

Free State

Introduction

The Free State's appeal lies in its scenic beauty and natural attractions. This province is in the heart of South Africa – it borders six of the nine South African provinces, as well as the kingdom of Lesotho.

Top attractions



Vredefort Dome

The Vredefort Dome is the impact site of a meteor that struck the Earth about two billion years ago, leaving a crater 300km in diameter. The area has been declared a World Heritage Site. The Vredefort hills and crater are ideal for adventure seekers: visitors can climb and abseil its rock faces, while the rapids of the Vaal River, which flows through it, make for great rafting. Image © Júlio Reis



Golden Gate Highlands National Park

The golden sandstone cliffs of this popular park are a geological attraction. Its Brandwag butte is an iconic symbol of the park, and its hiking trail takes visitors kilometres above the Drakensberg Amphitheatre for breathtaking views. The park, the only grasslands park in South Africa, is great for exploring on foot, bike or on horseback. It's great for birding – rare bearded vultures nest there – and game viewing.



Clarens

Recognised as the jewel of the Free State, this little artists' town is a popular weekend getaway for South Africans. Not far from the Golden Gate Highlands National Park, Clarens has great views. There's plenty to do, like strolling through the art stores and galleries, restaurant-hopping, birding, game drives, and trout fishing. History buffs will find plenty to do: they can go fossil-hunting, or visit the Clarens Museum and South African War sites nearby.



Fossil hunting

The Free State is rich in fossil sites, especially from early Jurassic-era dinosaurs. One of the most exciting South African dinosaur fossil discoveries in recent years was that of a 210-million-year-old sauropod that was found in the Ladybrand district. Fossil-hunting safaris are offered in several parts of the Free State, including in Clarens and the Golden Gate Highlands National Park. Near the town of Bethulie are the vast waters of the Gariep Dam – the largest dam in South Africa – whose waters are said to cover thousands of fossils embedded in rock.



Cosmos season

The autumn months of April and May are cosmos season in South Africa. The eastern Free State, particularly, is the perfect place to experience the riot of pink and white blooms. A great place to see these flowers is the 35km route between Clarens and Fouriesburg; or a visit to the Sandstone Estates farm outside Ficksburg, where on certain days of the year, visitors are allowed on to the grounds of the heritage farm and can ride a locomotive through the cosmos.

The province was originally known as the Orange Free State, and was an independent republic in southern Africa. Later, it kept the name Orange Free State, and became one of four provinces of South Africa after the Union of South Africa in 1910. Today, it's the Free State province, without the word Orange.



The majestic Drakensberg mountain range, which traverses the Free State, KwaZulu-Natal and Eastern Cape provinces

Overview of the Free State

The Free State is South Africa's breadbasket. Because of its good soil and climate, much of the land is taken up by agriculture – the area produces over 70% of the country's grain.

But it also boasts astounding scenic beauty: wide open plains and majestic mountains characterise this province. Cosmos season (cosmos is a pretty pink flower) in the Free State is one of the country's landmarks, while the area's natural beauty is a drawcard for outdoor enthusiasts.

The spectacular Drakensberg and Maluti mountain ranges are popular for adventure tourists. The province boasts some of the best rock features in the world, including ancient hills, caves and spectacular sandstone cliffs, and is rich in San rock art.

A popular attraction is the Golden Gate Highlands National Park, which gets its name from the surrounding gold sandstone cliffs. Great for exploring on foot and home to hundreds of bird species, it's an excellent site for birders.

The Free State is known for its great hospitality and sedate lifestyle, and is particularly appealing for those interested in exploring small-town South Africa.

But it is not all about sedate strolls and birdwatching; there's more than enough to keep the adrenaline junkie occupied. There are plenty of opportunities for hiking, abseiling and canoeing (among others), while the Ash River – the only river in the country that has year-round high water levels – makes for excellent white-water rafting.

The province's capital city, Bloemfontein, is the judicial capital of the country.

The Free State has an excellent road infrastructure and a variety of accommodation options. Bloemfontein's airport, Bram Fischer International Airport, links to South Africa's other major centres.

Welkom is one of only a handful of cities in the world that was planned to completion before being constructed.

Game viewing

The Free State is definitely the home of unusual wildlife experiences. Bloemfontein boasts one of the most unique reserves in the world – a wildlife reserve surrounded by a city. The 250ha Franklin Game Reserve offers wildlife, including giraffe and wildebeest, and great city views.

