People & Culture

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The BasothoÂ

Most of the inhabitants of Lesotho are Basotho and speak the national language Sesotho, although nearly all speak excellent English. Although many Basotho still live and work outside the country, their attachment to their local village and traditional culture is still strong. The family is still the dominant unit, and respect for the elder generation is important. Basotho culture is centred on village life, and most traditions and festivals relate to local village life and the seasons of the year.

Of all our people it is the Matabele who have preserved their traditions best, and their traditional dance Ndlamo is now a great way to celebrate throughout much of Lesotho, No traditional wedding is complete without this colourful dance.

Basotho people are predominately rural, and getting around mountainous areas has always been difficult. However, the Basotho pony is ideal for local transportation and so breeding and riding these surefooted ponies is very important. In the towns, as well as in the mountains, it will not be unusual to meet a Basotho horseman, clad in a kobo, his traditional cloak or blanket, who will raise his hand in the traditional greeting "Khotso" - meaning peace.Â

{mospagebreak title=Culture} Culture

The Basotho people have developed a unique culture. As one of the few African tribes living in a mountainous environment, they have made many adaptations to their conditions. The Basotho blanket is one example. All around the country you will see people dressed in woollen blankets, often with beautiful patterns. This is the ideal garment for a cold environment, and also has the versatility of keeping the rain off.

Villages are often located high in the mountains, usually on the mid-levels well above the deep river valleys and the flood dangers they carry. Villages are very structured. They are made up of a number of kraals, i.e. a collection of buildings belonging to one family. Some are for sleeping, some for storage and one for cooking. Each kraal will also have an enclosure for livestock. Each village has a chief, or headman, who will fall under the chief for the area. The Basotho are agriculturalists. The chief allocates the fields around the villages to villagers. Many crops are cultivated including maize, wheat, sorghum, beans and peas as well as vegetables such as onions and cabbage. Many local herbs are also gathered as green vegetables, which the Basotho call Moroho.

Animals are very important in Basotho society. The Basotho pony represents the best form of transport in the mountains, and donkeys are often used as pack animals. Most families will have some cattle, and oxen are used to plough the sloping mountain fields. Wool is a major source of income both from Merino sheep and mohair from Angora goats, and you will see many herds of both deep in the mountains. Shepherds, who are often young boys, look after them. The shepherds live in simple huts called motebo that are often perched on ridges at well over 3000m and very well hidden.

Passing a village you will frequently see a flag flying from a tall pole. This indicates a place where something is being sold. A white flag means "joala", a locally brewed sorghum beer. Yellow means maize beer, red means meat and green means vegetables.Â

Â {mospagebreak title=Economy} Economy

The powerful South African economy, and particularly the mining industry, was a great magnet for Basotho men. Many spent years as migrant workers in the gold mines around Johannesburg. This had a profound effect on Basotho society, as the women of the family were left to hold the home life together. Thus you will see many more women than men around the country, and often it will be the women out working the land. Around Christmas time the men would flock home for the holidays.

Money sent home by the migrant workers did much to keep families afloat financially, as Lesotho is a poor country. Drought in the early 1990's didn't help, and most of the population is unable to subsist on what they grow. The country has little manufacturing and most goods are imported from South Africa. The Lowlands are densely populated and even the mountainous interior is filling with ever more people. This pressure on the land causes immense problems, especially in terms of overgrazing by livestock and consequent erosion. Huge erosion gullies called dongas, grow ever larger and deeper, literally eating up the arable farming land.

Mining activity in South Africa has steadily been declining. The first miners to be retrenced are the non-South Africans. Many Basotho men have therefore been forced to return. This has increased the unemployment and poverty in Lesotho.Â

Â {mospagebreak title=Education} Education

Lesotho follows the British education system. Children spend 7 years in primary school, with Sesotho the medium of instruction. English is supposed to be learnt in the final years to prepare students going on to high school where English is the medium of instruction. Three years of secondary school culminates in the Junior Certificate, with the best candidates going on to spend a further two years doing Cambridge '0, levels. With many boys spending years as shepherds, there are generally more girls than boys at school, and often the boys are older.

Most schools in the country are connected to missions. Missionaries started arriving in the country in the early 1800's and some were close advisors of King Moshoeshoe. French missionaries were the first to transcribe Sesotho. The Roman Catholic Church is very influential as are the Lesotho Evangelical church and the Anglican church.

Almost every mission has a school attached. University and college entrance is based on '0' level results. The country has one university, the Lesotho National University in Roma. Originally the university catered for students from Lesotho, Botswana and Swaziland. The three countries were all British protectorates and were administered very similarly, particularly in terms of education. Today Botswana and Swaziland have their own universities. There is a Polytechnic in Maseru.

The education system means that some Basotho speak English. In the rural areas, however, older people do not usually speak English and neither do those who did not reach high school. Travellers will find a smattering of Sesotho worth learning.Â

Â {mospagebreak title=Arts and Crafts} Arts and Crafts of the Basotho

Basotho people are renowned for their crafts. Traditional products have a reputation for quality, individuality and variety. They have a universal appeal, and have helped to give Lesotho a strong identity. They all make wonderful souvenirs of a visit to Lesotho.

Lesotho has a justifiable reputation for its fine wool and mohair weaving. Tapestries, which are completely hand-woven, are works of art that display their own unique character, and are noted for their beauty, softness and strength. The artistic talent of many Basotho women also finds expression in the fine knitwear including pullovers, scarves and other personal items.

The herds of sheep and goats that roam the hillsides provide the skins and hides for an abundant supply of sheepskin products. These include warm and comfortable slippers and jackets, whole skins and much more. In addition, the ready supply of hides provides leather for excellent leather goods such as bags, belts and small gift items.

Wooven reeds and grasses are also important. The traditional Basotho Hat called mokorotlo is the best known of a fine range of grass-works made in Lesotho. Its conical shape is seen everywhere in the kingdom, and is the recognised symbol of the country. The hat's shape was inspired by the profile of Mount Qiloane, the legendary conical mountain close to Thaba Bosiu, and described by Masupha as Mother and Father.

Other fine souvenirs include locally made gold and silver jewellery (often decorated with local seeds and stones), and local pottery that demonstrates the skills and creative art of the village potter.

Visit handicraft centres in Maseru, Teya-Teyaneng and Leribe. Postage by surface mail overseas is reasonable and fairly reliable, so it is possible to buy, have the goods wrapped, and then send them home.Â

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