

Eastern Cape

Introduction

South Africa's 'wild' province, the Eastern Cape features expanses of untouched beach, bush and forest. This is Nelson Mandela's home province, and an area with some enticing attractions – pristine beaches, abundant wildlife and spectacular scenery.

Top attractions



Addo Elephant National Park

This is one of the few reserves in the world that offers the Big Seven – elephant, rhino, buffalo, lion, leopard, great white sharks and southern right whales. The 164 000ha park, which is situated near Port Elizabeth, is rated as one of the best places in Africa to see elephants up close. It also has the world's largest breeding colony of Cape gannets, rare flightless dung beetles, 1 000-year-old cycads, and hundreds of pastel-coloured proteas.



Cambedoo National Park

This stunningly beautiful reserve falls within the Karoo and is home to rare plants and wildlife. It almost completely surrounds the town of Graaff-Reinet, the oldest town in the Eastern Cape. Its most famous attraction, however, is the Valley of Desolation, made up of spectacular dolerite pillars. Prehistoric fossils have been discovered on the floor of the valley. There are plenty of animals to be found, including the bat-eared fox, meerkat, vervet monkeys and Cape mountain zebra.



Baviaanskloof wilderness area

The Baviaanskloof mega-reserve is a natural, unspoilt mountain kingdom. The 200km-long Baviaanskloof, the Valley of the Baboons, is so named because of the large numbers of baboons in the area. Spectacular plant and animal life compete for attention.



Tsitsikamma National Park

This park forms part of the Garden Route National Park. The area is home to a delicately balanced marine eco-system and some excellent whale and dolphin viewing sites. Inland, the indigenous rain forest harbours 116 types of giant tree, including giant Outeniqua yellowwood trees – the largest of which is said to be over 800 years old and has a circumference of almost 9m.



Beaches

The Eastern Cape has some of the best beaches in the world. This is the ideal region for sun-worshippers, water-sports junkies and nature-lovers. The province’s Sunshine Coast is a coastal belt stretching from Tsitsikamma to East London, offering glorious, sunny weather and access to beaches, lagoons, rivers and sheltered bays. From April to December much of the Eastern Cape coastline is ideal for spotting southern right whales as they follow their annual migration route.

Port Elizabeth’s Humewood beach has achieved Blue Flag status as a world-class beach.

Overview of Eastern Cape



Storm's River Gorge, Garden Route, is the perfect destination for adrenalin junkies

There’s so much to see and do in the Eastern Cape, which is blessed with rich natural beauty and wildlife.

Its natural diversity is impressive: the Eastern Cape incorporates parts of all seven ecological zones that occur in South Africa. It also features all three of the country's biodiversity regions, which is further enhanced by its 820km of untamed coastline.

This ensures an assortment of plant and animal species, including the Big Five, abundant birdlife and rich marine life (including 27 species of whales and dolphins).

The province offers something for everyone: for the adrenaline addict there's tubing down the Storm's River Gorge, skydiving in Grahamstown and learning to fly in Port Alfred; outdoor enthusiasts can try spot the Big Seven (the Big Five plus southern right whales and great white sharks) or enjoy pristine beaches. There's even snow skiing – in winter the Ben McDhui Mountain turns into a winter wonderland offering great skiing opportunities.

This is a province steeped in history – it is the birthplace of Nelson Mandela and a number of other great political activists – and was one of the centres at the forefront of the fight for democracy in South Africa.

Like South Africa's other provinces, the Eastern Cape has an excellent infrastructure, with good roads and plenty of accommodation.

Game viewing

The Eastern Cape is known as a Big Seven (the Big Five plus southern right whales and great white sharks) destination, one of the very few places on Earth that can claim this title. There are plenty of reserves that offer great game viewing.

The Mountain Zebra National Park, situated outside Cradock, was established to protect the smallest zebra in Africa, the mountain zebra. It is home to dozens of other species including cheetah, Cape buffalo and black rhino.

The Addo Elephant National Park near Port Elizabeth is one of only a few places on Earth that offers the Big Seven. It is also one of the best places in Africa to see elephants up close.

Also definitely worth visiting if you're looking for a luxurious bush experience is the internationally renowned and award-winning private game reserve, Shamwari Game Reserve. It has become a favourite among international celebrities: golfer Tiger Woods got engaged there, and actors Brad Pitt, Nicolas Cage and John Travolta have all visited.

The Mkhambathi Nature Reserve features a waterfall that drops straight into the sea. Here you can see eland and wildebeest wander along the coast, rare blue duiker and a Cape vulture colony.

The Great Fish River Nature Reserve is home to black rhino, hippo, Cape buffalo, elephant, lion and a number of antelope species.



Mkhambathi Nature Reserve, Eastern Cape

Mkhambathi Nature Reserve

Here you can see eland and wildebeest wander along the coast, rare blue duiker and a Cape vulture colony.



Great Fish River Nature Reserve, Eastern Cape

Great Fish River Nature Reserve

Home to black rhino, hippo, Cape buffalo, elephant, lion and a number of antelope species.



