

Epic list of practical travel tips for South Africa

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Sabs

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South Africa is a beautiful country with spectacular natural beauty, relatively good roads, and good quality food and accommodation. Many people have South Africa on their [travel bucket list](#), but visiting South Africa may be daunting for some travellers because of safety concerns. Here are some practical travel tips for visiting South Africa.

Practical travel tips for South Africa: Getting around

South Africa does not have a good public transport system. Here are some practical tips for getting around when travelling in South Africa.

Transport options

- Cape Town has a reliable bus system but Johannesburg does not.
- The best way to travel short distances is by Uber. Uber is available in Johannesburg, Cape Town, Pretoria and Durban.
- For longer distances, it is best to rent a car or to arrange transport with a reliable company.
- Should you decide that you don't want to drive in South Africa, make your arrangements in advance with a reputable company.

Gautrain

- The [Gautrain](#) runs between Johannesburg and Pretoria. It also offers a quick and reliable airport service from Oliver Tambo International Airport to different stations in Johannesburg and Pretoria. It is safe and efficient.
- Make sure you travel during its operating times. The earliest train from the airport is 4:55, and the last is 21:20.



Car rental

- Renting a car is the best way to explore South Africa. There are car rental agencies at the airports and in larger towns or cities.

- South African cars have the steering wheel on the right. South Africans drive on the left.
- Most rental cars are manual and not automatic.
- When you rent a car, you may end up with a Korean or French car. This is not a bad thing! In South Africa, German and Japanese cars are popular for stealing or hijacking.
- Take photos of your rental car before you leave the agency for the first time. This will protect you later on if the rental agency wants to charge you for damaging the rental car.

Driving

- Avoid driving in the large cities during the peak periods as your journey could easily take up to an hour longer than normal.
- If you rent a car, put everything in the boot when you leave the car. Nothing valuable should be visible inside the car.
- Lock the car doors when you drive to avoid any unwanted guests when you stop at a traffic light.
- There are usually beggars or sellers at traffic lights. Keep your windows closed and politely say no when any offers. It is best not to ignore these people.

Roads

- In some towns and regions the roads may be full of potholes or there may only be gravel roads, but the national roads are all paved and in a relatively good condition.
- An SUV may be more comfortable if you plan on driving in a National Park or on gravel roads.
- There are wonderful routes to follow in South Africa, such as the [Garden Route](#) and the Panorama Route.

Rules of the road

- Traffic cops use speed cameras, especially on the national roads (such as the N3). Stick to the speed limit, which is normally 60 km/hour in residential areas and 120 km/hour on national roads. An app such as Waze can help you spot these cameras.
- In residential areas and small towns, speed bumps are not always marked. Watch out for these to avoid damaging your rental car.
- When driving on the national roads, it is good manners to move to the left to allow faster drivers to overtake you. If someone does this for you, use your hazards to show your appreciation.
- South Africans call a crossroad a 4-way stop. The car that stopped first can leave first and if two cars stopped at the same time, the one to the right gets to leave first.

- Be careful when coming to a pedestrian crossing (called a Zebra crossing in South Africa) as most drivers don't stop at these crossings. Drivers also don't always stop for pedestrians crossing at a traffic light.
- Be careful at crossings as many drivers don't stop at red traffic lights.
- Be careful when you drive as the pedestrians are unpredictable and cross the road anywhere and without warning.
- There are two types of traffic circles in South Africa. The first is the smaller circles with yield or stop signs. At these circles, the first person to stop is also the first to leave. The larger circles work the same as in the rest of the world – the person on your right has the right of way.

Navigating

- Don't take shorter routes on smaller roads, even if suggested by your GPS or app. The main roads have rest stops and are in a better condition.
- Be careful of the minibus taxis. Minibus taxi drivers are known for their reckless driving. They stop anywhere they want without warning and can easily squeeze in anywhere.

Gas or petrol stations

Gas or petrol stations have attendants that will fill your car for you. They may also wash your windscreen and top up your tyres. There are no self-service options at petrol stations.

Car guards

- Any parking area will have car guards offering to watch your car for you. The car guards are usually self-employed and depend on tips from visitors.
- Although car guards are normally friendly, they can become aggressive and threaten to damage your car if you don't pay them.



Beautiful Koffiefontein in the Free State, South Africa

Practical travel tips for South Africa: Money

There are some things visitors should know about using money in South.

General money tips

- Woolworths is a great place for reasonably priced ready-made meals and snacks.
- South Africa offers something for people with a range of budgets. If you don't mind paying, many luxury options will be available for hotels, restaurants and sightseeing experiences.
- Always pay with your credit. Most places in South Africa accepts credit cards.

Cash

- Keep small change if you get it. It is useful to pay car guards.
- Keep some cash for toll roads. Although most work with the e-tags (provided by car rental agencies), some only take cash.
- Never have large amounts of cash with you.

