

Free State

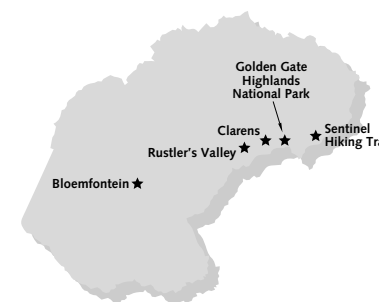


Nelson Mandela once said that when he visited the Free State, he felt nothing could shut him in, and his thoughts could roam as far as the horizons. If you spend enough time in this land of golden light and pistachio grasses you'll start to catch his drift. This is a place where farmers in floppy hats and overalls drive rusty *baackies* full of sheep over bumpy roads; where giant fields of sunflowers languish by brightly painted Sotho houses. Golden Gate Highlands National Park is heavenly in late afternoon, while artsy Clarens is surprisingly hip for a middle-of-nowhere town, bursting with eclectic galleries and charming guesthouses.

It's true that Free State doesn't hold any trump cards when it comes to South Africa's not-to-be-missed attractions. But if you travel to dig beneath the surface, to immerse yourself in the ideologies and idiosyncrasies of places you visit, we'd encourage you to linger. A journey through the Free State can be a mind-opening experience. In this staunchly Afrikaans region it often seems the clock stopped ticking in the early 1990s. The line between the colours is stark, and dreams of an Afrikaner Arcadia live on. It's not the easiest pill to swallow, but to grasp this country's complex social dynamics it's imperative to see the picture from every angle. And while there's no question that Free State has a long way to travel on the road to racial harmony, progress is happening. Today, even in the smallest rural villages, the once-impenetrable barrier between black and white is beginning to break apart.

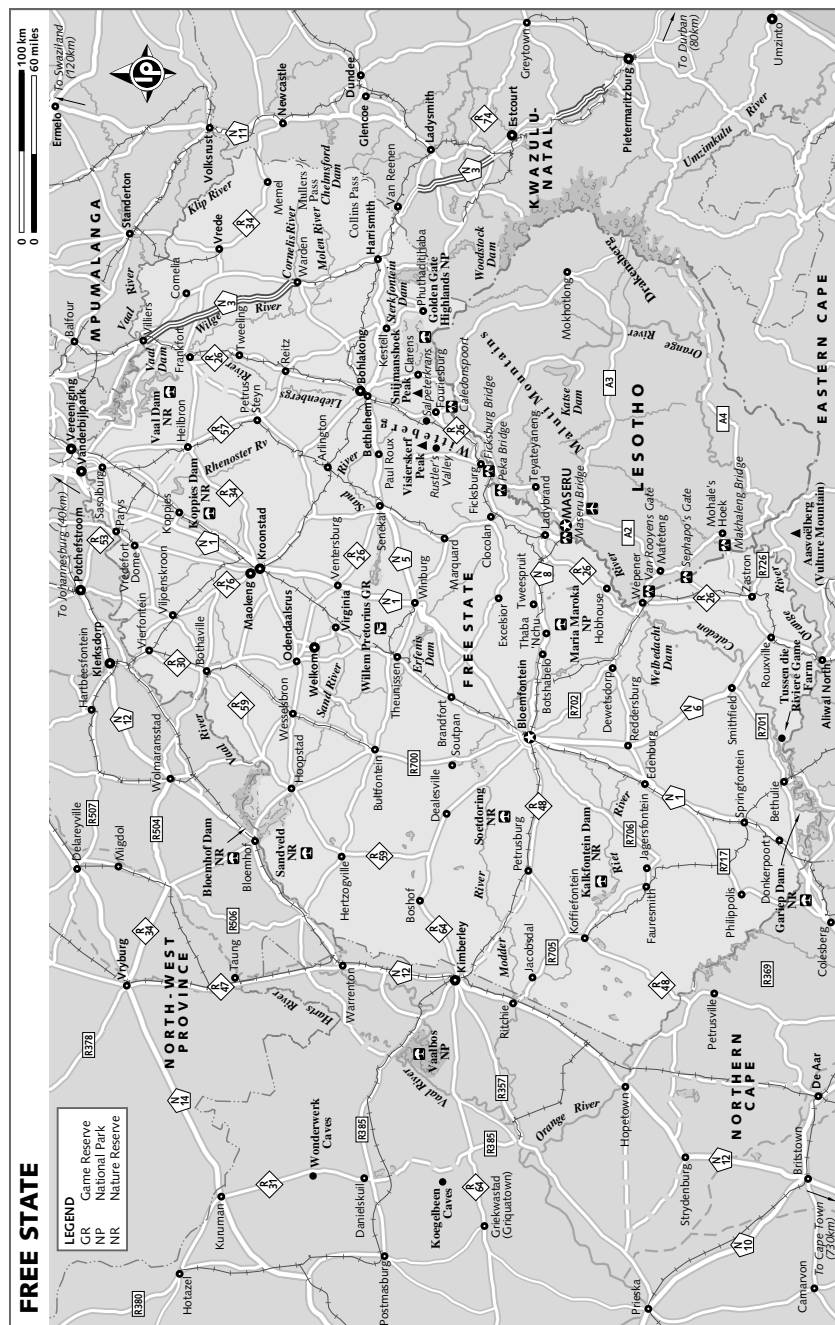
HIGHLIGHTS

- Shopping for art in surprisingly sophisticated little **Clarens** (p387)
- Visiting **Golden Gate Highlands National Park** (p385) at sunset when the pistachio grasslands and sandstone formations glow golden
- Traversing the **Sentinel Hiking Trail** (p386), which leads up over the dizzying heights of the Drakensberg plateau
- Following the Tolkein trail in **Bloemfontein** (p375), a town full of college kids and judicial bigwigs that's also home to funky old pubs
- Hanging in beautiful **Rustlers Valley** (p389), where you'll find stunning views and two ultra-cool guesthouses



■ POPULATION: 2.7 MILLION

■ AREA: 129,480 SQ KM



HISTORY

The Free State's borders reflect the prominent role it has played in the power struggles of South Africa's history. To the east, across the Caledon River, is Lesotho, where forbidding mountains combined with the strategic warfare of the Sotho king Moshoeshoe the Great halted the tide of Boer expansion. To the southeast, however, Free State spills across the river as the mountains dwindle into flat grassland – this area proved harder for Moshoeshoe to defend.

The Voortrekkers established their first settlement near modern-day Thaba 'Nchu, and various embryonic republics then came and went, in addition to a period of British sovereignty after the 1899–1902 Anglo-Boer War.

The 'Orange Free State' was created in 1854, with Bloemfontein as the capital. The 'Orange' part of the province's title was dropped in 1994, following South Africa's first democratic elections.

CLIMATE

The Free State experiences a dry, sunny climate from June to August, with showers, thunderstorms and hail between October and April. Snow falls quite thickly each winter around the foothills of the Maluti Mountains, near the Golden Gate Highlands National Park in the eastern highlands.

LANGUAGE

Sotho is the dominant tongue in the Free State, followed by Afrikaans, Xhosa, Tswana, Zulu and English (just 2% of the Free State's inhabitants speak English as a first language).

GETTING THERE & AROUND

Bloemfontein is well served by public transport, with trains and buses stopping here on their way to and from Johannesburg (Jo'burg) and Pretoria and southern parts of the country. Likewise, it's easy to get to and from Lesotho – taxis and buses leave Thaba 'Nchu and Bloemfontein daily for the border.

Elsewhere in the province, you'll need to take your own vehicle, or rely on the sporadic minibus taxis.

BLOEMFONTEIN

☎ 051 / pop 480,499

Whether you're coming from Jo'burg or Cape Town, Kimberly or Lesotho, Bloemfontein's location, smack in the middle of the country at the intersection of a few major highways, makes it an ideal place to crash. Easy and safe to navigate, there are sophisticated restaurants and more than a few great pubs to drown the memory of a hard day's drive with icy pints of lager.

As the provincial capital of the Free State and South Africa's judicial capital, tourism in Bloem (as the locals call it) is generally business oriented. But it's also a university town, so when school's in session, nightlife is raging. There's no real reason to go out of your way to visit Bloem, although it has a few interesting sights if you are in the neighbourhood. It's definitely more of a jumping off point than anything else. However, if you've got some time to kill within city limits this relaxed place boasts a few interesting attractions, including one of South Africa's most striking galleries.

HISTORY

Originally called Manguang (Place of Cheetahs) by the Tswana people who inhabited it, today the Afrikaans name translates to 'Fountain of Flowers.' Bloemfontein became the capital of the newly minted Orange Free State in 1854. At the time it was a struggling frontier village in constant danger of being wiped out by the soldiers of Sotho king Moshoeshoe. By the end of Johannes Brand's 25-year term as president, however, Bloem had grown into a wealthy city with imposing buildings and rail links to the coast.

ORIENTATION

There are endless sprawling suburbs in Bloemfontein but the central area is laid out on a grid and is easy to navigate. Hoffman Sq is the centre of the downtown area. Botshabelo, on the Thaba 'Nchu road, is one of the largest townships in the country.

