



Boundary representations are not necessarily authoritative.

BACKGROUND

Land and Climate

Covering 470,693 square miles (1,219,090 square kilometers), South Africa is slightly larger than Texas, New Mexico, and Oklahoma combined. The country's large interior plateau averages about 5,000 feet (1,500 meters) above sea level. Primarily savanna and semidesert, the plateau is rimmed by a narrow coastal belt, which is subtropical along the east coast and has a Mediterranean climate along the southwestern cape. South Africa's most important rivers are the Orange, Vaal, and Limpopo.

Snow is confined to the Drakensberg and Maluti mountains in the east. Seasons run opposite those in the Northern Hemisphere. Humidity is generally low, except in the KwaZulu/Natal Province along the east coast. The country is noted for its long beaches, green forests, and rugged mountains. Diversity among plants and wildlife adds to its stunning scenic beauty. The Kingdom of Lesotho, surrounded by South Africa, sits on a high plateau. South Africa also nearly engulfs the Kingdom of Swaziland.

History

The Khoikhoi, San, and other indigenous Africans lived in southern Africa for thousands of years, although little is known of their history. In 1652, the Dutch established a provisions station at Cape Town. It supplied ships with fresh foods as they sailed around the tip of the continent. French Huguenot refugees joined the Dutch colony in 1688 and Germans came later. The colonists became known as *Boers*

(farmers). They clashed at times with indigenous groups but stayed mainly in coastal areas. Britain gained formal possession of the Cape Colony in 1814. Dissatisfaction with British rule led many Boers to migrate to the interior between 1835 and 1848. Their migration, which they call the Great Trek, led to war with the indigenous Zulu, Xhosas, and other Africans. The Boers won most of the battles and took control of large tracts of land.

After the discovery of gold and diamonds in these Boer territories in the late 19th century, Britain annexed parts of the area. Tension erupted into the Boer War (1899–1902, also called the South African War), in which the Boers were defeated. In 1910, Britain combined its Cape and Natal colonies with the Boer republics of Orange Free State and Transvaal to create the Union of South Africa.

Following its election to power in 1948, South Africa's National Party (NP) devised the apartheid system that separated the country's population into racial groups: whites, blacks, coloureds (people of mixed race), and Indians. In 1961, the country gained independence from Britain and subsequently withdrew from the British Commonwealth over criticism of its racial policies.

For the next three decades, South Africa was the scene of turmoil and violence. The African National Congress (ANC), first organized in 1912, was banned in 1960 for its communist views and antiapartheid activities. The ANC then launched, with other groups, an armed struggle against the government. Many ANC leaders, including Nelson Mandela, were jailed. In the 1970s and 1980s, international sanctions damaged the economy and isolated the country.

Frederik Willem (F. W.) de Klerk took office in 1989 and

began to reform the government. He freed Mandela and other political prisoners, desegregated public facilities, and gave the ANC legal status. Mandela later suspended the ANC's armed struggle and dropped its socialist ideology. Violent clashes between rival African groups, among other factors, threatened progress toward greater political change. However, most apartheid provisions were abolished in 1991, and negotiations for a new constitution began in 1992. Mandela and de Klerk shared the Nobel Peace Prize in 1993.

Despite sporadic violence, multiracial and multiparty elections were held peacefully in April 1994. Mandela was elected president and launched a *Masakhane* (Nguni for "Let us build together") campaign. In 1996, a new constitution was ratified. It has an extensive bill of rights guaranteeing equality for all who live in South Africa. In 1999 national elections, the ANC won all but one seat needed for a two-thirds (constitutional) majority, allowing Thabo Mbeki to assume the presidency as Mandela retired. Mbeki won reelection in 2004 but was forced to resign in September 2008 after losing the support of the ANC. His detractors alleged he had interfered in a corruption case against ANC leader Jacob Zuma. After the ANC won elections in April 2009, Zuma was inaugurated as president.

South Africa is the recipient of an increasing flow of immigrants from the rest of southern Africa (particularly Zimbabwe) in search of better economic opportunities. However, unemployment rates are high, and in 2008, violence towards foreigners swept the country, causing thousands of immigrants to flee to their home countries. In 2010, South Africa became the first African nation to host the World Cup.