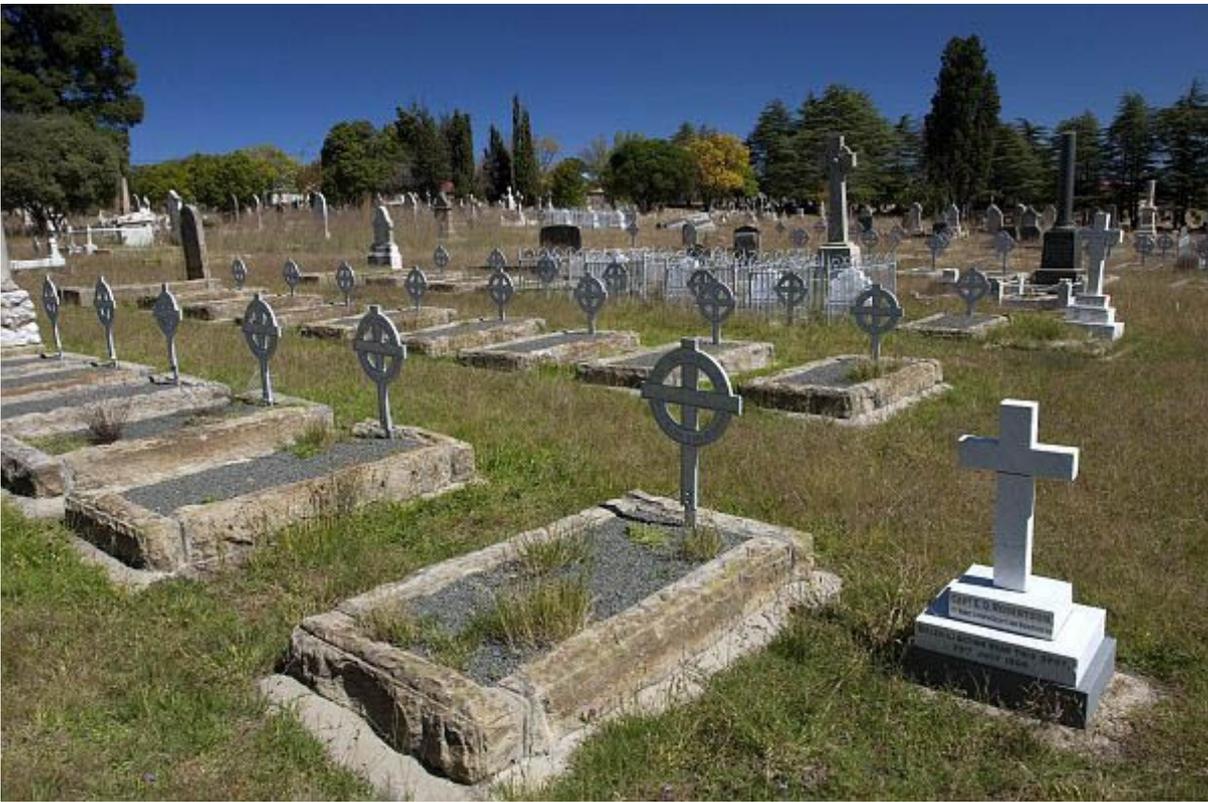
For another unique experience, visit the Moolmanshoek Game Reserve in the Moolmanshoek Valley. Here visitors can spend a few hours in the company of a colony of meerkats. The reserve is also rich in plains game, including springbok, zebra, the rare black wildebeest, blesbok and ostrich, and is home to 230 bird species.

The spectacular Golden Gate Highlands National Park is great for game viewing and birding. Here visitors will find black wildebeest, eland, blesbok, oribi, springbok, Burchell's zebra and baboons. There are also over 170 bird species.

Visitors may also be interested in the Cheetah Experience in Bloemfontein, a 10ha sanctuary started in an effort to help save these animals from extinction. The sanctuary is also home to leopard and lions.

American gangster Al Capone allegedly used to favour wearing blue-white diamonds from the Free State diamond mining town of Jagersfontein above all other jewels.

An annual cherry festival takes place in Ficksburg in November.



An Anglo-Boer War (South African War) cemetery on the Battlefields Route in the Free State.

Historical sites

The Free State is an ideal destination for history buffs – there are a number of great historical routes, memorial sites, museums and indigenous villages that tell the story of the people of the region. Bloemfontein is a great place for your clients to start their tour; its National Museum is home to one of the most extensive fossil collections in South Africa.