INFORMATION

Internet Access

Connix Internet (☎ 051-448 5648; Loch Logan Waterfront; per hr R30) A flash place in the Waterfront shopping centre, with fast connections and prices to match.

LORD OF BLOEMFONTEIN

JRR Tolkien, author of *Lord of the Rings*, was born in Bloemfontein in 1892. Although he moved to England when he was five, his recollection of the Bloemfontein district as 'hot, dry and barren' is considered a sign by Bloem's residents that his years here inspired him to create the legendary kingdom of Mordor. Or perhaps, as some graffiti in a Cape Town pub once said, 'Tolkien was just another Bloemfontein boy on acid'...

Regardless, if you're interested in learning more about the local Tolkien scene, head over to the **Hobbit Boutique Hotel** (p379), home of the local Tolkien literary society. They can direct you towards the house where Tolkien was born, the cathedral he was baptised in, and to the grave where his father is buried. Although the town had high hopes of cashing in on the *Lord of the Rings* movie craze a few years ago (a provincial tourism official was once quoted as saying 'Tolkien is Bloemfontein's best kept secret') its 'Tolkien Trail' hasn't quite taken flight as quickly as town promoters had hoped. Still, if you're in the area, and fascinated with all things JRR Tolkien, it is definitely worth strolling over to the Hobbit for a cosy fireside chat – ask to speak with manager Jake Uys.

Money

There are banks with ATMs in the town centre and handy ATMs at the tourist centre and at the Waterfront.

ABSA In the Pick 'n' Pay Centre opposite the western side of the Mimosa Mall (with bureau de change).

Amex (Mimosa Mall)

Post

Main post office (Groenendal St) Near Hoffman Sq.

Tourist Information

Free State Department of Environmental Affairs & Tourism (☎ 051-405 4062; fax 051-403 3778; PO Box 264, Bloemfontein 9300) For information about national parks and reserves in the area, phone or write.

Information centre (☎ 051-405 8489; www.bloemfontein.co.za; 60 Park Rd; ☎ 8am-4.15pm Mon-Fri; 8am-noon Sat) Pick up a walking-tour map here and a *Bloemfontein Art Route* brochure for galleries, museums and handicraft outlets.

Tourist centre (Park Rd) Long-distance buses arrive here, and there are ticket counters for all major bus companies.

SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES

Surprisingly, Bloem has quite a few noteworthy attractions.

Oliewenhuis Art Museum

One of South Africa's most striking art galleries, the **Oliewenhuis Art Museum** (☎ 051-447 9609; oliewen@nasmus.co.za; 16 Harry Smith St; admission by donation; ☎ 8am-5pm Mon-Fri, 10am-5pm Sat, 1-5pm Sun) is housed in an exquisite 1935 mansion. The gallery's name comes from the wild olive trees growing in the beautiful gardens that surround it. It holds a collection of

works by South African artists, including Thomas Baines. There's also a strong contemporary collection.

Many an hour can be spent lazing at one of the tables in the museum's café, the Terrace at Oliewenhuis, which has breakfast and lunch mains for R20 to R35 (it's closed on Monday).

National Women's Memorial & Anglo-Boer War Museum

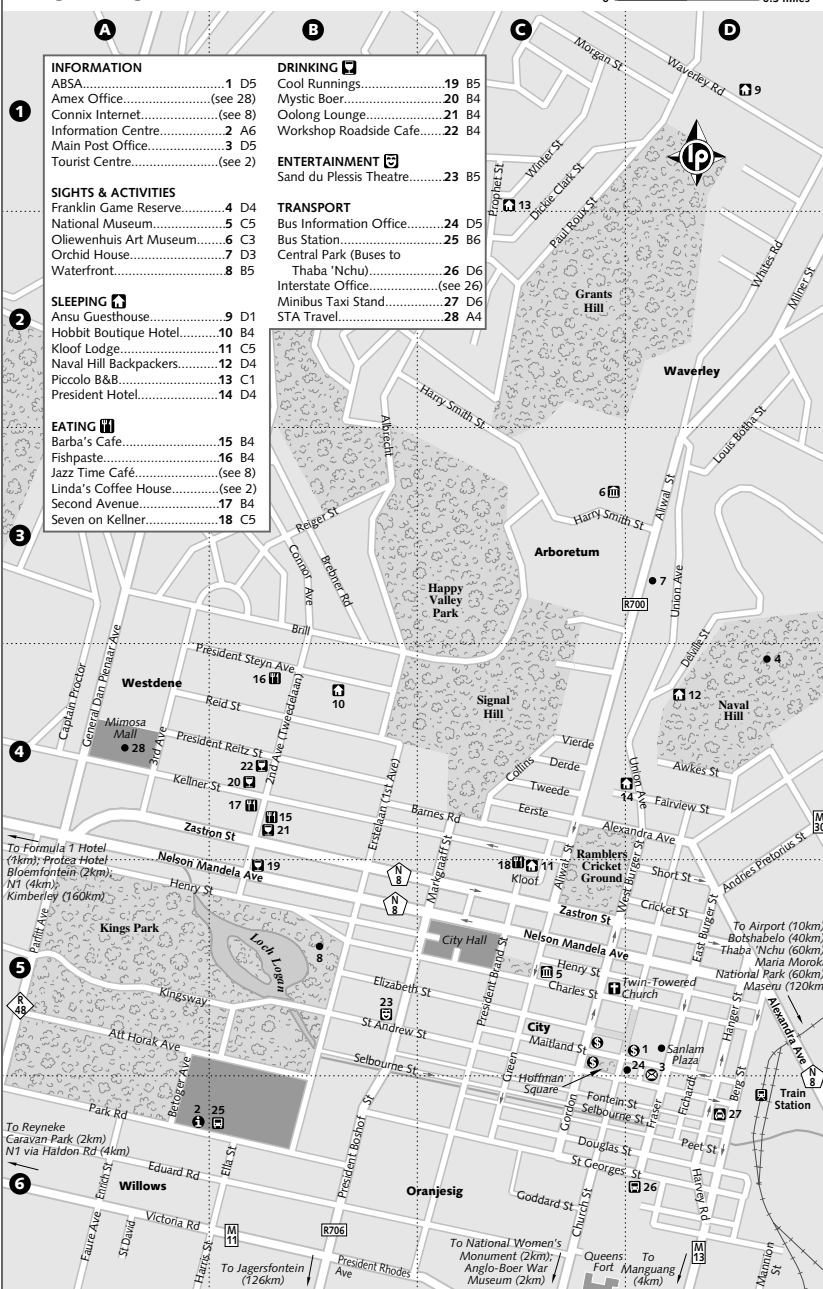
Commemorating the 26,000 women and children who died in British concentration camps during the 1899–1902 Anglo-Boer War (see p378), the National Women's Memorial is the creation of well-known South African sculptor Anton von Wouw. The sandstone obelisk depicts a bearded Afrikaner, setting off on his pony to fight the British, bidding a last farewell to his wife and baby, who are to perish in one of the camps. It's a powerful image and one still buried in the psyche of many Afrikaners.

The memorial is in front of the **Anglo-Boer War Museum** (☎ 051-447 3447; Monument Rd; admission R5; ☎ 8am-4.30pm Mon-Fri, 10am-5pm Sat, 2-5pm Sun), which has some interesting displays, including photos from concentration camps set up not only in South Africa, but also in Bermuda, India and Portugal.

Manguang

You can hang out in the *shebeens* (unlicensed bars) or eat a simple meal at a local dive with people you're unlikely to meet on a trip to the Waterfront or the Mystic Boer (p379) in the vibrant Manguang township.

BLOEMFONTEIN



CONCENTRATION CAMPS

The British have the dubious honour of inventing the concentration camp, during the 1899–1902 Anglo-Boer War. Guerrilla bands of Afrikaners, helped by farmers, were reportedly harassing the British troops. In response the British took on a 'scorched earth' policy in the countryside, burning the farms of suspected combatants and shipping their wives and children off to concentration camps. As a consequence, by the end of the war 26,000 Afrikaner women and children had died of disease and malnutrition, which accounted for more than 70% of the total Afrikaner losses in the war. There were also concentration camps created for blacks and of the 80,000 interned, an estimated 14,000 people died.

Tours are informal and usually run for as long as you want. They cost about R200, with discounts for groups. Book at the Information Centre (p376).

Naval Hill

This was the site of the British naval-gun emplacements during the Anglo-Boer War. On the eastern side of the hill is a large white horse, a landmark for British cavalry during the war.

There are good views from the top of the hill, where you'll also find the **Franklin Game Reserve** (☎ 051-405 8124; admission free; ☞ 8am-5pm). Walking is permitted, so get out of the car and hit the trail for a good old-fashioned bush romp.

Also in the neighbourhood, **Orchid House** (☎ 051-405 8488; admission free; Union Ave; ☞ 10am-6pm Mon-Fri, 10am-5pm Sat & Sun) is a glasshouse with a beautiful collection of flowers. The park outside is an ideal place to take the kids for a picnic.

Waterfront

Yes, Bloemfontein has a Waterfront, modelled on Cape Town's. Although it's a bit tacky, Bloem's Waterfront is a lot more pleasant than the huge shopping malls that are popping up on the outskirts of so many South African cities. It's outside, set on a small body of water, and the atmosphere is relaxed – it's a great place for kids.

