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SEHLABATHEBE NATIONAL PARK

# The Plateau of the Shield

Above: One of Sehlabathebe National Park's stunning sandstone formations. Below: An old stone dwelling crouches underneath one of the massive, eroded stones.

Admiring the view from the Sehlabathebe National Park, it quickly becomes clear why Lesotho is known as the Kingdom in the Sky. With an average elevation of 2400m, Sehlabathebe offers panoramic views, incomparable natural beauty and astonishing solitude. The only problem is that it is very difficult to get there. In fact, it is virtually inaccessible. Geoff and Elise Earnshaw, driving their Toyota Prado, braved the route to Sehlabathebe – and were left in awe

**Just getting to** Sehlabathebe National Park – also known as the Plateau of the Shield – is half the fun. Perched atop the Drakensberg escarpment, Sehlabathebe is a sub-alpine wilderness that, while exceptionally beautiful and tranquil, is very difficult to get to.

The easiest way to reach the park is by aircraft, but since this isn't an option for most people, the best alternative is a 4x4.

If you don't have an appropriate vehicle, no need to worry, there is another way to get to Sehlabathebe. Visitors without a 4x4 can park their cars at the Bushman's Neck Hotel in South Africa, pass through customs at the nearby SAPS complex and follow a 10km hiking trail up the Bushman's Neck Ravine. The trail should take a person of average fitness around five hours to complete.

But for those lucky enough to have a 4x4,

the roads to Sehlabathebe offer an exciting challenge and come highly recommended.

Three route options are available to 4x4 travellers. The first course starts at the Sani Pass. From the Sani Top – the highest pub in Africa – you can travel to Linokeng (past Mokhotlong), through Matabeng and up the Matabeng Pass until you reach the park gate.

The second option – and probably the easiest – starts at Kokstad and passes through Matatiele, Qachas Nek on the Lesotho border, Mpiti and Moshebi.

My wife and I settled for the third option, though. We turned off at Matatiele and took a less travelled road through the Ramatseliso Gate. This 46km track to the border is very rocky, but not too treacherous and took us only about 100 minutes to traverse. Once atop the escarpment, there is a 33km road from the border to the park gate.



Inside the gate (regardless of the route that you choose) there is a 7km track that will lead you to the lodge. This road is quite rocky, but very scenic. It took us about 45 minutes from end to end.

The lodge – originally built for the prime minister of Lesotho – is basic but clean and comfortable. Overall, it is quaint and inviting, and has an old-world, colonial feel. We shared the lodge with two couples from Zastron and spent many pleasant hours exchanging stories around the fire.

The lodge's amenities are excellent. It is fitted with gas, lights, fridges and water heating systems. The kitchen and dining room are fully equipped. All you need to bring along is food and towels – the rest is supplied.



The one thing that you do need to keep in mind when visiting Sehlabathebe, though, is the highly changeable weather conditions.

The park is between 2200 and 2700m above sea level, and this means the weather can change quickly and dramatically. My advice is to come prepared for any eventuality.

When the weather permits, however, Sehlabathebe offers a wide variety of activities. The park is a wonderful playground for hikers and bird watchers and boasts a wide variety of birds, animals and plants. In addition, it gives visitors a chance to view ancient cave dwellings and rock paintings, fish for trout in the lakes below the Tsoelikane waterfall, explore the surroundings on horseback and see Lesotho's famous spiral aloe.

Sehlabathebe National Park is definitely worth a visit, especially if you have a 4x4 that you want to put through its paces.

Elise and I enjoyed our trip tremendously and will be returning to Sehlabathebe very soon.



Below: Thousands of years of erosion has created this striking sandstone cave.

Above: The beautiful Tsoelikane Waterfall is a very popular hiking destination in the area. Below: Many ancient rock paintings depicting people and animals can be found in the region.



Above: This sign near the Ramatseliso Gate required a bit of deciphering. Right: The lodge in Sehlabathebe was originally built for Lesotho's prime minister.

## TRAVEL PLANNER

**SEHLABATHEBE NATIONAL PARK:**  
Situated atop the Drakensberg escarpment, Sehlabathebe is the only official national park in Lesotho. Roads into the park are very bad and passable only in a 4x4. The park's lodge offers electricity, warm water and a fully fitted kitchen.  
**COST:** Entry into the park is free.  
Accommodation in the lodge is R150 per

person per night and camping costs R50.  
**BAD:** Due to the altitude the weather can be unpredictable.  
**GOOD:** Lots of birds, ancient cave dwellings, rock paintings, lake fishing and Lesotho's famous spiral aloe.  
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