

# THE GREAT OUTDOORS

*South Africa is known for her temperate climate, where soft spring gives way to glorious summer, where time is spent decadently languishing on gold and white-sand beaches or more active pursuits. Autumn creeps in, and verdant leaves turn to rich crimson and gold. Logs are collected in anticipation of roaring fires, as the nights grow crisper, and longer. As winter sets in, you might be tempted to stay indoors, but actually, with its cooler temperatures, the winter months are as good a time as any to head into the great outdoors and explore. For the more active and adventurous, our beautiful country has so much to offer, whether you undertake invigorating hikes or epic mountain-bike rides through a myriad of breathtaking and varied landscapes, or you dive beneath the surface along our nearly 3,000 kilometre coastline.*

Photo: © Hillary Fox

Useful climbing sites

[www.mcsa.org.za](http://www.mcsa.org.za)

[www.climb.co.za](http://www.climb.co.za)

## *Rock Climbing and Bouldering*

Whether you are a complete novice or an experienced climber; and whether you favour bouldering, or traditional climbing, or sport climbing, South Africa offers some of the best and most diverse rock climbing in the world.

For the uninitiated, bouldering is when you climb on short, low routes without the use of safety ropes, often with the aid of a spotter below to direct you away from potentially hazardous areas. Traditional (trad) climbing is when you place protection (bolts) against falls while ascending, or when bolts are placed on lead. In this instance, rather than helping with the ascent, your gear is used to protect against falls. Trad bolted climbs use either a hand drill and are bolted on lead, so there are far less bolts, and they are spaced out farther than in sport climbs. In sport climbing, your protection or bolt is placed with power drills or on rappel or permanent anchors, which are attached to the rock walls.

It doesn't matter which province you live in, there's a mountain range that begs to be climbed. Internationally renowned, Waterval Boven in Mpumalanga, boasts some of the best sport climbing in the country, with more than 500 routes from which to choose, and many as yet untouched rock faces. In the eastern parts of the Free State, hard sandstone cliffs offer wonderful bolted routes, while Blouberg in Limpopo, the KwaZulu-Natal Drakensberg and the North West province's Magaliesburg, offer traditionalists kilometres of unbolted rock. At Shongweni, just outside of Durban, you'll find the Wave Cave, which has hard overhanging sport routes and you can enjoy seaside cliff climbing at Morgan's Bay.

While many of the country's climbing routes are more than a little off the beaten track, when it comes to close-to-city experiences, Cape Town - a city that grew up around the iconic Table Mountain, which boasts a number of excellent traditional routes - must surely take first place. There are hundreds of sport and traditional routes within city limits, including those on Table Mountain, Lion's Head, or those majestic minders' of Camps Bay - The Apostles (which offer you more routes than the first two combined.)

Travel an hour outside of Cape Town and you'll find Du Toit's Kloof, where you'll be spoilt for choice when it comes to traditional rock climbing routes. Rocklands in the Cedarberg (three hours from Cape Town) is a world-class bouldering area. The Cedarberg also offers visitors to this scenic region some of the best traditional rock climbing routes in South Africa, while Montagu and Oudtshoorn have excellent sport routes. One thing to remember though, is that the Western Cape has a winter rainfall climate, and strong storms can come up quickly, catching a climber off-guard. Ideally the best time to visit this region is in spring and autumn.



## Mountain Biking

There is no denying the popularity of mountain biking (MTB) as a sport, and what better place to get the adrenalin pumping than the rugged South African countryside. From sedate family-friendly routes that are suitable for all ages and skill levels, to epic adventure trails that are not for the fainthearted. Your selection of favourite trails are likely to be driven by your experience level, accessibility to the trails, how much you've chosen to invest in your passion, and how hard-core you are.

Heading to the beautiful grasslands and woodlands of Northern Farms Nature Reserve is a good starting point if you're Johannesburg-based, as it is suitable for young families, novices and advanced riders. It is open on weekends and public holidays, and is a popular destination for cyclists, horse riders, hikers and birders. The trails are graded to reflect the different difficulty levels and distances vary from 15 to 55 kilometres.