National Museum

A great re-creation of a 19th-century street, complete with sound effects, is the most interesting display at this **museum** (☎ 051-447 9609; 36 Aliwal St; admission R5; ☞ 8am-5pm Mon-Fri, 10am-5pm Sat, noon-5.30pm Sun). There is also a shop and a café here.

SLEEPING

The information centre (p376) has a full list of accommodation and makes bookings. Note rooms can be scarce on cricket- and rugby-match weekends.

Budget

Bloem doesn't have the best selection when it comes to shoestring options.

Reyneke Caravan Park (☎ 051-523 3888; fax 523 3887; Petrusburg Rd; camp sites R70, s/d chalets R180/220; ☞) Two kilometres out of town, this well-organised park has a swimming pool, a trampoline and a basketball court. It's a good place for kids.

Naval Hill Backpackers (☎ 051-430 7266; www.navalhillbackpackers.co.za; Delville St; dm/d R80/180; ☞) Pretty much the only 'traditional' backpackers in the Free State, this is an old water-pumping station (1902) that has been converted into an über-cool looking hostel with funky industrial décor. Unfortunately, we've had numerous reports from travellers of management giving the distinct impression that guests were intruding on a private party. Places can switch owners faster than guidebooks are published, however, so if the personnel change this has serious kick-ass backpacker potential.

Midrange

Bloem is chock-full of small guesthouses.

Ansu Guesthouse (☎ 051-436 4654; www.ansuguesthouse.com; 80 Waverley Rd; s/d R220/260; ☞) The three modern rooms here are light and airy, done up in earthy colours and open onto a leafy garden area where there's a gazebo by the pool.

Piccolo B&B (☎ 051-436 1483; kay@imaginet.co.za; 4 Prophet St; r from R250; ☞) A perfect choice for families or those travelling in small groups, it offers an African-themed unit that can sleep four, a self-catering flat with three single beds and a spacious cottage with a spare living area. There's also a normal double. The garden is filled with all sorts of birds.

Formula 1 Hotel (☎ 051-444 3523; cnr Nelson Mandela Ave & Kriega St; r R299; ☞) This cut-price hotel west of Kings Park is a bit claustrophobic but cheap and spotless. Rooms sleep up to three people (in a double bed and a bunk).

Kloof Lodge (☎ 051-447 7603; kloof@global.co.za; 7 Kellner St; s/d R300/400; ☞) This rambling place is nothing fancy, but perfectly comfortable for a night. There's a cosy bar and lounge and you'll find a very good restaurant, Seven on Kellner (right), just next door. Prices include a full breakfast (think eggs, sausages etc). Ask for the luxury room – it's huge, boasts cooler furniture and costs the same.

Top End

Bloem has a few luxurious options.

President Hotel (☎ 051-430 1111; 1 Union Ave; s/d R485/560; ☞) The President is very modern and shiny looking with lots of gold trim and offers all the amenities of a well-managed business-class hotel – slightly bland but comfortable rooms with soft sheets and fluffy towels, TVs with more than one channel and the requisite pub and restaurant.

Hobbit Boutique Hotel (☎ 051-447 0663; www.hobbit.co.za; 19 President Steyn Ave; s/d with breakfast R600/800; ☞) This charming old-world hotel, comprising two 1921 houses, is the winner of numerous awards for service and décor. The cottage-style bedrooms have sprigged counterpanes and painted bathtubs, plus a couple of teddy bears apiece. There's a great view from the outdoor patio. The reading room has a chess table and the local Tolkein society meets here to talk about all things JRR. The hotel is popular with visiting dignitaries, but also perfect for literati and romantic types.

Protea Hotel Bloemfontein (☎ 051-444 4321; bloemf@iafrica.com; 202 Nelson Mandela Ave, Brandweg; s/d R645/960; ☞) This place is smart and glossy and part of the Protea Luxury Collection. The upscale all-white rooms are Asian-inspired minimalist and quite calming to sleep in. You can order drinks on the terrace by the long, skinny pool in summer or check out the year-round onsite gourmet restaurant and cocktail bar with a fireplace.

EATING

Many of the hotels and guesthouses do their own meals in the evenings, but there are a few good restaurants in Bloem, along with

the usual fast-food joints in the Waterfront and Mimosa Mall shopping centres.

Fishpaste (☎ 051-430 2662; 31 President Steyn Ave; mains R30-50; ☞) lunch & dinner Mon-Fri, dinner Sat) Fishpaste is a rare thing – a Free State restaurant with a trendy, funky interior and an interesting modern fusion menu. Choose from blackened Canadian salmon with green-bean salad, Vietnamese prawn rolls or rolled pork fillet. The fashionably black-clad staff are super-friendly, the bar is buzzy and the prices extremely reasonable.

Seven on Kellner (☎ 051-447 7928; 7 Kellner St; mains R50-80; ☞) lunch & dinner) An eclectic restaurant with a very trendy lounge vibe, this place does everything from wood-fired pizzas to many Middle Eastern and Indian inspired delights. The food is delicious. Afterwards chill in an ultra-cool chair on the patio with a bottle of bubbly picked from the extensive wine list.

Barba's Café (☎ 051-430 2542; 16 2nd Ave; ☞) breakfast, lunch & dinner Mon-Sat) Barba's is recommended by locals and rightly so: it's one of Bloem's hidden secrets. The Greek specialities are delicious. It has mezze (R140 for two), a large cocktail list and live music on Wednesday.

Jazz Time Café (☎ 051-430 5727; Waterfront; mains R20-50; ☞) lunch & dinner) This hip eatery has an interesting menu featuring zippy *zivas* – Yemeni-style layered dough wrapped around a variety of fillings (such as Cajun chicken, feta and avocado), folded and toasted. There are cocktails and jazz recitals in the evenings – unusual in the rock-orientated Bloemfontein music scene.

Second Avenue (☎ 051-448 3088; 2nd Ave; mains R20-40; ☞) lunch & dinner) It's kind of tacky looking, with galvanized steel-light fixtures and slate tiles, but this student diner-cum-bar gets rocking when university is in session and crowds pile in to socialise and tackle the 'tower of beer'.

Linda's Coffee House (☎ 051-430 6436; Park Rd; mains R17-32; ☞) 24hr) Near the information desk at the Tourist Centre, Linda's does good breakfasts (and coffee) for those early bus arrivals. If everywhere else is closed, it's a great option.

DRINKING & ENTERTAINMENT

As a university town, Bloemfontein has a good range of places to drink, party and, increasingly, listen to live music. The corners

of 2nd Ave and Kellner St, and Zastron St and Nelson Mandela Ave bustle with revellers in the evening and compete for the nightlife scene with the Waterfront.

Mystic Boer (☎ 051-430 2206; 84 Kellner St) Bloem's most popular pub and live music venue provides an eccentric twist to Afrikaner culture, with psychedelic pictures of long-bearded Boers on the walls. One 'big' band plays per month, plus there are regular gigs by unsigned rock and (sometimes) hip-hop outfits. The bar specialises in tequila, while pizza and burgers provide the fuel.

Oolong Lounge (☎ 051-448 7244; 16a 2nd Ave; ☎ Tue-Sat) Bloem's latest hotspot, this ultra hip lounge attracts a trendy young crowd. The super-mod interior is slick and shiny with black leather chairs and space for dancing. Light meals are served.

Cool Runnings (☎ 051-430 7364; 163 Nelson Mandela Ave; admission R5-10) This is part of a nationwide chain of Caribbean-themed bar-restaurants, with DJs and live bands at weekends and karaoke on Sundays. Forget about reggae – the music on offer is the ubiquitous rock and blues.

Workshop Roadside Cafe (☎ 051-447 2761; cnr 2nd Ave & President Reitz St) A large, raucous pub with loud music, a big-screen TV and a reputation as a bit of a bikers' hangout, it's a good place to sink a few beers.

Sand du Plessis Theatre (☎ 051-552 4071; cnr Markgraaff & St Andrews Sts) The local paper lists music, ballet, drama and opera performances held at this striking modern building in the town centre.

There are cinemas in the Mimosa Mall and at the Waterfront.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Air

Bloemfontein airport is 10km from the city centre and there is no transport to/from the airport, except private taxi.

SAAirlink (☎ 051-433 3225) and **Nationwide Airlines** (☎ 011 344 7200; www.flynationwide.co.za) connect Bloemfontein with Cape Town (R1200) and Jo'burg (R1000) among other destinations.

STA Travel (☎ 051-444 6062; laudep@statravel.co.za; Mimosa Mall) can organise flights.

Bus

Long-distance buses leave from the tourist centre in Park Rd. **Translux** (☎ 051-408 4888;

www.translux.co.za) runs daily buses to Durban (R150, nine hours), Jo'burg/Pretoria (R150, five hours), Port Elizabeth (R200, nine hours), East London (R180, seven hours), Knysna (R270, 12 hours) and Cape Town (R320, 10 hours).

Greyhound (☎ 051-447 1558; www.greyhound.co.za) runs daily buses to Durban (R230, 9½ hours), Pretoria (R200, seven hours), Cape Town (R360, 12 hours) and Port Elizabeth (R230, 10 hours).

