mountain bamboo forest. Among the sandstone in Sehlabathebe National Park you'll find old stone buildings, like this shepherd's hut and kraal.

WHAT ANIMALS WILL I SEE?

You might see antelope like eland and duiker and small predators like caracal and black-backed jackal. Birdwatchers should look out for specials like Drakensberg rockjumper, mountain pipit and bearded vulture. Lesotho is also home to some unique creatures like Maluti redbfin in Sehlabathebe and Sloggett's ice rat in Bokong.

The wind pushes its icy fingers down the back of my collar and makes my eyes water. I can't feel my toes, but who cares? In front of me are rows upon rows of mountains, stacked all the way to the horizon. I'm a modern explorer, blazing a trail where few hiking boots have trod before.

In Lesotho, a flat patch of land is as scarce as gluten-free bread in Brandvlei. Almost every road ends in a mountain pass. If you're planning a visit, you'd better have your vehicle's brakes tested and you should limber up your calf muscles because you're going to have to hike to get to the most scenic spots.

For such a small country, Lesotho has a surprising number of views. You have to visit at least twice to see the metamorphosis that happens when summer changes to winter. In summer, the landscape looks like a rumpled green blanket. In winter, the cold turns the green grass gold, dusts the peaks with snow and freezes the waterfalls into columns of ice.

The best way to see the Mountain Kingdom is to visit one of Lesotho's official conservation areas: There are two national parks and one nature reserve. Don't expect SANParks-level efficiency. Everything has a more informal vibe. At the gate, the guard will wipe cobwebs from the permit book. Google will often tell you more about the local fauna and flora and you'll probably have to figure out the hiking trails on

your own. One afternoon, when I return from a hike just after lunch, I find that the park has closed because the two staff members on duty decided to leave early to enjoy the weekend!

However, as far as scenery goes, Lesotho's conservation areas can compete with the best. Each park has its own trump card: Bokong Nature Reserve is high in the mountains at the top of a 3 000 m pass; Ts'ehlanyane National Park is between valleys, full of fynbos and pockets of mountain bamboo forest; Sehlabathebe National Park has grassland, river pools and rock formations straight out of a David Attenborough documentary.

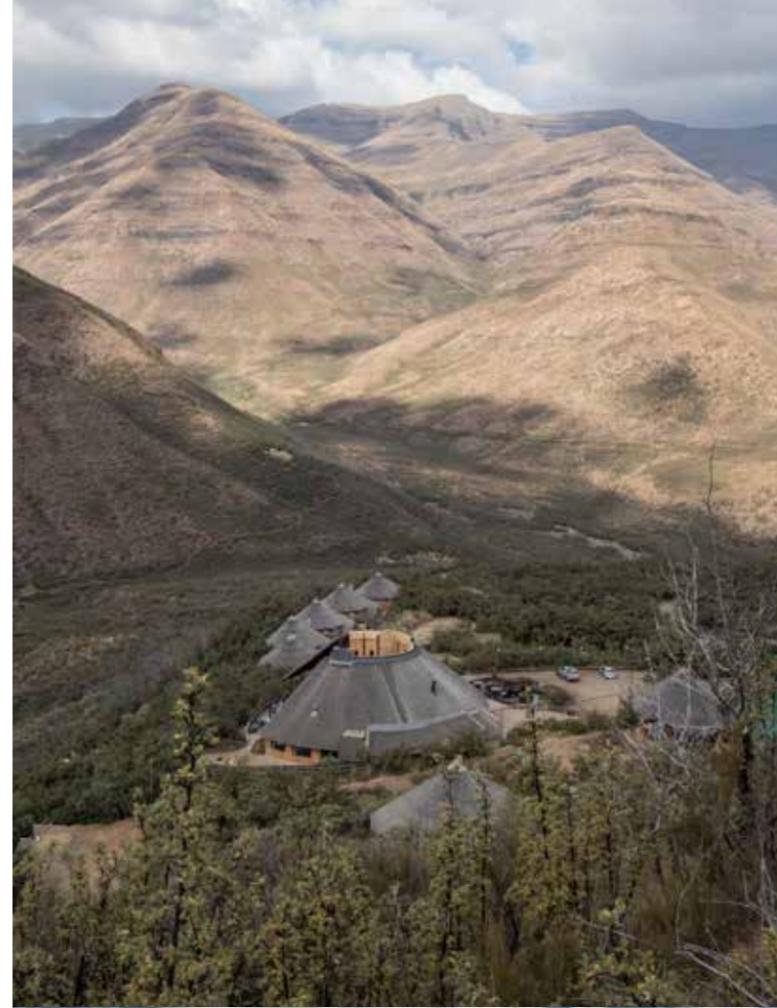
Each reserve is small because Lesotho is small – Sehlabathebe is the biggest at 65 km² – but each also plays a crucial conservation role in a country where the majority of the residents are subsistence farmers. The highly endangered Maluti redbfin fish, for example, is only found in Lesotho and would likely be extinct if it weren't for the protection afforded by a park like Sehlabathebe.