Using ATMs

- When you go to ATMs to withdraw money, be careful. Never use an ATM in an isolated place. Don't allow strangers to stand close to you – rather cancel the transaction and go somewhere else.
- Always use the ATMs at the airport to make your first cash withdrawal, they usually offer good exchange rates.
- A safe place to withdraw cash from ATMs is a shopping centre.

Shopping

If you forgot to pack something, don't panic – you can purchase it in South Africa as there are great shopping malls in the larger cities.

Unique South African products

- Shoes, traditionally worn by farmers, called Veldskoene or “vellies” are comfortable and practical.
- Biltong is salted dried meat – similar to beef jerky, but better.
- Droë wors is dried sausage – with biltong this is a popular snack among South Africans.

Practical travel tips for South Africa: Safety concerns

Although South Africa is known as an unsafe destination, common sense will go a long way. Here are tips to ensure you remain safe during your visit to South Africa.

General safety tips

- South Africa is not a good destination for solo unexperienced travellers, travelling with someone is definitely safer. This is especially true for females.
- Don't display your camera and other expensive equipment openly, as this may make you a target for criminals.
- Keep your valuables on you whenever you are in a public place. Hold your phone in your hand and not lying on the table when you are eating out – it can easily be snatched if left unattended.
- Don't wear expensive jewellery as this may also make you a target of criminals.
- It is best to wear your handbag across your body and not just over the shoulder – this makes it more difficult to grab.

Freedom of movement

In South Africa freedom of movement is more restricted than in many safer countries. Choose carefully where you go. Avoid isolated attractions, especially at night.

Passports

- Leave your passport in your hotel's safe or keep it on your body, but not in your handbag or loose purse. If you wear pants with zipped or buttoned pockets, keep it in one pocket.
- Have photocopies of your passport available for download or in your suitcase.

Luggage

Have your luggage wrapped when flying to and from South Africa and for domestic flights. Many people have had tampering with their luggage or even had items stolen from their luggage by ground staff at the airports.

Practical travel tips for South Africa: General planning tips

South Africa is a large country. Here are some general travel planning tips to consider.

Over scheduling your itinerary

The distances between destinations may take longer to drive than shown on Google Maps. If you rely on Google Maps when you do your planning, you may end up adding too many stops for your visit to South Africa, leaving you with too little time to explore each stop properly. If possible, schedule at least 2 nights at a stop.

Load shedding

South Africa's electricity provider is experiencing shortages in its supply. This has resulted in frequent periods of planned outages called load shedding. There is a rotational schedule for the different suburbs and towns. Usually, load shedding can last between two to four and a half hours. Load shedding can impact traffic and sightseeing. Unfortunately, the schedule is usually only announced with a few hours' notice making planning around it difficult.

Cellphone and data

- If you didn't activate international roaming on your phone, you can buy a SIM card for an unlocked cellphone at the airport. You need your passport and proof of accommodation to buy a SIM card. Make sure your new SIM card works before you leave the airport.
- When staying in lodges in the more isolated areas, the WiFi may not be as good as in the urban areas.
- WiFi is available in most areas in South Africa. It may just be slower in smaller towns and rural areas.

Eating out

- Popular restaurants are busy and you should make a booking in advance to ensure you get a table.
- The portions in most South African restaurants are large. One meal may be enough for two people, but taking leftover food home is not uncommon in South Africa.
- You need to ask the waiter for the bill when you are ready to leave. If you don't, they will assume you are staying.
- Most foreigners find the food, wines and beers in South Africa inexpensive.
- Most restaurants allow you to bring your own wine and pay a corkage fee. This is usually cheaper than ordering the same bottle of wine at the restaurant. Find out if this is allowed when you make your booking.
- If you want to pay using a credit card, always ask the waiter for the credit card machine. Let them bring it to you. Never let your credit card out of your sight.

Electrical plugs

- South Africa uses electrical plugs with either two or three round prongs. It is best to take your own adapter plug as not all lodges and hotels will have adapter plugs.
- South African plug points cater for 220 volts. Some devices and chargers automatically adapt to this, but be careful not to blow electric equipment that don't adapt.

What to wear

- Whether you go on a game drive or visit Cape Town, wearing layers is best. The days may be hot and the nights cold.
- Also keep a rain jacket available for late afternoon thunder showers.

Indoor heating

Most homes don't have central heating and can be chilly. Usually a gas or oil heater will be available.

Summers

During the Summer, South Africa can get really hot. Be sure to wear a hat, apply sun block and use a mosquito repellent.

South African slang

South Africans call traffic lights robots.

Water

- South Africa's tap water is clean and safe to drink and use.
- Take a refillable bottle to fill for free every day.

Clothing

- Most foreigners find clothes in South Africa affordable.
- Take cotton handkerchiefs with you when you travel. You can use it to wipe your hands in restrooms if there are no towels available. You can also use it for a scarf when it is cool. Other uses include wiping your glasses, protecting your neck from sunburn, clean your camera lenses, etc.