A bus called **Interstate** (☎ 051-448 4951) runs from the information centre in Bloem to Thaba 'Nchu every hour (R10). There's also a shuttle bus to Bloem run by the hotels in Thaba 'Nchu daily except Tuesday and Thursday. The ticket price of R50 includes vouchers for drinks, food and a game on the casino tables. Book both at the tourist centre.

Big Sky Buses (www.bigskycoaches.co.za) run from the Central Park shopping centre in St Georges St to Maseru in Lesotho (R35, three hours) at 6.10am and 2.10pm Monday to Friday.

Minibus Taxi

Most minibus taxis leave from opposite the train station for Maseru, Lesotho (R45, three hours), Kimberley (R50, four hours) and Jo'burg (R80, six hours). There's usually at least one bus daily, but times vary.

Train

The **Shosholozha Meyl** (☎ 0860-008 888; www.spoornet.co.za) **Trans Oranje** runs weekly via Bloemfontein between Cape Town (1st/2nd/economy class R390/265/155) and Durban (R270/185/110). The **Algoa** runs five times weekly via Bloemfontein between Jo'burg (1st/2nd/economy R145/100/55, about seven hours) and Port Elizabeth (R235/160/95). The **Amatola** runs five times weekly via Bloemfontein on the run between Jo'burg (1st/2nd/economy R145/100/55) and East London (R210/145/85). The **Diamond Express** runs three times weekly between Bloemfontein and Jo'burg (1st/2nd/economy R145/100/90).

GETTING AROUND

Bloem's public-bus system, Interstate, provides infrequent services that finish early in the evening. The best place for schedules and information is the **Interstate office**

(☎ 051-448 4951) in the Central Park shopping centre in St Georges St. There is also a **bus information office** (Hoffman Sq).

If you're after a private taxi, try **President Taxis** (☎ 051-522 3399).

AROUND BLOEMFONTEIN

Thaba 'Nchu

☎ 051 / pop 38,693

Thaba 'Nchu (ta-'baan-chu, meaning 'Black Mountain') is a small Tswana town east of Bloemfontein. The surrounding area was once a small piece of the scattered Bophuthatswana homeland, and this too was known as Thaba 'Nchu. As with most homelands, a Sun casino was built here.

Unless you're a compulsive gambler, it's hard to see any reason to stop here. If you'd like to try your luck, then hit the N8 to the **Protea Thaba 'Nchu** (☎ 051-871 4200; fax 051-873 2161; www.proteahotels.com; r R800; ☎).

About 10km from Thaba 'Nchu, it has well-appointed rooms, restaurants, lounges and the casino. There are often discounts.

There's a free shuttle that operates between town and the Protea Thaba 'Nchu hotel – call the hotel for a schedule.

Maria Moroka National Park

This small **national park** (☎ 051-873 2427) in a pretty, hilly location outside Thaba 'Nchu protects zebras, elands and red hartebeests among other species. You can hike through the park on a couple of different trails or stay the night in one of the self-catering chalets (R90 per person). The rangers offer guided wildlife drives. You'll need your own vehicle to get there. Enquire at the entrance about accommodation bookings.

NORTHERN FREE STATE

The towns sprinkled around this maize-farming region are decidedly untouristy, usually comprising little more than small rural enclaves in nowhere places. Unless you're really interested in mining or yearning to spend a few days on a farm, there's not much to attract travellers to the northern Free State.

Gold was discovered around here in April 1938 and a rush started immediately. Now the Free State goldfields produce more than a third of the country's output.

WINBURG & AROUND

It's difficult to imagine that the sleepy little town of Winburg, founded in 1842, was once the first capital of a Boer republic in the present-day Free State. It was in the dining room of Ford's Hotel (now a large shop on the town square) that the leaders of five Voortrekker groups finally agreed to form a government under the leadership of Piet Retief. Unless you're a serious South African history buff, however, there is little reason to visit Winburg.

Off the N1, about 20km north of Winburg and 70km south of Kroonstad, is the **Willem Pretorius Game Reserve** (☎ 057-651 4003; admission R20; ☎ 7am-6.30pm). Split in two by the Sand River and Allemanskraal Dam, the reserve encompasses two different ecosystems: grassy plains with large herds of eland, blesbok, springbok, black wildebeest and zebras; and, further north, the bushy mountain region with baboons, mountain reedbuck and duiker. White rhino and buffalo are equally at home on either side of the reserve.

A range of accommodation is available at **Aldam Resort** (☎ 057-652 2200; fax 057-652 0014; camp sites from R60; 2-bed chalets R380, 4-bed units R500), much of which has magnificent views over Allemanskraal Dam. Rates increase on weekends and in high season. The resort is near the dam and well sign-posted in the reserve. Fishing is popular here (you need to get a Free State angling licence from the resort) and there are hiking trails.

WELKOM

☎ 057 / pop 457,612

If you're interested in South Africa's gold mining industry (Welkom is at the centre of the Goldfields area) or you are a serious birder (there are more than 200 species present), Welkom is worth a stop. Otherwise don't bother going out of the way to visit this rather soulless, modern town. It is something of a showpiece, however, as it was completely planned – there are no traffic lights, which is touted as proof of a masterpiece of town planning.

Orientation

Stateway is Welkom's main street. Not far from Stateway is Mooi St, with most of the central shopping area in its horseshoe curve.

Information

First National Bank (Elizabeth St)

Main post office (Bok St)

Welkom information centre (☎ 057-352 9244;

☎ 8am-4.30pm Mon-Fri) In the clock tower at the Civic Centre on Stateway.

Sights & Activities

Tours of the **mines** in Welkom can be arranged by contacting the information centre in advance – they are informal affairs that go out when there's enough interest. Prices vary. The huge mine-evaporation pans are home to a wide variety of **birdlife**, including the greater and lesser flamingo and the grey-headed gull. More than 200 species of bird have been seen around the city, and this number accounts for 90% of all waterfowl species found in South Africa! Try Flamingo Pan, off the Rte 30 just west of the town, or Witpan at Oppenheimer Park, about 4km southeast of the town centre on the continuation of Stateway. Two other bird-watching spots are Theronia and Flamingo Lakes.

Sleeping & Eating

Stanville Inn (☎ 057-353 2452; 180 Tempest Rd; s/d R175/220; 🍷) Stanville has spick-and-span budget rooms with TV and telephone. It's opposite Dagbreek Primary School.

Welkom Inn (☎ 057-357 3361; w-inn@global.co.za; cnr Stateway & Tempest Rd; s/d R300/345; 🍷 📺) This place is three-star rated and is a few blocks east of the centre. Neat rooms have TV and telephone. There's an attached O'Hagan's bar and restaurant. The food is decent and the bar can get lively.

Saddles Steak Ranch (☎ 057-353 4248; Stateway; mains R40-50) Opposite the Sanlam Plaza, Saddles is another southern African chain. The atmosphere is a bit cheesy Western, but the place does decent steaks among other hearty fare.

Getting There & Away

Several **Intercape** (☎ 0861-287 287; www.intercape.co.za) services stop daily in town on their way to destinations including Cape Town (R380, 15 hours), Bloemfontein (R120, two hours) and Jo'burg (R185, four hours).

The minibus taxis in the supermarket car park in town are mainly for the local area but you may find long-distance taxis here for Jo'burg (R55, four hours) or Cape Town (R130, 14 hours) in the early morning.

KROONSTAD

☎ 056 / pop 106,064

Kroonstad, on the N1, is a typical large, rural Free State town and makes a good base for exploring nearby Koppies Dam Nature Reserve, an anglers paradise. The town dates back to 1855, and the Voortrekker Sarel Celliers was one of the first settlers here. Kroonstad may have been named after the Voortrekker's horse, Kroon!

There's Internet access at **Compuwire** (☎ 056-213 4368; cnr Orange & President Sts; per hr R20; ☎ 7.30am-5pm Mon-Fri, 7.30am-1pm Sat) in the centre of town.

Sights & Activities

The **old market building** (cnr Mark & Murray Sts), opposite the pretty magistrate's building, is a national monument. You can see the **Celliers statue** in the grounds of the impressive **NG Moederkerk** (Mother Church; Cross St). Celliers is standing on a gun carriage making the Blood River vow.

Kroon Park (admission R20) offers swimming and other water activities (below).

The **national tournament of Jukskei** (an Afrikaner game in which clubs are tossed at a peg) is held annually in Kroonstad.

The 4000-hectare **Koppies Dam Nature Reserve** (☎ 056-72 2521; ☎ 7am-9pm), located about 70km northeast of Kroonstad on the Rhenoster River, is popular with anglers. Yellowfish, barbell, mudfish and carp are all abundantly available. Windsurfing, sailing, and water-skiing are also very popular here – although you'll have to have your own equipment and transport, or make friends.

Sleeping & Eating

Kroon Park (☎ 056-213 1942; fax 213 1941; camp sites R50, 2-/4-person chalets R200/250; 🍷) With a couple of swimming pools, river tubing, boat rides and some beautiful camping spots on the river's edge, this place feels more like a resort than a municipal park. Book ahead during holiday seasons. It's well signposted from town.