None of the reserves are fenced, but you won't hear cattle bells or see a mielie field within their borders.

It used to be difficult to explore Lesotho if you didn't have a 4x4 or a horse. But Chinese engineers have tarred hundreds of kilometres of gravel roads and these days you can drive your Ford Fiesta to Bokong and Ts'ehlanyane. If you get an early start in the Eastern Free State, you can even head to one of these parks as a day visitor. Bokong is about 80 km from Ficksburg and Ts'ehlanyane is about 55 km from Fouriesburg.

Sehlabathebe is a whole different story. The gravel roads to the park are better than they were in the past, but it still takes at least six hours to reach the gate and you need a vehicle with high ground clearance. The reward at the end of the road is worth it, however: You can see the wind as it moves across the landscape, rippling through grassland and singing around sandstone cliffs before disappearing into the mountains.

Here's your guide to Lesotho's conservation areas. Warning: If you're a people person, you'll have to invite your friends along for the trip because you probably won't encounter any other visitors...





TS'EBHLANYANE NATIONAL PARK

The tamest of the bunch

If it's your first visit to Lesotho, or if you prefer to sleep on white linen after a day's hike, Ts'ehlanyane should be your first pick. It's a well-managed park with good facilities, mainly due to the influence of five-star Maliba Lodge. The lodge is on the banks of the Hlotse River. From the deck, you have a view of the Hlotse Valley – it feels like you're surrounded by mountains.

Hiking trails: The Hlotse River is only a few minutes' walk from the chalets and there's a pool where you can soak up some Vitamin D on a rock. In summer you'll have an abundance of swimming spots to choose from because there are four rivers and several waterfalls that flow through the park.

There are five hiking trails in the park, ranging from easy half-day routes to strenuous day hikes. If you only have one day, pack a picnic basket and walk to Valley of the Pools, a 5 km stretch of river with 16 pools. Follow the Upper Trail or Lower Trail to Black Lake and look for the Valley of the Pools sign. It's 5,6 km from the lodge.

The Upper Trail (3,2 km) steadily climbs to a contour path with views of the Hlotse Valley before descending to Black Lake, a dark pool in the river. It's a great spot for a picnic and a swim on a hot afternoon. From there, you can hike up through mountain bamboo forests to Matsa-Mararo, a waterfall with three levels.

The Lower Trail (3,1 km) hugs the river and runs to Black Lake through indigenous forests with lots of birds. Ask at the lodge for a list of at least 57 bird species you can see in the park, from hamerkop and black-headed heron to

spotted eagle-owl and Steppe buzzard. You also have a good chance of seeing bushbuck and eland in the reeds. This is an easy trail for the whole family – on a hot day, there's more than enough shade to keep you cool, and lots of places to swim in the river.

The strenuous Litsumi Cave Trail (8,4 km) climbs to a cave where porcupines like to hang out.

The Waterfall Trail (4,7 km) and Circular Route (13 km) are for more experienced hikers. If you're one of those hikers and you enjoy a challenge, do the overnight hike to Bokong Nature Reserve (32 km).

More things to do: The Maliba Bana Club is a children's centre for three- to twelve-year-olds. They'll keep your kids busy by teaching them how to catch tadpoles and how to ride a pony. They offer archery lessons, guided outings to see rock art and dinosaur tracks, as well as cultural outings to a nearby Basotho community. Maliba also has five 4x4 trails in the area and a spa if you prefer to take things easy.