THE PEOPLE

Population

South Africa's population of 49.1 million is shrinking at an annual rate of 0.05 percent. The majority of the population (79 percent) is comprised of Africans, mostly from nine ethnic groups. The Zulus are the largest group (23 percent), followed by the Xhosas (18 percent), North Sothos, South Sothos, Tswanas, Shangaan-Tsongas, Swazis, Ndebeles, and Vendas. Each ethnic group has its own cultural heritage, language, and national identity. Before migration patterns led groups to mix with one another, most lived in distinct areas of southern Africa. This division inspired the apartheid concept of "homelands," which was abolished in 1992.

People of mixed race (9 percent) are most often descendants of early white settlers, native Khoikhoi, and slaves imported from the Dutch East Indies during South Africa's colonial period. Indians (2 percent) are generally descendants of indentured laborers brought from India during the 19th century or of Indian immigrants who came between 1860 and 1911. Whites (10 percent) include English-speaking descendants of English, Irish, and Scottish settlers and Afrikaans-speaking descendants of Dutch, French, and German colonials. It is estimated that between two and four million illegal immigrants from neighboring African states also reside in South Africa.

Language

Sixty percent of all whites and most mixed-race people speak Afrikaans (a Dutch derivation). Other whites and Indians speak English. English is commonly used in business, between some ethnic groups, and as the primary language of instruction in secondary schools. The vocabulary and pronunciation of South African English reflects a unique relationship between English and other languages spoken in South Africa. English and Afrikaans are more common in urban areas than rural regions.

African languages are roughly divided into four families: Nguni; Sotho; Tsonga, or Shangaan; and Venda. Most Africans speak a Nguni language: Zulu and Xhosa are most prominent, followed by Ndebele and Swazi. Sotho languages (South Sotho, North Sotho, and Setswana) dominate the central part of the country. Also, a few mixed languages have developed to facilitate communication between groups. Typical is a mixture of Zulu and Xhosa or Zulu and Sotho. People speak their original languages at home or within their own groups. Some whites are now learning a major African language to help them become more aware of their diverse culture.

Religion

More than half of Africans, most whites, and most mixed-race people are Christians. Some mixed-race people are Muslims. Afrikaans speakers belong primarily to the Dutch Reformed Church. English-speaking whites belong to Anglican, Lutheran, Presbyterian, Roman Catholic, Methodist, and other congregations. Africans typically belong to African Independent churches, the largest of which is the Zion Christian Church, that combine Christian and traditional African beliefs in their worship patterns. As many as 20 percent of Africans adhere solely to indigenous belief systems. Most Indians are Hindus, though about 20 percent are Muslims and 10 percent are Christians. The Jewish community is small but has had a significant impact on the country's development.

General Attitudes

South Africa faces a formidable set of challenges, including insufficient housing, high unemployment, violent crime, huge wealth inequality, and a high rate of HIV infection. Many people have been frustrated by the slow pace of change in these and other areas since the transition to majority rule. Some Africans complain of job discrimination, while many whites disagree with attempts to require companies to hire more Africans. Mixed-race people often express a feeling of being left behind or marginalized in new planning. And, even as some whites are reaching out to others by improving access to job training or land, integrating neighborhoods, or learning about indigenous cultures, others continue to fear majority rule and oppose reform efforts. At the same time, many Africans are angry that whites are not giving up more of their wealth or moving faster to integrate society.

Despite these frustrations, the majority of South Africans accept coexistence in their multiracial, democratic society and want to contribute their efforts to building it. Most people value their new economic opportunities and agree that South

Africans must work together to achieve the goals set forth in the constitution and to allow South Africa to capitalize on its natural wealth, strong economy, and diverse peoples.

Personal Appearance

Some rural Africans wear traditional clothing for special purposes or everyday attire. This may include a variety of headdresses and colorful outfits. They usually wear Western-style clothing on a daily basis. Rural women wear a scarf or other headdress with either a dress or a blouse and skirt. Urban African men wear pants, shirts, and sometimes suits, but rarely shorts. Urban African women wear both African and European fashions.

White South Africans wear Western-style clothing, usually made from lightweight cotton. They tend to be well dressed in public. Men wear suits or shirts and trousers. In rural areas, they may prefer shorts and knee socks. Women generally wear comfortable dresses or modest pants. Many Muslim women wear head coverings and other traditional Muslim attire. Indian women often wear a *sari*, a wraparound-type dress.