Timing

- Most Attractions in South Africa close earlier (17:00) than in other parts of the world. South Africans eat dinner anytime from 18:00 – 20:00.
- Shops also close fairly early in most cities and towns, usually around 18:00. Only in main centres, select shopping centres will remain open until late night.
- On Sundays, most shopping centres will be open until lunchtime.

Malaria

If you plan on visiting the Kruger National Park or certain areas in KwaZulu Natal, make sure you take malaria medication before your trip.

Attitude

So leave your fears and concerns at home, just bring an open mind, a positive attitude and not too many expectations except to have fun and be surprised and see many amazing things in this beautiful country.

Safe sex

If you meet someone and want to get intimate with them, use condoms. South Africa has a high incidence of HIV. Good quality condoms are available for free in some buildings or you can buy them from pharmacies or supermarkets.

Drugs

Recreational drugs are illegal in South Africa.

Bribes

The corruption levels in South Africa is high. Some cops will accept a bribe, others won't. Just don't take a chance by trying to bribe them!

Street children

There are street children in the major cities. They beg for money and use the money for drugs. If you want to help them, rather approach a registered charity organisation to make a donation.

Domestic flights

- Domestic airlines require you to switch your phone off during take-off and landing.
- Always lock your suitcase and get it wrapped for an additional safety measure.

Language

Learn a few simple words South Africans use:

- **Howzit:** A local greeting meaning hi, how are you?
- **Lekker:** This is the Afrikaans word for good, tasty, nice.

Practical travel planning tips for South Africa: Experiences

Experiencing new and beautiful things is why people come to South Africa. Here are tips to make sure you maximise your experiences while there.

Safari

- There are many Safari options, ranging from the Kruger National Park to the Amakhala Game Reserve in the Eastern Cape. Whereas you need to take malaria medication for the Kruger National Park, it is unnecessary for the Amakhala Game Reserve.
- For walking safaris, use gaiters to keep the seeds and grasses from getting into your socks.
- Allow for a few days at a game reserve. If you don't get to see all your favourite animals on the first day, you may be able to see them on the following days.
- Unless the parks have received good rainfall, it may be dry and dusty even in Spring.
- When on Safari, the days will be hot and the nights cold – even in Summer.
- Safari drives can be dusty, don't wear anything you don't want to get dirty.
- Take sunglasses for game drives to avoid the dust getting into your eyes. It will also protect your eyes from the wind.
- The roads in the parks are not always in a good condition and it can damage your rental car.
- If you do a self-drive safari, plan it carefully to make sure you include stops at the restrooms. It is easy to lose track of time when driving around looking for wild animals.
- To protect your camera gear from dust while on Safari, use ziplock bags and make sure to clean your camera and lenses each night.

When on Safari or doing a self-drive option in a game reserve, never get out to feed or pet the animals. Remember, these are wild animals and they may hurt you badly.

Kruger Park Tips

- The picnic areas in Kruger National Park stop serving food at 15:30. The shops in the areas close around 16:00. Keep this in mind when planning your meals.
- When visiting the Kruger Park and staying in the larger camps, don't underestimate how early you need to queue to leave the gate in the morning.
- The sunrises and sunsets in the Kruger Park are gorgeous. Make sure you witness this at least once.
- You need to take malaria medication before visiting Kruger National Park.

Animal issues

At many sights baboons may try to take food from your or get into your car. They are dangerous animals and it is best to avoid eating food outside in reserves and parks.

Swimming in the ocean

- If you want to swim in the ocean, the beaches in KwaZulu Natal is better as the water in Cape Town is freezing.
- South Africa has many beautiful beaches. Plan to spend some time taking a walk on the beach or perhaps having a picnic.
- When you get to a swimming beach, only swim in the area between the lifeguard's flags. In South Africa it does not allow you to consume alcohol while sitting on the beach.

Places to avoid

Avoid the downtown areas of Johannesburg, Pretoria and Durban. The crime levels in these areas are high.

Cape Town

- Walking in Cape Town is safe if you stick to the busy areas.
- Greenmarket Square is worth a visit. You can bargain with the vendors, but bear in mind that this is how they earn a living.
- Long street is popular with tourist, but be careful if you go there at night.



Table Mountain in Cape Town

Hiking

- When hiking on the mountains, it is safest to stay in the constructed paths.
- Never go hiking alone!
- Joining a hiking group is easy and definitely recommended. There are several Facebook groups for hiking in Cape Town. This is a good way to mix with locals and it is free.
- When hiking on a mountain, dress appropriately and take food, water, a map and extra clothing.
- Make sure someone knows you are going on a hike and which route you plan to take.

National parks

- South Africa has several national parks. These are gated and you have to pay to enter. Foreigners pay more than locals to visit these parks.
- If you want to stay in these parks, booking online can give you a discounted rate.
- If you plan to visit several national parks, buy the SANS wildcard. Although not cheap, it will save you some money.
- The Kruger National Park is the most popular with foreigners, but many locals prefer the Kgalagadi.

Ultimately, having a positive attitude and using common sense when you visit South Africa will make your trip safe and memorable!

Have you visited South Africa? Do you have any practical travel tips to share?

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