The Big Red Barn at Sunlawns Estate in Irene is situated next to

a 20 acre Eucalyptus forest and looks out over field, grasslands and the Kaal River. Its 25 kilometres of scenic MTB trails meander through veld, farmland, and forest and alongside the river. Here too, the trails are graded for casual, intermediate and advanced riders. The 27 kilometre Route 1: Blast off trail, will take an average to good mountain biker between 90 minutes to two hours to complete. The Black Diamond trails are off-shoot trails and are very technical, consisting of steep drop-offs, jumps, switchbacks, BMX ramps and berms. For a more sedate pace, which is suitable for children who are learning the ropes and need adult supervision there is Route 5 that is 4.2 km and winds through the forest close to the Barn. The route is perfect for trail running and parents can walk, run, or cycle with their children in beautiful surroundings. Central Park Trails at Modderfontein and van Gaalens at Hartebeesport are also popular Gauteng mountain biking destinations.

Near Fouriesbrug in the Central Free State, you'll find the Camelroc

Photos: © Oak Valley

### Useful Mountain Biking sites

[www.northernfarm.co.za](http://www.northernfarm.co.za)

[www.thebigredbarn.co.za](http://www.thebigredbarn.co.za)

[www.camelroc.co.za](http://www.camelroc.co.za)

[karkloofmtbtrails.co.za](http://karkloofmtbtrails.co.za)

[www.welvanpas.co.za](http://www.welvanpas.co.za)

[elginmtb.co.za](http://elginmtb.co.za)



MTB Trail on Camelroc Guest Farm. The Trail has a grading of intermediate to difficult and a choice of a 10 kilometre figure eight and a 30 kilometre circular trail with short cuts for 10 and 20 kilometres. The terrain is mountainous, with many uphill and downhill over varied terrain. It should take you an hour to complete the green trail, and between three to four hours for the blue trail.

There are many mountain bike trails throughout the Drakensberg and the KwaZulu-Natal Midlands, and Pietermaritzburg also has many excellent options. Karkloof Mountain Bike Trails, which traverse Sappi's widespread plantations in the Karkloof valley in the KwaZulu-Natal Midlands has become a premier MTB destination in South Africa. The trail network is accessible year round and riders are able to make use of the facilities offered at the Karkloof Country Club. There are also some superb coastal routes, like Rocky Bay MTB Trails near Park Rynie in Scottburgh, or Virginia Farm MTB Trails near Eston.

Bains Mountain Bike Trails at Welvanpas in the Western Cape will challenge and reward you with its fast, technical single tracks that

wind through orchard, vineyard, waterfalls and pristine fynbos through the beautiful Hawekwa and Groenberg mountain ranges.

The Elgin MTB trails – a collaboration between neighbours Paul Cluver and Oak Valley has produced one of the Cape's most unique and spectacular MTB experiences. They form part of some of the most famous multi-stage mountain biking events including the Absa Cape Epic and FNB Wines2Whales. The Oak Valley Trails are graded according to skill requirements: an easy Blue (14km), intermediate Red (24km) and advanced Black (32km). Here you'll ride through forests of ancient oak trees, vineyards and apple and pear orchards and across grassy pastures in the shadow of the Groenlandberg Mountain. The Paul Cluver Trails are graded for distance and level of expertise Blue Short (8 km), Blue Long (11 km), Red (34 km) and Black (43 km). The route begins in the amphitheatre, and offers riders the excitement of lots of berms, flowing singletrack and some technical riding. There are some challenging climbs but riders are rewarded with magnificent views of the Elgin valley.



## Scuba Diving

South Africa's extensive coastline offers scuba divers the chance to view a huge diversity of marine life. With over 2,000 species of fish, 37 species of whale and dolphin and history of shipwrecks and salvage, it's no surprise that so many local and international travelers make their way to the coast each year.