CUSTOMS AND COURTESIES

Greetings

Of the many greetings used in South Africa, the English phrases *Hello* and *Good morning* are understood by most people. Afrikaans speakers say *Goeie môre* (Good morning). Young English speakers say *Howzit* (slang for “How are you?”) to friends. A more formal *Good morning* or *Good afternoon* is common among adults. The Zulu and Swazis greet each other with *Sawubona* (literally, “I see you,” meaning “Hello”) or *Kunjani* (How are you?). An acceptable response to either is *Yebo* (Yes). The Xhosa greeting, *Molo*, and the Sotho phrase *Dumela* have similar meanings to *Sawubona*.

On parting, most South Africans use a phrase that assumes a future meeting. In other words, people rarely say good-bye. Rather, one says *See you* in English, *Tot siens* (Till we see each other again) in Afrikaans, or something like the Sotho *Sala gashi* (Go well in peace).

South Africans shake hands when they greet, but the type of handshake differs between groups. Some use firmer, others lighter, shakes with one hand; many rural people use both hands. Close friends and relatives may hug. Sometimes African friends greet with an intricate triple handshake that involves interlocking the smallest fingers, clasping fists, and interlocking fingers again. African men may also hold hands when walking or conversing.

Although friends use first names and nicknames, South Africans generally do not address strangers or older people by their first name. Professional titles or the equivalents to “Mr.,” “Mrs.,” and “Miss” are preferred. It is polite to call an older African “father” (*Tata* in Xhosa, *Ntate* in SeSotho, or *Baba* in Zulu) or “mother” (*Mama* in Xhosa and Zulu or *Mme* in Sesotho). Afrikaans-speaking people, both white and of mixed race, refer to older males as “uncle” (*oom*) and older females as “auntie” (*tannie*).

Gestures

Africans and mixed-race people frequently use hand gestures in conversation. It is impolite to point at someone with the index finger, stand too close during conversation, or talk with one's hands in the pockets. Africans use the right hand for handshakes, to pass objects, or to gesture. Receiving an object with cupped hands is polite. Some young people express “hello” or “good-bye” by extending the thumb and little finger up (folding all other fingers against the palm) and rocking the hand from side-to-side. Whites tend to use minimal hand gestures and are comfortable passing items with either hand.

Visiting

Visiting is an important social activity for most of South Africa's groups. When possible, visits are arranged in advance, but unannounced visits among good friends or relatives are common, especially in areas where telephones are not accessible. South Africans are gregarious, hospitable, polite, and personally self-effacing. They enjoy conversing and socializing. Gender, ethnic, and age groups tend to socialize among themselves; association between such groups is typically more formal.

Etiquette varies widely between ethnic groups. Guests usually are served refreshments. In Indian homes, it is impolite to refuse these, and it is polite to accept second helpings if eating a meal. Among Africans, dinner guests are not expected to bring a gift. Whites will often bring something to drink (juice, wine, etc.). When guests leave, they usually are accompanied by their host to the gate, car, or street.

Eating

Whites generally observe the continental style of eating; the fork is in the left hand and the knife remains in the right. Africans more often eat meals with spoons or their fingers (depending on the food). It generally is not appropriate for adults to eat on the street unless eating ice cream or standing at a vendor's stand. Eating alone is also rare. Dinner, usually eaten after 6 p.m., is the main meal. All South Africans enjoy a *braai* (barbecue), especially on the weekend. Beef and *boerewors* (spiced sausage) are usually featured at a barbecue.

LIFESTYLE

Family

South Africa's white families are small, live as a nuclear unit, generally are close-knit, and enjoy a good standard of living. Africans have strong extended family ties, even if nuclear units are not always able to live in the same household because of employment or education. Children are taught to respect their elders and obey their parents. Relatives play an important role in caring for children and providing aid to those in need.

Housing

Housing varies widely by socioeconomic level. Whites

usually have the largest and most expensive houses, made of brick with tiled roofs and comprising a living room, dining room, kitchen, one or more bathrooms, two or more bedrooms, and an enclosed garage. These homes have electricity and running water and are furnished similarly to houses in Europe and North America. A wall or fence, often electrified or topped with razor wire, surrounds the property.