Mountain Zebra National Park, Eastern Cape

Mountain Zebra National Park

Established to protect the smallest zebra in Africa, the mountain zebra. It is home to dozens of other species including cheetah, Cape buffalo and black rhino.



Addo Elephant National Park, Eastern Cape

Addo Elephant National Park

One of only a few places on Earth that offers the Big Seven. It is also one of the best places in Africa to see elephants up close.



Shamwari Game Reserve, Eastern Cape

Shamwari Game Reserve

Award-winning luxury accommodation in the heart of malaria-free big game country. Here, game-viewing and responsible tourism go hand-in-hand.

The great white shark is an endangered species and is protected in South Africa.



The Wild Coast is an unspoiled natural treasure, which stretches along the Eastern Cape province's northern coastline

Natural attractions

The Eastern Cape's Wild Coast, which stretches from the Mtamvuna River in the north to the Great Kei River in the south, is a superb destination for travellers looking for something a little off the beaten track. It is an untamed wilderness of wild, picturesque beaches, cliffs, sheltered bays, and rolling hills and valleys; it is also one of the few places you'll see cattle chewing the cud on the beach.

Along this coast is a small town by the name of Hole in the Wall, which gets its name from a rocky archway just off the coast that's been carved out by the waves over millions of years.

For those interested in marine life, southern right whales on their way from Antarctica to warmer waters frequent the Eastern Cape coastline between May and December each year. There are numerous spots along the coast that make for great whale-watching. Bottle-nosed dolphins are also a frequent sight along the coast.

Further inland, the wide open spaces of the Karoo Heartland cocoon towns such as Cradock and Graaff-Reinet. This is a dry, untouched area, offering stunning landscapes as well as game.

Jeffreys Bay is famous for its 'supertubes', long and consistently good waves.

Main centres



Port Elizabeth

Known as the Friendly City, the Windy City, or simply PE, Port Elizabeth was founded as a town in 1820 to house British settlers. It is the second-oldest city and the fifth-largest in South Africa. Life here revolves around the ocean. The city caters for everyone, and is known as a great family vacation centre.



East London

This charming port city is also known as Buffalo City because it lies between the Nahoon and Buffalo rivers. It is the only river port in the country. The East London Museum has some fascinating displays, which include the last known dodo egg in the world.



Jeffreys Bay

Jeffreys Bay, or J Bay, is situated in the heart of the Sunshine Coast. It is famous as one of the best surfing spots in the world, and in July each year, the world's top surfers flock to the city for the Billabong Pro event. But the town also has more to offer – there's skydiving, sandboarding, and whale and dolphin watching.



Grahamstown

Grahamstown, about 130km from Port Elizabeth, is home to the oldest independent newspaper in South Africa, *Grocott's Mail*. The city is best known for the annual National Arts Festival, held each July, which is recognised as one of the biggest cultural events in Africa.



Graaff-Reinet

This is the only city in South Africa to be surrounded by a national park – the Camdeboo National Park. Founded in 1786, Graaff-Reinet has been a traveller's oasis in South Africa's semi-arid desert – the Karoo – for more than two centuries. It has magnificent examples of Cape Dutch architecture.



Port Alfred

Port Alfred is a popular holiday destination along the Eastern Cape's Sunshine Coast. There's plenty to do here, including taking in its great beaches, water sports (kitesurfing and water-skiing) and diving among the reefs off the coast. The popular Fish River Sun is about 20 minutes' drive from Port Alfred.



Kenton-on-Sea

This little village is a popular holiday destination. There are great beaches, rock pools and sheltered bays with plenty of opportunities for water sports like fishing and canoeing. From April to December the village is a good place to do some whale watching. It is also close to a number of inland game reserves.

Port Elizabeth is home to the Nelson Mandela Bay Stadium, a sports venue that hosted matches during the 2010 FIFA World Cup.

Timeline



100 000 years ago

Hunter-gatherer ancestors of the San people first settled in the area that is now known as Algoa Bay. © [Ian Sewell](#)



2000 years ago

Agriculturalist populations ancestral to the Xhosa migrated into the region from the north.



1488

Portuguese explorer Bartolomeu Dias lands on St Croix Island in Algoa Bay.



1799

Port Elizabeth gets its start when British troops establish a fort to protect the area against a possible French invasion. Over the years the fort and surrounding areas expand, eventually forming the city.



1994

The Eastern Cape province is established in 1994, after South Africa's first democratic elections.



2010

Port Elizabeth hosts FIFA World Cup matches.

Aliwal North is a popular inland resort and is famous for its hot springs.

Tips for your traveller

- The climate is highly varied in this region, and can range from very hot (at the coast) to very cold (in the mountains); check with a local weather service before travelling.
- The Eastern Cape is malaria free.
- There are three airports that serve the Eastern Cape – in East London, Port Elizabeth and Mthatha.
- Plan your transport arrangements before you leave – public transport is not efficient in rural parts of the province.

One of Africa's largest and most colourful cultural attractions, the National Arts Festival, is held annually in Grahamstown.