Arcadia Guesthouse (☎ 056-212 8280; arcadia@gcs.co.za; s/d with breakfast R280/350) This smart guesthouse with classically-themed rooms is in the middle of a large garden scattered with faux-Greek statues. Dinner can be arranged (R60). It's well signposted in town.

Angelo's Trattoria (☎ 056-213 2833; 38 Reitz St; mains R30-65; ☎ lunch & dinner) Pizza with biltong

(dried, salted meat), fettuccini with steak – the menu here is all about Italy merging with the African bush. The dining area is cosy. Look for it opposite the mosque.

Getting There & Away

There are daily **Translux** (☎ 408 4888; www.translux.co.za) services to Jo'burg/Pretoria (R150, four hours), East London (R220, 10 hours) and Paarl (R240, 14 hours). **Intercape** (☎ 0861-287 287; www.intercape.co.za) and **Greyhound** (☎ 477 1558; www.greyhound.co.za) also travel this route. All buses stop out on the highway at the Shell Ultra City.

The minibus taxi rank is opposite the train station. There are occasional buses to Jo'burg (R45, four hours) – ask around the taxi ranks to see if they're running. Otherwise minibus service is pretty much a local affair.

PARYS & VREDEFORT DOME

☎ 056 / pop 75,464

Parys, right on the border with the North-West Province, is handy for visiting Vredefort Dome, an area of hills created by the impact of a gigantic meteorite 2000 million years ago. Vredefort is the oldest and largest meteorite impact site on earth, measuring around 200km in diameter. In 2005 the dome was named a Unesco World Heritage Site, South Africa's sixth, which was more than a big deal for the little town.

The area around Parys is quite beautiful, consisting of valleys, ravines and cliffs, covered in lush flora and home to a variety of different plants, animals and birds. Activities on offer include abseiling and white-water rafting. Although tourism is still in its infancy here, the place is slowly but surely taking off.

The **Parys Info Centre** (☎ 056-817 2986; www.parysinfo.co.za; 62b Bree St; ☎ 8am-5pm Mon-Fri, 8am-1pm Sat) does bookings for the many adventure trails and camping sites in the Dome area.

This engaging area is best reached by private transport.

Sleeping & Eating

Suikerbos (☎ 018-294 3857; www.suikerbos.co.za; camp sites R60, dm R60, hut from R120, chalet from R400) Bookings are essential if you want to stay at this very popular farm-reserve where herds of impala graze peacefully between the

buildings. The chalets are airy and modern, with giant bathtubs and loads of light. You can also choose from simpler, and cheaper huts, or dorms in the main lodge. The reserve has a swimming hole and plenty of hiking and mountain biking trails.

Waterfront Guesthouse (☎ 083-452 6504; devils@global.co.za; 22 Grewar Ave; s/d with breakfast R400/600; 🍷 📺 📺) The hospitality is warm at this upscale guesthouse that prides itself on being gay friendly. It's located down by the Vaal River, and rooms come with shiny bedspreads and mosquito netting. All sorts of activities can be arranged, including fishing and rafting trips, at the onsite info centre. Lunch and dinner are prepared upon request.

Mirro's (☎ 056-817 7191; 62 Bree St; mains R20-50; ☎ lunch & dinner Tue-Sun) This little restaurant does half-decent pizza, along with steaks and burgers.

EASTERN HIGHLANDS

Bumped up against the wild and rugged mountains that guard Lesotho's border, this is the most beautiful portion of the Free State and well worth exploring. Long popular with weekenders from surrounding areas, the provincial government is now trying hard to get the word out to international visitors.

Encompassing an area roughly from Rte 26 and Rte 49 east of Bethlehem to Harrismith, the region boasts sandstone monoliths towering above undulating golden fields, hippy hideaways, fabulous country retreats and South Africa's newest art destination, trendy little Clarens.

HARRISMITH

☎ 058 / pop 35,178

The quiet rural centre of Harrismith features picturesque old buildings and a grassy square. It is well situated for exploring the northern Drakensberg range, and there are opportunities to partake in informal and untouristy township tours.

The **Harrismith Marketing Bureau** (☎ 058-622 3525; Pretoria St; ☎ 9am-5pm Mon-Fri) in the back of the town hall can help with any local information.

There's Internet access at the **Koppie Shop** (Stuart St; per min R0.60; ☎ 9am-5pm Mon-Fri).

Sights & Activities

The marketing bureau arranges tours (R25) of Intabazwe, a township on a hill outside town. It can also arrange accommodation (around R150 with half board) there. It's inspiring to see a small, conservative town promoting this sort of thing, and the peaceful township is small enough for visitors to get a good feel for township life. Unusually for Free State, both Zulu and Sotho people live here.

The extensive **botanic gardens** (☎ 058-623 1078; admission R5; ☞ 7am-7pm Sep-May, 7.30am-7pm Jun-Aug), about 5km south of town at the foot of the Platberg, have many plant species from the Drakensberg. Walking on the slopes of the Platberg you may see a few antelope species – there was once a nature reserve here.

Sleeping & Eating

Harrismith International Backpackers (☎ 058-623 0007; jmantz@oldmutualpfa.com; 44 Piet Retief St; camp sites/dm R30/55) There is a garden and braai (barbecue) facilities in this comfy B&B-cum-backpackers. The staff are able to ar-

range pick-ups from major bus stops in the area.

Sahara Lodge (☎ 058-622 2151; fax 058-622 2152; 100 McKechnie St; s/d from R225/320; ☞) Under renovation (and new management) when we stopped by, this place is a lot more charming inside than it looks from the exterior. Rooms are in self-contained chalet-like structures. The executive suites are very plush, with sleek African furnishings. Look for it behind the BP petrol station at the N5 junction.

Pringles Country Inn & Restaurant (☎ 058-623 0255; louise@pringles-wimpy.co.za; Warden St; s/d R240/360; ☞) There is nothing 'country' about this place, but it will do for a night. A new-ish motel right off the highway, it has smart rooms. Its restaurant (mains R25 to R50) is the best dining option in town, serving old-fashioned stodge such as bangers and mash, and lamb hotpot. Look for Pringles at the Bergview 1-stop petrol station.

Harrismith Inn (☎ 058-622 1011; harrismithinn@dorea.co.za; McKechnie St; s/d R320/420; ☞ ☞ ☞ ☞) Clean and modern, rooms are spacious with tile baths, TV and two double beds.

The hotel has its own restaurant, which does a R45 breakfast buffet and à la carte choices (R20 to R40) at dinner. It's closed for lunch. Look for the hotel behind the Spur.

Getting There & Away

Translux (☎ 058-408 4888; www.translux.co.za) runs daily services to Durban (R150, four hours), Bloemfontein (R145, five hours), Jo'burg (R150, four hours) and Cape Town (R370, 17 hours), which stop at the Harrismith Country Lodge in McKechnie St.

The *Trans Oranje* train stops here daily between Durban (1st/2nd/economy class R135/95/55, eight hours) and Cape Town (R525/355/210, over 24 hours). See p380 for details.

AROUND HARRISMITH

The small **Sterkfontein Dam Nature Reserve** (☎ 058-622 3520; admission per vehicle R25; ☞ 7.30am-10pm) is in a beautiful area of the Drakensberg foothills, 23km south of Harrismith on the Oliviershoek Pass road into KwaZulu-Natal. Looking out over this expansive dam with its backdrop of rugged peaks feels like gazing across an inland sea. At one of the many viewpoints there's a vulture 'restaurant', but there's no set day or time for feeding. Sunset cruises on the dam's lake are available.

Camp sites (R40) and rustic four-bed chalets (R200) are both available.

GOLDEN GATE HIGHLANDS NATIONAL PARK

Right before the darkness erases the remaining flecks of colour from the sky, something magical happens in **Golden Gate Highlands National Park** (☎ 058-255 0012; fax 058-255 0022; admission per vehicle R60). The jagged sandstone outcroppings fronting the foothills of the wild maroon-hued Maluti Mountains glow golden in the dying light; lemon yellow rays silhouette a lone kudu standing still in a sea of mint green grasses before the sky explodes in a fiery collision of purple and red.

The park might not boast any of the Big Five, but don't miss spending a sunset here if you're in the area. We'd suggest arriving around an hour before the sun is due to set (ask the locals when this happens as it changes throughout the year), this way

you'll have plenty of time to find the perfect spot. The scenery from the western approach is pretty tempting – loads of blazing sandstone and rusting old cars – but only stop here for a few moments, then head out into the open and take the turn-off for the Basatho Cultural Village. You'll now be off the main road and in the middle of the grasslands. Pull out a picnic basket, a bottle of good South African red and a bit of biltong (beef jerky) and toast the end of another perfect African day. You can pick up great picnic supplies at Mezzlauna Deli (p388) in Clarens.

There are quite a few animals in the park, including grey rheboks, blesboks, elands, oribis, Burchell's zebras, jackals, baboons and numerous bird species, including the rare bearded and Cape vulture as well as the endangered bald ibis. The park is popular with hikers on long treks, but there are also shorter walking trails. Winters (June to August) in the park can be very cold, with frost and snow; summers (January to March) are mild but rain falls at this time and cold snaps are possible: if you're out hiking, take warm clothing. Buy entry permits at the park reception.