Other noteworthy historical attractions include the National Women's Memorial and South African War Memorial, and New Clare Township. A visit to the Basotho Cultural Village in QwaQwa, close to the Golden Gate Highlands National Park, is a must.

In the little town of Koffiefontein (Coffee Fountain), the most significant historical features are the remnants of wall art left behind by World War II prisoners of war who were interned there.

Other towns that have interesting historical sites include Fauresmith, Bethulie and Harrismith. The South African War concentration camp memorial garden outside Bethulie is interesting and evocative of the war, also known as the Anglo-Boer War, and fought between Boers and the British between 1899 and 1902. The town is also located in a part of South Africa that is rich in fossil beds and early San artefacts.

The little town of Fauresmith is one of the few towns in the world where a railway track runs through the centre of its main street. It once competed with Bloemfontein to become the capital of the Free State.

Main centres



Bloemfontein

The name means 'fountain of flowers', and it is popularly known as the City of Roses because of the abundance of these flowers. Bloemfontein, the capital of Free State province, was officially founded as a fort in 1846 by the British army. It is the birthplace of *Lord of the Rings* author JRR Tolkien.



Clarens

Clarens is known as the jewel of the Eastern Free State. The picturesque little town is an artists' haven and its spectacular scenery is a drawcard for visitors. It is surrounded by mountains and is situated only a few kilometres from the Golden Gate Highlands National Park. It offers something for everyone.



Parys

This picturesque little town is about one-and-a-half hours' drive from Johannesburg. Parys is the Afrikaans word for Paris – the town got its name from a German surveyor who said the area reminded him of Paris on the River Seine. There is plenty to do here, including river rafting, waterskiing and angling.



Harrismith

Founded in 1849, Harrismith is well known as a convenient refuelling stop between Johannesburg and Durban. Nearby there's wildlife, birding, windsurfing, fly-fishing and views of the Drakensberg.



Bethlehem

The land around the town, which was founded in the mid-1800s, proved ideal for growing wheat. Hence it was named Bethlehem, meaning 'house of bread' in Hebrew. Today the town is the largest commercial centre in the eastern Free State.

Sasolburg

This large industrial town was established in 1954 to provide housing facilities for the employees of Sasol – a large petrochemical company. It is situated close to the



Sasolburg

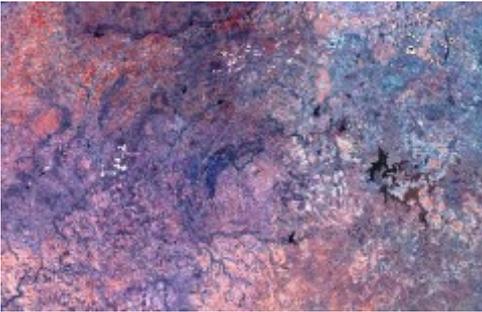
This large industrial town was established in 1954 to provide housing facilities for the employees of Sasol – a large petrochemical company. It is situated close to the Vaal Dam, which provides excellent opportunities for water sports.



Welkom

On 16 April 1946, a rich gold find was made on the farm Welkom. The town officially came into being on 15 April 1947 and received city status in 1955. It is one of very few cities in the world that has been wholly pre-planned. Its economy centres on mining. Welkom is a Dutch and Afrikaans word for 'Welcome'.

Timeline



Two billion years ago

Two billion years ago a meteor crashes into Earth in the now-Free State area, leaving a 300km-in-diameter crater that is known as the Vredefort Dome, a World Heritage Site



1846

In 1846 the British army establishes a fort that is later to become the city of Bloemfontein

1870

Diamond discovered in Jagersfontein, sparking a diamond rush





1946

A rich gold find is made on the farm Welkom



1994

Free State province is established



2010

Bloemfontein plays host to FIFA World Cup matches

Tips for your travellers

- The temperature in the Free State varies from hot in summer (November to February) to very cold in winter (May to August). Snow is experienced in some parts of the province.
- This province is malaria free.
- Wi-Fi is not freely available in some rural parts of the province.
- Bloemfontein has its own airport.
- There are a number of state and private hospitals throughout the province.
- The best way to explore the Free State's goldfields is the Goldfields Route, which takes visitors on an intriguing trail of gold prospecting and gold discovery.
- A small airport and a branch of the main railway between Johannesburg and Cape Town serve Welkom.

In Brandfort, your clients can visit the former home of Winnie Madikizela-Mandela, Struggle icon and former wife of Nelson Mandela, who was banished here during apartheid.