At the other end of the socioeconomic spectrum, many urban blacks live in informal settlements called shantytowns. These homes are made of corrugated iron, wood, and/or cardboard and usually consist of a single room. There is no electricity, and an outside water tap is shared by an entire community. Cooking is done inside on a paraffin stove or outside on a coal fire. Furnishings are sparse, typically only a wooden table, some chairs, and perhaps a mattress. An extended family of three generations often occupies the room. In rural areas, extended families live in a *kraal* (compound) consisting of several circular huts with thatched roofs and walls made of clay or wood. They contain no furniture except sleeping mats.

Dating and Marriage

Dating habits vary between ethnic groups, but most South Africans plan on marrying and having children. For many ethnic groups, the groom must pay *lobola* (bride-price) in the form of cattle or money to the bride's parents before a wedding can take place. However, paying *lobola* can take years; a couple might have several children before it is paid.

Traditional wedding celebrations involve much dancing and feasting. The law recognizes tribal weddings. Polygamy is more common in rural areas. Most white and mixed-race South Africans marry in a church or marry civilly. Indians have their own wedding traditions.

Life Cycle

Among African groups, a coming-of-age ceremony is one of the most important events in a person's life. Sometime between the ages of 10 and 18, young people take part in an initiation process, in which elders teach them how to prepare for adult status. For boys, the final stage is a circumcision ceremony. A boy is then regarded as an adult and has the right to marry. Girls go through similar initiation schools.

When a child is born to white and mixed-race South Africans, the infant is usually christened in a church. Twenty-one is regarded as the age a person enters adulthood, and a special party may be held. At death, a person is typically given a Christian funeral, and the body is buried in a cemetery or cremated.

In most Indian families, a Hindu ceremony is held six days after a child's birth. Prayers are offered, and the child's hair is shaved so evil spirits may not attach themselves to the child. At death, Hindus cremate the body within 24 hours and spread the ashes into a sea, lake, or river. The family observes a period of mourning for 10 days. No food is cooked in the home, so friends and relatives provide the family with meals. The family observes three further periods of mourning, at 13 days, 6 months, and 12 months after the person's death.

Diet

South Africans enjoy a wide variety of foods, including roast beef or roast lamb and potatoes, curries, *boerewors* and pickled fish, grilled meats, stewed tomatoes, cabbage, pumpkin, and spinach. Wild game meats are also popular with many people. Corn, rice, beans, and potatoes are the staples for the rural majority. Africans eat *mealie meal* (cornmeal porridge, sometimes cooked with vegetables and meat) on a regular basis. Cooked in a three-legged cast-iron pot over a fire, *potjiekos* (pot food) is a popular meal among Afrikaans speakers for weekend social functions, festivals, and holidays. Fresh fruits and vegetables are abundant and often sold by farmers from roadside stands. *Biltong* is a jerky-like snack made from various types of meat. The *milk tart*, a custard-like pie, is a favorite desert. Wine, tea, coffee, beer, and *cool-drink* (any soft drink or juice) are common beverages.

Recreation

Soccer, rugby, and cricket are the most important sports in South Africa. Whites prefer rugby and cricket, while Africans mostly follow soccer. However, South Africans of all backgrounds cheer when fellow citizens win at international events. Many people enjoy tennis and swimming. Indeed, all ethnic groups value competitive sports, which are increasingly open to a broader population. Those who can afford equipment or club memberships participate in squash, lawn bowling, golf, field hockey, and sailing. Horse and car racing draw crowds.

South Africans appreciate their many beaches and recreational facilities, including swimming pools, parks, libraries, and movie theaters. Dancing, playing music, attending festivals, and enjoying cultural events are other popular activities.

The Arts

South Africa boasts a diversity of musical styles. Choirs are common, and traditional folk songs have been integrated into choral music. The popular *mbaqanga* dance music originated in apartheid-era townships. *Kwaito* music, a favorite of young South Africans, mixes African melodies and lyrics with hip-hop and reggae. *Kwela* incorporates the distinctive penny whistle.