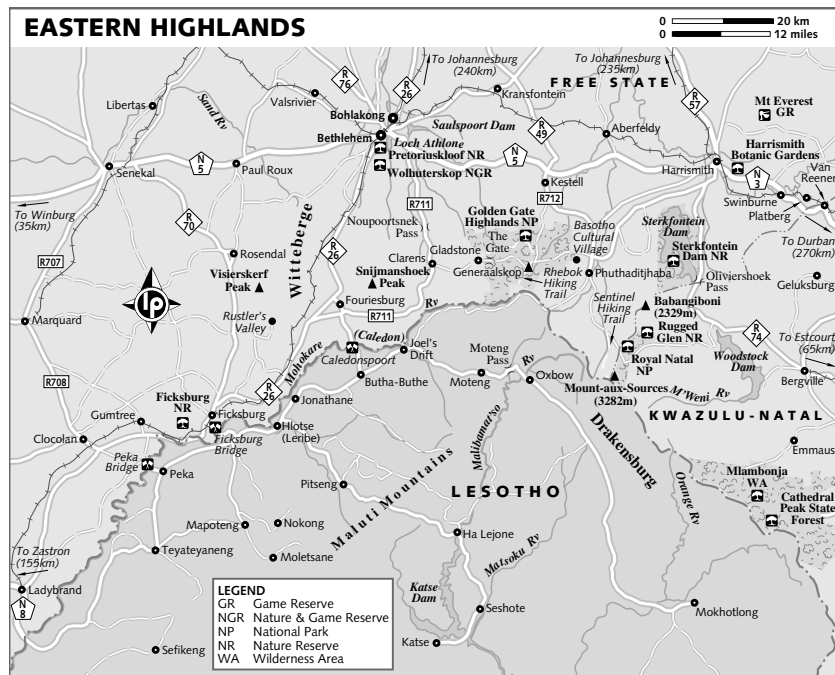
Sights & Activities

RHEBOK HIKING TRAIL

This well-maintained, circular, 33km trail (R70 per person) is a two-day trek and offers a great way to see the park. The trail takes its name from the grey rhebok, a species of antelope that prefers exposed mountain plateaus, and you will probably see them while you're hiking. The trail starts at the Glen Reenen Rest Camp, located next to the park reception, and on the second day the track climbs up to a viewpoint on the side of Generaalskop (2732m), the highest point in the park, from where Mont-aux-Sources and the Malutis can be seen. The return trail to Glen Reenen passes Langtoon Dam.

There are some steep sections so hikers need to be reasonably fit. The trail is limited to 18 people and must be booked through the **South African National (SAN) Parks Board** (☎ 012-428 9111; www.sanparks.org).

There are also shorter hiking trails in the foothills, ranging from 45 minutes to half a day. Ask at the park reception for details.



BASOTHO CULTURAL VILLAGE

Within the park you'll find the small **Basotho Cultural Village** (☎ 058-721 0300; basotho@dorea.co.za; tours R20; ☞ 8am-4.30pm Mon-Fri, 8am-5pm Sat & Sun). It's essentially an open-air museum, peopled by actors depicting various aspects of traditional Sotho life. There's a curio shop and an outdoor restaurant, open for lunch and dinner, serving a few Sotho dishes. Try the homemade ginger beer.

A two-hour guided hiking trail (R25 per person) explores medicinal and other plants, and a rock-art site. You can stay in two-person self-catering rondavels (R400), but bring your own food.

Although this is a friendly place, with a lot of good information on traditional customs and culture, it is also essentially artificial and idealised. To see how most Sotho live, take a township tour in nearby Harrismith (p384), or cross the border into Lesotho (p550).

Sleeping

Glen Reenen Rest Camp (☎ 011-428 9111; 2-person camp sites R95, d chalets R380) Popular with South Africans on holiday, this place has well-maintained chalets and campsites by the river. A shop sells basic supplies.

Protea Hotel Golden Gate (☎ 058-255 1000; www.proteahotels.com/goldengate; s/d around R360/500, d chalets R470, buffet dinner R80; 📶) The park's only 'proper' hotel is in a fabulous locale (up against red sandstone cliffs), even if it looks a bit outdated from the exterior. It boasts wonderful terrace views and has a snug coffee shop made for relaxing.

Clarens (opposite) is another sleeping option, located just 17km away.

Getting There & Away

Rte 712 is a sealed road that runs into the park from Clarens, south of Bethlehem. Minibus taxis run between Bethlehem and Harrismith, via Clarens and Phuthaditjhaba, and go right through the park. Alternatively, with your own vehicle you can approach from Harrismith on Rte 74 and then Rte 712.

PHUTHADITJHABA & AROUND

☎ 058 / pop 88,906

Phuthaditjhaba, about 50km southwest of Harrismith, was the capital of the apartheid homeland of QwaQwa (master the 'click'

pronunciation and you'll win friends). QwaQwa (meaning 'Whiter than White') was named after the sandstone hill that dominates the area. It was created in the early 1980s as a homeland for southern Sotho people. The dumping of 200,000 people on a tiny patch of agriculturally unviable land, remote from employment centres, was one of the more obscene acts of apartheid. Today, the highlands around Phuthaditjhaba are great hiking country.

The **QwaQwa information centre** (☎ 058-713 0012; fax 713 4342; ☞ 8am-4.30pm Mon-Fri, 8am-9pm Sat & Sun), on the road through town, has hiking information.

The most famous of the hiking trails in the area is the 10km **Sentinel Hiking Trail**, which commences in Free State and ends in KwaZulu-Natal. The trail starts at the Sentinel car park, on the way up to Witie-shoek Mountain Resort Hotel at an altitude of 2540m, and runs for 4km to the top of the Drakensberg plateau, where the average height is 3000m. It's about a two-hour ascent for those of medium fitness. At one point you have to use a chain ladder that runs up over a set of sheer rocks. Those who find the ladder frightening can take the route up The Gully, which emerges at Beacon Buttress (although some hikers argue this route is even more hair-raising!). The reward for the steep ascent is majestic mountain scenery and the opportunity to climb Mont-aux-Sources (3282m).

There are several rudimentary cafés and hotels in Phuthaditjhaba – ask the information centre for recommendations as they are constantly changing.

Witsieshoek Mountain Resort Hotel (☎ 058-713 6361; fax 058 713 5274; s/d R200/300, dinner R65) about 15km south of Phuthaditjhaba, is reputedly South Africa's highest-altitude hotel and is a good source for local hiking information. The accommodation, however, is pretty basic.

Minibus taxis from Phuthaditjhaba to Harrismith (R10) and Bethlehem (R35), usually via Clarens, run daily.

If you're driving into Phuthaditjhaba from the north, you'll eventually get through the urban sprawl to the tourist information centre (look for a cluster of tall thatched roofs on the left). If you're heading for the Witsieshoek Mountain Resort Hotel or the Sentinel Hiking Trail, turn left at the

traffic lights at the information centre and keep going.

CLARENS

☎ 058

The jewel of the Free State, Clarens is one of those places you stumble upon expecting little then find yourself talking about long after you depart. Set to a backdrop of craggy limestone rocks, hunter green hills, spun gold fields and the magnificent Maluti Mountains, this town of whitewashed buildings and quite shady streets is the perfect bucolic country retreat.

Surprisingly sophisticated, it's a bit of an art destination – with 18 galleries focusing on quality works by well-known South African artists. Also home to charming guesthouses (ranging from very simple to extraordinarily posh), gourmet restaurants, eclectic cafés and a myriad of adventure activities, it's easy to see why international celebrities like Prince Harry and Brad Pitt have chosen Clarens to shack up in.

Orientation & Information

Clarens sits at the junction of Rte 712 and Rte 711 (a back road between Bethlehem and Fouriesburg) and is 17km west of Golden Gate Highlands National Park. Main St is the main road through town, and most businesses are clustered around the big grassy town square. The place is small and easily negotiated by foot.

The **Clarens Tourism Centre** (☎ 058-256 1542; www.clarens tourism.co.za; ☞ 8am-5pm Mon-Thu, 8am-6pm Fri, 8am-4pm Sat & Sun) has info on the area.

Mountain Odyssey Tourism (☎ 058-256 1173; www.infoclarens.com; Main St; per min R1.50) offers pricey Internet access.

Sights & Activities

With tidy tree-lined streets and a myriad of boutiques and galleries to peruse, Clarens is made for aimless wandering. The quality of the art varies from gallery to gallery, but there are plenty of them to choose from, so if you don't like what you see at the first place, try the shop down the street. Keep an eye out for pieces by Pieter van der Westhuizen or Hanneljie de Clerq, two well-respected South African artists. Favourite shops include the **Art & Wine Gallery on Main** (☎ 058-256 1298; 279 Main St; ☞ 9am-5pm), offering a fantastic selection of regional wines

and paintings and the **Bibliophile** (☎ 058-256 1692; 313 Church St; ☞ 9am-4.30pm), a quaint bookshop with a huge range of titles and jazz CDs.