Facilities & rates: There's a basic backpackers' lodge near the gate with communal ablution facilities (not part of Maliba Lodge). Rates from R150 per person. Maliba Lodge offers three accommodation options: twin-sleeper self-catering riverside cabin from R750 per person (cabins not available for bookings from June to August); eight-sleeper self-catering river lodge from R1 632 per night for four people; twin-sleeper five-star chalet from R1 430 per person with meals included. There are no camping facilities in the park. Park fees: R30 per person; R10 per vehicle (once-off).

How to get there? Ts'ehlanyane is about 45 km from the Caledonspoort border post. Drive to Butha-Buthe and follow the A1 for about 5 km. Turn left onto the tar road to the town of Khabo. Continue along this road for 32 km and look for the sign to Maliba Lodge.

Niggles? It's hard to find fault. The other two parks should take notes...

Contact: Maliba Lodge ☎ 031 702 8791; 🌐 maliba-lodge.com; park office ☎ 00266 6858 4740

BOKONG NATURE RESERVE

Get high

At 3 000 m above sea level, Bokong is one of the highest reserves in Africa. The visitors' centre clings to the side of a 100 m cliff near the entrance. From the deck it feels like you're looking out of the window of an aeroplane.

Upon arrival, I wonder whether the reserve is open because both the reception office and visitors' centre are deserted. I walk past one of the self-catering units – there's an official inside and he almost falls off his chair when he sees me. He asks me to come to the door of the kitchen. A desk in the living room is piled high with brochures and calendars, wilted posters cling to the wall and there's a taxidermied leopard in one corner gathering dust.

A second official appears from nowhere, unearths a permit book and gives me change from her own pocket. I peer through the windows of the other units. They're all locked but the rooms are clean and neat. The officials ensure me that everything is in working order and there's even a laundry room with brand-new washing machines and tumble dryers.

Hiking trails: Bokong is one of the few places in Lesotho where you're higher than the surrounding mountains. The trails in the reserve vary from an hour-long stroll to a strenuous eight-hour circular route.

If you only have one day, hike to Lepaqua Falls, about 1,5 km from the visitors' centre. It's a short hike, but the thin air will squeeze your lungs and the icy wind will freeze your ears. You'll get new appreciation for Antarctic explorers like Robert Scott and Roald Amundsen as you trudge through snow and ice to get to the river.

Follow the trail to the edge of the waterfall and watch the river tumble over the cliff. In winter, the waterfall freezes to form a solid pillar of ice.

Have you ever heard of a Sloggett's ice rat? This rodent is only found in Lesotho and South Africa at altitudes



of 2 000 m and above. They're shy animals, but who could blame them with birds of prey like bearded vulture and Verreaux's eagle circling above? Other wildlife isn't abundant in the reserve, but you might see a rhebuck.

More things to do: Hike the 32 km overnight trail to Ts'ehlanyane, or explore the park on horseback. Katse Dam is 13 km from Bokong; the dam wall is 60 km away. Do one of the daily tours at 9 am or 2 pm to see the inside of the dam wall. A tour costs R20 per person. Katse Dam information centre ☎ 00266 229 10808/9

Facilities & rates: There are five fully equipped self-catering houses, each of which sleeps 10 people. Rate from R500 per night for six people. Once-off park fee: R40 per person.

Niggles? The visitors' centre is empty and the staff members I met weren't very knowledgeable about the reserve. The hiking trails aren't clearly marked either.

How to get there? Bokong is at the top of Mafika Lisiu Pass. This steep tar pass is an adventure to drive, especially if someone in the car has a fear of heights. The closest border posts are Ficksburg (77 km) and Caledonspoort (94 km).

Contact: ☎ 00266 5849 8769 (You'll probably get a place to sleep if you just show up.)



INTO THIN AIR. The scenic Mafika Lisiu Pass (top) is your gateway to Bokong Nature Reserve, where the visitors' centre and chalets (middle) cling to the edge of a 100 m-high cliff like dassies. At this altitude, not even a waterfall can withstand the freezing cold in winter (above).

UP AND DOWN. A contour path on the Upper Trail (top) will take you over the folds of the Malutis before it joins up with the Lower Trail (above), where you can soothe your burning feet in Black Lake or the Valley of the Pools. At the end of your hike, you can sleep in a five-star chalet (top right).