South Africans are also devoted to the fine arts, and major cities host performances of the symphony, ballet, and opera. Each ethnic group produces its own style of folk art, including basketry, beadwork, and soapstone carvings. South African authors of all races have dealt with controversial political and social themes, often writing in exile during the apartheid years. Nadine Gordimer, André Brink, and Es'kia Mphahlele are some of the most respected.

Holidays

South Africa's official holidays are New Year's Day, Easter (including Good Friday and Family Day on Monday), Human Rights Day (21 Mar.), Freedom Day (27 Apr.), Workers' Day (1 May), Youth Day (16 June), National Women's Day (9 Aug.), Heritage Day (24 Sept.), Reconciliation Day (16 Dec.), Christmas, and Day of Goodwill (26 Dec.). Each religion also observes other important holidays.

SOCIETY

Government

South Africa's president (currently Jacob Zuma) is chief of state and head of government. The president is chosen by an elected parliament on the basis of the majority party's recommendation. Parliament has two houses: a 90-member Council of Provinces and a 400-seat National Assembly. All members of Parliament are elected to five-year terms. Members of the National Assembly are elected directly by popular vote, while Council members are chosen by the nine provincial parliaments. The president serves a maximum of two five-year terms. Citizens are eligible to vote at age 18.

Economy

South Africa is the richest country in Africa, and whites generally enjoy a high standard of living. The relatively high per capita gross domestic product (GDP) reflects a wide gap between whites and others in terms of income because whites usually earn far more than Africans. Mixed-race people earn closer to the average national GDP.

More than half of all export earnings come from minerals and metals. South Africa is one of the world's largest producers of platinum and gold. It also exports diamonds, chrome, and coal. Low gold prices on world markets have sometimes slowed that sector's growth. The industrial base is large and diversified, and new investment is allowing for growth. Wine and tourism are fast-growing industries. To improve market conditions and raise capital, the government has privatized (in whole or in part) some of the largest state enterprises. Strong growth and investment will be necessary to reduce high unemployment and poverty. The currency is the *rand* (ZAR).

Transportation and Communications

South Africa has the best-developed infrastructure in Africa. Railroads carry freight and passengers throughout the country. Air routes link major cities. South Africa's road system is well maintained and extensive. Traffic moves on the left side of the road. Many urban commuters take minibuses *combies* to work.

The nation's advanced telecommunications system is also considered the best on the continent. Television is widely available, and four channels broadcast in English, Afrikaans, and the Nguni and Sotho language groups. One cable channel offers a mix of U.S. and British programming. Radio broadcasts are available in all of South Africa's languages.

Education

As in other areas of South African life, apartheid-era segregation in public education has been dismantled. However, it will take some time before all children receive the same opportunities within a uniform system. Many schools are without adequate texts or supplies. Schooling is compulsory to age 15. Africans receive instruction in their native language until the seventh grade, and then they usually are taught in English after that. Afrikaans is also offered as a

language of instruction. In urban areas, an increasing number of primary schools teach in English. There are 19 universities in South Africa.

Health

Medical services are socialized, but some private sector participation is also incorporated. Public hospitals and clinics are open to all citizens. Free care is given to all pregnant women and to children younger than age six. Disease and malnutrition are more common among blacks. South Africa is experiencing a devastating HIV/AIDS epidemic; about 18 percent of adults aged 15 to 49 are infected. Tuberculosis, malaria, and cholera are also serious problems. About half of South Africa's population lacks basic sanitation; almost one-third lacks access to adequate supplies of potable water.

AT A GLANCE

Contact Information

Embassy of South Africa, 3051 Massachusetts Avenue NW, Washington, DC 20008; phone (202) 232-4400; web site www.saembassy.org. South Africa Tourism, 500 Fifth Avenue, 20th Floor, Suite 2040, New York, NY 10110; phone (800) 593-1318 or (212) 730-2929; web site www.southafrica.net.

POPULATION & AREA

Population	49,109,107 (rank=25)
Area, sq. mi.	470,693 (rank=26)
Area, sq. km.	1,219,090

DEVELOPMENT DATA

Human Dev. Index* rank	110 of 182 countries
Gender inequality rank	82 of 155 countries
Real GDP per capita	\$10,300
Adult literacy rate	87% (male); 86% (female)
Infant mortality rate	44 per 1,000 births
Life expectancy	50 (male); 48 (female)

*UN Development Programme, Human Development Report 2010 (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010).

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