When you tire of browsing, head over to **Mountain Odyssey Tourism** (☎ 058-256 1173; www.infoclarens.com; Main St; ☞ 8am-6pm), a one-stop shop for all things outdoors. Popular excursions include quad-biking (R250, one hour) through Golden Gate Highlands National Park, white-water rafting (R380, three hours) on the dam-fed Ash River (some rapids rate as high as Class IV) and horse riding (R175, two hours) through the mountains. Tell them if you're an experienced rider and you'll have a chance to gallop.

There are also plenty of opportunities for fly-fishing on dams and rivers around here, with rainbow and brown trout usually on offer. **Paul Ellis** (☎ 072-174 4380) is a recommended local guide who knows the area well. Call to arrange a trip or for info on obtaining permits and renting rods. Prices vary.

Sleeping

Clarens boasts 120 different guesthouses, so if none of these options sound appealing stop by the tourism centre for a list of plenty more.

Clarens Inn (☎ 058-256 1119; schwim@netactive.co.za; 93 Van Reenan St; r per person R100) Run by the same friendly folks that operate Mountain Odyssey Tourism, this is the town's best budget option. Open-fire pits and a tranquil locale against the mountain at the bottom of Van Reenan St (look for it after the Le Roux turn-off) are bonuses.

Bokpoort Holiday Farm & Game Ranch (☎ 058-256 1181; www.bokpoort.co.za; s/d with breakfast R190/380) This farmstay is backpacker-friendly and another great spot between Clarens and Golden Gate. Horse riding is available and there are mountain-bike trails (but you must have your own bike). To get here, travel 5km from Clarens on the Golden Gate road, then turn off at the big Bokpoort Holiday Farm sign and drive another 3km along the dirt road.

Lake Clarens Guesthouse (☎ 058-256 1436; weyer@intercom.co.za; r per person with breakfast from R220) Run by the enigmatic 'Big, Bad Bruce' (a real man about town), this impeccably maintained guesthouse offers buckets of

intimate country charm. Fresh flowers, giant bathtubs, heated floors and silky soft linens are all highlights of luxuriously appointed bedrooms. There are fabulous views from the terrace, where you can enjoy a hearty morning breakfast or a cup of late afternoon tea.

If you've always dreamed of sleeping in the same bed as Brad Pitt (as our friend Shari had), ask to stay in 'his' room that he uses when he's in town – an experience Shari highly recommends. Jane Seymour's cottage is also an option, as is Prince Harry's light and airy corner nook.

Patcham Place (☎ 058-256 1017; patcham@netactive.co.za; 262 Church St; r per person with breakfast R225) A good central option, this B&B has airy rooms with giant windows and fab views from the balconies. The bathrooms are spotless, the beds firm and there is even a small kitchen. A friendly host and a welcome tumbler of port are nice touches.

Castle in Clarens (☎ 082-468 0642; www.castleindarens.com; r per person from R350) This place has the romantic fairy-tale market cornered – you get to sleep in an old picture-book castle. The tower rooms are self-catering affairs done up with thick curtains and frescos on the walls. To reach the castle from Clarens head towards Golden Gate Highlands National Park and take the Bokpoort turn-off then follow the signs.

Eating

Clarens has great places to indulge your stomach.

Clementines Restaurant (☎ 058-256 1616; 315 Church St; mains R45-60; ☎ lunch & dinner Tue-Sun) The food at this souped-up country kitchen tastes just as good as it looks on the gourmet international menu, featuring everything from creamy pastas to tender ostrich fillets. Professional service, intimate ambiance, a lengthy wine list and veggie options are more perks. Make sure to check out the daily specials on the wall.

Café Moulin (☎ 082-690 1382; Main St; mains R15-45; ☎ breakfast & lunch) A quaint local haunt, the outdoor patio is lovely and rustic and overlooks the square. The menu is creative and healthy – including everything from crepes with tender steak and asparagus, to regional specialities varying by season.

Mezzaluna Deli (☎ 058-256 1692; 313 Church St; dishes from R5; ☎ breakfast & lunch) Next to the

Bibliophile bookstore (p387), this tiny take-away sells the most delicious cheeses and olives. It also does coffee and pasta salads.

Getting There & Away

Clarens is best reached by private transport. There are a few minibus taxis to Bethlehem and Harrismith from Clarens – although frequencies and costs weren't exactly clear. There is no set departure point, head towards the suburbs on the outskirts of town and ask around.

BETHEHEM

☎ 058 / pop 86,905

The main commercial centre of the eastern Free State, Bethlehem has little to interest travellers beyond a night's rest. The Voortrekkers established the town on a farmsite called Pretoriuskloof in 1864. Not content with the biblical name they chose for their town, the devout newcomers also gave the name Jordaan to the river that flows through it.

The **tourist information office** (☎ 058-303 5732; info@bethlehem.org.za; cnr Muller & Roux Sts; ☎ 7.30am-1pm & 2-4pm Mon-Fri) is in the civic centre.

Just outside of town is the **Wolhuterskop Game & Nature Reserve** (☎ 058-303 5732), which has several species of antelope. There are horse trails and a one-night hiking route here. Book through the tourist information office in town.

The best accommodation option in town is the acclaimed **Fisant & Bokmakierie Guesthouse** (☎ 058-303 7144; fisant@isat.co.za; 8-10 Thoi Oosthuys St; s/d with breakfast R290/370; ☎). The owners are very friendly and each room is tastefully furnished. Dinner (R70) can be arranged.

The rooms are far from flash at the **Park Hotel** (☎ 058-303 5191; 23 Muller St; r from R240; ☎), but everything is clean and bathrooms are spacious. The place has a quaint polished-wood bar that's a good spot to watch a rugby match with the Afrikaner locals. The restaurant is the best-value place to eat in Bethlehem – a three-course meal goes for R65.

African themes are prevalent at class **La Croché** (☎ 058-303 9229; www.lacroche.co.za; cnr Kerk & Theron Sts; s/d R290/380). Rooms have an eclectic air with a mix of modern furniture and traditional wooden pieces; ask for one with a Jacuzzi. La Croché is next door to

O'Hagans, which is handy for breakfast or evening drinks.

Linger over a few pints at **Nix Pub** (☎ 058-303 0722; Kerk St), an old-fashioned joint with a divey country vibe. You'll find hearty dishes like chicken livers, bangers and mash, and lasagne on the small menu.

Getting There & Away

Translux (☎ 058-408 4888; www.translux.co.za) runs daily to Durban (R160, five hours) and Cape Town (R360, 16 hours), as does **Greyhound** (☎ 058-477 1558; www.greyhound.co.za) at similar fares. Translux buses stop at Top Grill in Church St, and Greyhound stops at Wimpy on the corner of Muller and Hospital Sts.

The minibus-taxi ranks are around the corner of Cambridge and Gholf Sts, north of the town centre on the way to the train station. There are minibus taxis to Harrismith via Clarens. These usually cost somewhere in the vicinity of R20, although prices vary as much as frequencies – you'll have to ask around.

The *Trans Oranje* train stops here on its weekly run between Durban (1st/2nd/economy class R180/120/70, 10 hours) and Cape Town (R500/340/210). See p380 for details.

FOURIESBURG

☎ 058

Entirely surrounded by wild, craggy mountains, Fouriesburg occupies a magnificent spot just 12km north of the Caledonspoor border post to Lesotho. Two nearby peaks, Snijmanshoek and Visierskerf, are the highest in Free State; and you'll also find the largest sandstone overhang in the southern hemisphere, **Salpeterkrans**, around here – look for the signs off Rte 26, it's just north-west of town. An eerie example of wind erosion, the place is still sacred and used by local tribes for ancestral worship.

Fouriesburg was a stronghold in the Anglo-Boer War and was pronounced the capital of Free State after the British occupied Bethlehem. There are a number of fine old **sandstone buildings** in the town including President Steyn's house.

About 11km outside Fouriesburg, and just 800m from the Lesotho border, **Camelroc Guest Farm** (☎ 058-223 0368; www.camelroc.co.za; dm R60, r per person R190, chalets from R390) sits in a spectacular location against a camel-shaped

sandstone outcropping with fine views over the Maluti Mountains. It's a great rustic retreat, offering a variety of sleeping options. Dorms are in a simple hikers hut, while chalets are fully equipped and range in size and style. Good hiking and 4WD trails are nearby.

RUSTLER'S VALLEY

☎ 051

To journey into the wildly beautiful heart of nowhere, ditch the pavement and let your subconscious guide you down rich brown dusty byways to random oases scattered amid this rough-and-ready countryside. The remote valley, located off Rte 26 between Fouriesburg and Ficksburg, is the vanguard of the 'dare to be different' movement in the new South Africa.

Although famous **Rustler's Valley Retreat** (☎ 051-933 3939; www.rustlers.co.za; dm R65, r from R250; ☎), the country's original hippy hang-out, was closed (and looking rather spooky) when we stopped by, a caretaker told us this was only a temporary break caused by the chaos of the long New Years celebration. When it's open, the place attracts a diverse crowd: yuppies from Jo'burg, remnant hippies from all parts of the continent and 'ideas' people from all over the globe. The signs clearly state the retreat is an 'experimental area', meaning you'll find people in various states of altered mental status (a Clarens resident once described the resort as 'the kind of place you go to have a special mushroom omelette. You know?')

