



# ROCKY MOUNTAIN HIGH

Geoff Dalgish

If you believe that life begins at the end of your comfort zone, then a visit to the mountain kingdom of Lesotho is really living.

Lesotho, for me, had always been about tranquil scenes with blanketed Basotho tribesmen in conical straw-hats guiding surefooted ponies through breathtakingly beautiful mountain scenery.

It's an iconic image you'll find on postcards and in the guidebooks, although the spectacular Maletsunyane Falls may soon rival the traditional horsemen in popularity in the photo albums of adventure-loving tourists.

The reason is simple: not only is it one of Africa's great waterfalls, but it is now the setting for a dramatic, 204-metre leap of faith recognised in the Guinness Book of Records as the world's longest, single-drop commercial abseil.

Stepping over the cliff alongside the falls is one of Lesotho's ultimate adrenalin trips. My fellow adventurers included a courageous lady-friend with a well-known terror of heights. But, like all of us, she was painstakingly prepared, the organisers at nearby Semonkong Lodge having insisted that participants first tackle three training abseils down a 25-metre cliff. It's a great confidence builder and essential to hone the techniques you'll need during a controlled descent of up to 30 minutes.

To be truthful we were all scared silly to begin with, but within seconds were dazzled by the beauty and enormity of the scene, descending alongside the thundering waterfall and being engulfed in spray near the bottom.

Of course, there's much more to Lesotho than abseiling, and in the space of a week we created a busy itinerary that started with a 4x4 ascent of the legendary Sani Pass between KZN and the mountain kingdom; included a night at Sani Top Chalet, the highest pub in Africa where it is traditional to down a Maluti lager; packed in some great hiking, and tasted traditional transport with a pony trek.

If you knew Lesotho in days gone by you'll remember some of the most daunting and car-shattering tracks to be found anywhere in Africa. Well, fast-forward to 2009 and you discover that rugged charm still exists, although an ever-improving road network and new tourism initiatives make South Africa's landlocked neighbour a viable and affordable holiday destination - even if you don't own a 4x4.

But Sani Pass won't be an option in a regular car until that road is tarred, an event that will be mourned by the 4x4 fraternity.

For me, the wildness of the Maloti and Drakensberg Mountains, and especially those parts not yet linked by tar roads, are the main attraction, and next time around I'll hike to Southern Africa's highest peak, Thabana-Ntlenyana soaring to 3 482 metres.

But Lesotho caters equally for visitors more interested in scenery and a cultural experience than high adventure.

The easy way is to fly in to Maseru, the capital, or arrive from the Eastern Free State, taking advantage of good tar roads as you enter Lesotho through one of a number of relaxed border posts.

Lesotho accommodation is more rustic than luxurious, but

you're likely to enjoy great company, cheerful service and good home cooking at many places.

One such stop was the historic Trading Post Guest House at Roma that is owned by Ashley and Jennifer Thorn. Although roads have improved hugely in recent years, the 247 km drive from the top of Sani was still an eight-hour undertaking, making you appreciate the determination of early pioneers.

Ashley's grandfather founded the Roma trading store in 1903 and it remains locked in a time warp. Blanketed Basotho arrive on donkeys with grain for grinding, while cattle, pigs and chickens roam freely. There's even a 'parking lot' for donkeys while their owners are shopping or catching up on the latest gossip.

Ashley believes passionately in the country and we'd strongly recommend one of his guided outings.

At Malealea Lodge, which is acclaimed for its hikes, pony treks and authentic African experience, I notched up another highlight, enjoying my first time aboard a traditional Basotho pony.

Malealea is a lesson in community empowerment and an example of what is possible when lodge owners, visitors and local rural people interact in meaningful ways. Rarely have I met as many smiling, friendly locals anywhere.

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## OTHER LESOTHO HIGHLIGHTS

- Visit the largest and most concentrated group of rock paintings in Africa south of the Sahara at uKhahlamba-Drakensberg Park.
- Visit the Katse and Mohale Dams of the mammoth Highlands Water Project which will supply much of South Africa's future water needs.

## CONTACT INFO

**Sani Top Chalet (highest pub in Africa)**  
**T:** +27 (0) 33 702 1069 or **M:** +27 (0) 82 715 1131  
**W:** www.sanitopchalet.co.za  
**E:** sanitop@futurenet.co.za

**Trading Post Guesthouse in Roma and Ramabanta Trading Post Lodge**  
**T:** +266 (0) 2234 0202 or **M:** +27 (0) 82 773 2180  
**W:** www.tradingpost.co.za  
**E:** tradingpost@leo.co.ls

**Semonkong Lodge (Maletsunyane Falls abseil)**  
**T:** +266 (0) 2700 6037 or **M:** +266 (0) 6202 1021  
**W:** www.placeofsmoke.co.ls  
**E:** booking@placeofsmoke.co.za

**Malealea Lodge (pony trekking)**  
**T:** +27 (0) 51 436 6766 or **M:** +27 (0) 82 552 4215  
**W:** www.malealea.com  
**E:** malealea@mweb.co.za