Run on thin air

The annual Lesotho Ultra Trail, a 50 km ultra-marathon, is held in November. The trail follows shepherd paths in the park and forms part of the South African Skyrunner Series (races that take place at altitudes greater than 2 000 m). 🌐 lesothoultratrail.com



THE SOLITUDE IS ALL YOURS. You'll need a vehicle with high ground clearance to reach Sehlabathebe National Park (top), and the park's new lodge (above) is still closed, but you'll soon realise its appeal when you explore the area on foot (above right).

Explore on foot or on horseback

You can reach Sehlabathebe on foot or on horseback from Khotso Lodge & Horse Trails (☎ 082 412 5540; 📍 khotso.co.za) near Underberg in KZN, or from Sani Lodge Backpackers (☎ 033 7020330; 📍 sanilodge.co.za) at the foot of Sani Pass.

SEHLABATHEBE NATIONAL PARK

The oldest and most remote

The "easiest" way to get to this park is via the long, rocky road from the Ramatseliso's Gate border post (about six hours). Like any other place that's hard to reach, you'll be rewarded with silence and solitude when you arrive.

The facilities are brand new – there's a big reception office, houses for park officials, a vegetable patch and even a motor workshop. Like in Bokong, however, most of the buildings are empty. When I arrive at the reception office, the official on duty has to hunt for the permit book in another room. A bookshelf is packed with a colourful collection of books, including a *Sawubona* magazine, a report on sustainable agriculture and a book titled *Compact Kilimanjaro*. On one wall, there's a poster about Lesotho's fauna and flora and a 2017 year planner – the only entry for the rest of the year reads "Sonja Swanepoel, 7 people".

A new lodge and visitors' centre about 2 km from the gate have been under construction for years, and they're still not open. After a long day's drive you'll have to stay in a basic (but neat) rondavel next to the reception office, or pitch your tent near the new lodge. If you're driving a 4x4, take the gravel road to the deserted park ranger quarters (formerly Jonathan's Lodge) about 8 km from the gate. If you don't have a 4x4, park at the new lodge and hike there.

A short walk from the park ranger quarters will take you to some of the most scenic sandstone formations, rock pools and rock arches in the park. This is also where you can take an iconic landscape photo of the Devil's Knuckles – a series of knobby mountain peaks that glow orange in the first rays of the sun. There are several river pools that reflect the landscape on a windless



day. Yes, your photos from Sehlabathebe will make your Facebook friends spew envy emojis.

Hiking trails: The trails aren't clearly marked and brochures about the park are as scarce as tourists. You should manage one of the shorter trails on your own, but if you want to do any of the longer hikes, it's best to hire a guide for a measly R40 per group. With a guide, you can see some of the 130 rock art sites in the park, some caves, or Tsoelikana Falls, which has a pool where you can swim. If you're not keen to hike, hire a pony for R100 per person.

Wildlife: According to the park brochure, you can see black-backed jackals, baboons, eland and even otters, but I only saw mountain reedbeek. Birders can look for bearded vulture, Verreaux's eagle and wattled crane.

The most unique resident of the park is the Maluti reedfin – a freshwater fish species that was thought to be extinct until it was rediscovered in the icy waters of the Tsoelikana River in 1971.

Facilities & rates: There are two self-catering rondavels that share a communal kitchen and bathroom: R250 per person (cash only), bedding included. Bring your own food, drinks and firewood. Once-off park fee R30 per person. You can also camp near the lodge (there are ablution facilities) for R80 per person.

How to get there? The closest border posts are Ramatseliso's Gate (33 km) and Qacha's Nek (80 km) – both to the south. You can access the park in any vehicle with a high ground clearance. You can also reach the park from the north via Matebeng Pass, but you'll need a low-range 4x4. This pass is very rocky after heavy rains and in winter there will be ice and snow. If you want to drive the 197 km from Sani Pass to the north, it will take at least eight hours. **Niggles?** It's a shame the lodge is still not open. Contact Zambezi Kanyemba Safaris on ☎ 076 640 3653 for info about when it might open.

Contact: ☎ 00266 6253 7565 or ☎ 00266 5853 7565. You can also call park official Sefali Lesansana on ☎ 00266 6386 8034 to make a booking or find out about road conditions. If he doesn't answer, leave a message – cellphone reception is patchy.