Perhaps the most well-known and beloved stretches of coastline among divers, is the Sodwana Bay section of the iSimangaliso Wetland Park World Heritage Site, around 500 kilometres north of Durban and 100 kilometres from the southern border of Mozambique, which boasts the most southerly coral reefs in the world. The site is part of a Marine Protected Area and has a variety of reefs and depths to explore which will satisfy novices and technical divers alike. If you get the opportunity to go on a rare night dive you will experience a spectacular vision and a chance to encounter different fish and marine life which you won't during the day. The reefs are named according to their distance from Jesser Point: Quarter Mile, Two Mile (the most popular), Five Mile, Seven Mile and Nine Mile. Uniforms dive site is situated east of Five Mile reef and is about 45 metres long and 50 metres wide. In December and January the water temperatures are higher and it is the perfect time to witness Leatherback and Loggerhead turtles laying their eggs. Uniform's reef is known for its layered contoured coral and you are likely to see yellow tail goldies, Tiger Angelfish, and purple butterfly fish.

Fifty kilometres from Durban, off Umkomaas on the south coast of KwaZulu-Natal you'll find Aliwal Shoal, a 1,5 kilometre wide fossilised sandbank, which became a Marine Protected Area in early 2005. It offers open water, advanced shark and wreck diving through the Produce and the Nebo. Visibility at the shoal is typically excellent. Sharks are major drawcard to the area, with Ragged-tooth sharks frequenting Raggie's Cave and Cathedral during the winter months, and Tiger and Hammerhead sharks are common sightings during summer. The Sardine Run passes Aliwal Shoal between May and June every year bringing sharks, dolphins and birds. Remember that you will need a permit to dive the Aliwal Shoal, as it is a Marine Protected Area.

Protea Banks – 7,5 kilometres off Shelly Beach is ranked among the top shark and game fish dives in the world. The fossilised sand dune reef, which is home to the Zambezi shark in summer, is approximately six kilometres long and 800 metres wide. Hammerhead sharks can also be seen here in their hundreds and you are likely to spot Guitar sharks, Coppers and Blacktips. In winter the Ragged-tooth sharks that opted not to visit Aliwal Shoal, can be found here. Divers at Protea Banks also stand a chance of spotting Humpback whales, Spotted Eagle rays, and Manta rays, Devil Rays, Whale Shark and Brindle bass. You will need your dry suit when diving in Avalanche Reef off Port Elizabeth in the Eastern Cape. Water temperatures here are very cold but the dive is worthwhile, as you'll see a spectacular, densely populated coral reef.

False Bay waters are much warmer than those on the Atlantic coastal side of the Cape Peninsula, and there is a huge variety for divers to

see here, with vast, dense Kelp forests, which are home to a number of catshark species including Pyjama sharks, Leopard catsharks and Puffadder shysharks (Happy Eddie's). Initially conditions are mediocre, but visibility improves greatly when entering the expansive Kelp forests that are found on both sides of the bay. The Gordon's Bay, Rooi Els and Simon's Town sites have much to offer visitors, with brightly coloured Sea Fans and Feather Stars in between soft corals. Smitswinkel Bay is renowned for incredible wreck diving but an advanced certification is required to explore scuttled navy vessels from bygone eras. Divers will find a host of colourful fish here, and whale sharks, turtles, dolphins and ragged tooth sharks are frequently seen in specific areas.

There are so many dive sites from which to choose, that we haven't even touched on, like Storms River Mouth in Mossel Bay, the Paquita Wreck off the Knysna Heads, night dives at A Frame in Simonstown, and Clifton Rock in Cape Town.

When travelling from the coast, remember that you will gain about 2,000 metres in altitude from sea level to Johannesburg - so always include a day of sightseeing or shopping in between your last dive and the flight to the City of Gold; and do take your underwater camera to capture those memorable moments in the big blue.

Whether you're climbing, riding or diving, make a plan to take some well-earned time off and explore all of the natural wonders of our beautiful country. ■ [Lindsay Grubb](#)