If you grow tired of contemplating your navel, you can swim or fish in the many dams, walk up onto sandstone escarpments, climb imposing Nyakalesoba (Witchdoctor's Eye) or ride a horse into the labyrinthine *dongas* (see p569) all around. There's an onsite restaurant and digs in either dorms or individually painted cottages with private bathrooms. The once-legendary music festival no longer happens here, but it's been replaced with a calendar of smaller events, most notably the **One World** festival at Easter. There are also a variety of workshops on offer, from drumming to permaculture or creativity. Children are very welcome.

Rustler's Valley Retreat does pick-ups (R20) from Ficksburg. If you have your own vehicle, the main turn-off is about 25km

south of Fouriesburg on Rte 26 to Ficksburg. Follow the signposts down a dirt road that crosses a train line. From the turn-off it is about 12km to Rustler's, 13km to Franshoek.

In the same area, just a few kilometres in the other direction, is the **Franshoek Mountain Lodge** (☎ 051-933 2828; www.franshoek.co.za; r per person R255; 📶 📺), which is perfect if you're looking for a completely opposite experience. A working farm with comfortable sandstone cottages in its garden, a terrific outdoor swimming pool, Zulu steam room and great views of the valley, it emits a lovely country charm. The place has a Thai chef, who doubles as a masseuse, so there's lots of Thai cuisine at dinner and you can sign up for a Thai cooking course or try a traditional massage. Ask for the honeymoon suite with its open fire. Not only is it huge (sleeping four in two separate rooms), it doesn't cost any extra. A polo package, with full board, thoroughbred ponies and instruction from a pro, costs R1500 per day.

FICKSBURG

☎ 051

Nestled against the purple majesty of the Maluti Mountains on the banks of the Caledon River, Ficksburg is particularly spectacular in winter when the mountains are topped with whipped-cream dollops of snow. The village sports some fine **sandstone buildings**; keep an eye out for the town hall and the post office.

The mild summers and cold winters make this area perfect for growing stone fruits, and Ficksburg is the centre of the Free State's cherry industry. There's a **Cherry Festival** (www.cherryfestival.co.za) in November but September and October are the best times to see the trees in bloom. The **Cherry Trail** is a tourist route around the district; there are several orchards to visit, various art and craft shops and guest farms. Get a map from the **tourist office** (☎ 051-933 2130; 🕒 9am-4.30pm Mon-Fri) in the Caltex office on the main road, or visit the Cherry Festival website.

The African-themed rooms at the **Highlands Hotel Hoogland** (☎ 051-933 2214; fax 051-933 2750; 37 Voortrekker St; s/d R180/300) are another option, offering all the creature comforts and the movie channel on TV. There's an

onsite restaurant and secure parking. Look for it next to the town hall.

The **Bella Rosa Guesthouse** (☎ 051-933 2623; bellarosa@telkomsa.net; 21 Bloem St; r per person R250; 📶) is in a charming, Victorian sandstone building. The 12 guest rooms are decked out with fine antiques and modern artwork. Dinner can be arranged, and there's a cosy pub with a well-stocked wine cellar.

Bottling Co Pub & Restaurant (☎ 051-933 2404; 57 Piet Retief St; mains R35-50; 🕒 lunch & dinner Mon-Sat) has an imaginative menu with a couple of veggie options and is a top little spot for an evening beer.

SOUTHERN FREE STATE

Southern Free State typifies much of the province: it's dusty, harsh and dry. It's pretty much an area that you'll just transit through, although some of the small old towns such as Philippolis are worth a look.

LADYBRAND

☎ 051 / pop 17,263

Archaeologists and anthropologists should pay Ladybrand a visit. The small town on Rte 26, around 16km from Lesotho's capital, Maseru, has handsome **sandstone buildings** (check out the town hall and the old magistrate's court). Archaeological displays, including local rock paintings, instruments and tools dating back to the Stone Age are on display at the rather fascinating little **Catharina Brand Museum** (☎ 051-924 5131; malotiinfo@xsinet.co.za; 17 Church St; 🕒 8am-5pm Mon-Fri). You will find the tourist office here too. The museum also explains how ashes taken from an ancient hearth in the **Rose Cottage Cave**, not far from Ladybrand, prove humans first inhabited the area more than 55,000 years ago!

The helpful tourism staff can assist with info about visiting the 300-plus San rock-art sites in caves in the area around the town – they can also help organise guides. While you're at the museum grab a permit to visit one of the quaintest churches you are ever likely to see. **Modderpoort Cave Church**, built in 1869, is nestled under a huge boulder in scenic surroundings about 12km

from Ladybrand, and well worth the short drive.

Sleeping & Eating

Fort Amity (☎ 051-924 3131; 18 van Riebeeck St; s/d with breakfast from R300/450; 📶 📺) Ask for a room with a private balcony at this very smart B&B. The manicured garden is a nice place to relax, or take in a game of tennis on the resident court.

Casa Romana B&B (☎ 051-924 1627; casaromana@xsinet.co.za; 34 Piet Retief St; s/d with breakfast R300/510; 📶) The rooms in this smart pink-painted B&B have TV, minibar and a safe.

Cranberry Cottage (☎ 051-924 2290; www.cranberrycottage.co.za; 37 Beeton St; s/d from R310/500; 📶) Perhaps the most interesting B&B in town, Cranberry offers luxury accommodation in a main guesthouse, as well as good-value self-catering rooms in the disused train station 800m away. The three-course fusion-style dinner (R95) is recommended. There's a grapevine-covered patio for summer teatime and a log fireplace in the cosy dining room for winter meals.

Impero Romana restaurant (11 Church St; mains R20-60; 🕒 lunch & dinner Mon-Sat) This place, run by Casa Romana, offers sophisticated food and good service.

Getting There & Away

Minibus taxis can be found near the church on Piet Retief St. Most run to nearby areas, including Ficksburg (R20, one hour). For a wider choice of destinations, take a minibus taxi to Maseru Bridge (R5), at the Lesotho border, and find a long-distance taxi in the big minibus-taxi rank there.

ZASTRON

☎ 051 / 12,464

Zastron, on Rte 726, is a quiet little town set in the hills. The distant Aasvoëlberg (Vulture Mountain) and Maluti Mountains form a splendid backdrop. With Lesotho forming an arc around this section of Free State, Zastron has long-established trading links with the mountain kingdom. There are some **San paintings** in the area; the best are in the Seekoei and Hoffman Caves.

The three-star **Maluti Hotel** (☎ 051-673 2112; 22 Hoefe St; s/d with breakfast R185/320) has the Horse & Hound pub on site. The nearest town in Lesotho is Mohale's Hoek, 55km away on a dirt road.

TUSSEN DIE RIVIERE GAME FARM

☎ 051

This 23,000-hectare **reserve** (☎ 051-754 0026; admission per vehicle R20; 🕒 dawn-dusk Sep-Apr) has more animals than any other reserve in Free State. These are mostly small mammals and various species of antelope, but if you look hard enough you may also see white rhinos and hippos. The country is varied, with plains and ridges and a long frontage on the Senqu (Orange) River. For keen hikers, there are the 7km Middelpunt, the 12km Klipstapel and the 16km Senqu (Orange) River hiking trails; water must be carried on all of them.

There are camp sites (R50), and inexpensive two-person chalets (R150), which feature shared bathrooms. You pay for both at the entrance gate to the reserve. No food is available, but there is a communal sitting- and dining-room complex with a bar, kitchen and a large braai (barbecue) area. The entrance gate is located on the road between Bethulie and Smithfield (Rte 701), about 15km from Bethulie, or 65km east of the N1. There is no public transport.

GARIEP DAM NATURE RESERVE

☎ 051

West of Tussen Die Riviere, on the Senqu (Orange) River, this 13,000-hectare **reserve** (☎ 051-754 0026; admission per vehicle R20) surrounds one of the largest dams in South Africa (it used to be called the Hendrik Verwoerd Dam). Be warned, the dam is described in brochures as 'a mecca for motorboats'. During February each year the world's longest **inland rubber-duck race** takes place on the Gariep Dam. The event, which runs over a distance of 500km, is completed in one day.

Choose from three chalets (R250) or a variety of camp sites (R45) in the reserve. There's quite a lot of accommodation in the town of Gariep Dam, near the dam wall at the western end. The **Gariep Aventura** (☎ 051-754 0045; www.aventura.co.za/gariep/gariep.htm; camp sites/2-person chalets R100/550) is well laid-out and has loads of water-sport activities available. The **Gariep Dam Hotel** (☎ 051-754 0060; r R400) offers comfortable, but ordinary universal motel-style digs.

PHILIPPOLIS

☎ 051

Founded in 1823 as a mission station, Philippolis, on Rte 717, is a beautiful place, and the oldest town in the Free State. Seventy-five buildings within the town have been declared national monuments, including the library and many places built in Karoo

style (made with thick walls to keep the heat at bay).

If you've ever fancied spending a night in jail, the **Old Jail** (☎ 082-550 4421; s/d R120/220) is your big chance. The town's former jail has been converted into basic but comfortable self-catering accommodation. The prison also has a honeymoon suite!