

South Africa – people, culture, language

A guide for businesses



The country

South Africa is an ethnically diverse nation with the largest white, Indian, and racially-mixed communities in Africa. Black South Africans, who speak nine officially-recognised languages and many more dialects, account for slightly less than 80% of the population.

Racial strife has played a large part in the country's history and politics, culminating in *apartheid*, which was instituted in 1948 by the National Party (although segregation existed prior to that date). The laws that defined apartheid began to be repealed or abolished by the National Party in 1990 after a long and sometimes violent struggle.

The economy of South Africa is the largest and best developed on the continent, with modern infrastructure common throughout the country. The country's socially progressive policies are rare in Africa (in 2007, for example, the country joined Belgium, the Netherlands, Spain and Canada in legalising same-sex marriage).



Nelson Mandela

Did you know...?

- Officially, the youngest language in the world is Afrikaans. By the early-20th century Afrikaans had developed from Dutch, French and other influences into a fully-fledged language with its own dictionary.

Johannesburg is the richest city in Africa and the only African city with 'global city' status. The purchasing power parity of the average Johannesburg citizen is more than the average citizen in Paris, Athens, Singapore and Hong Kong and 65% of the average New Yorker.

About one-third of the population of South Africa has illegal immigrant status – they are mostly from other African states.

South Africans are meat eaters. If invited to dinner you may be ridiculed if you are a vegetarian. Some rare meats may be offered to you including hippo, ostrich or crocodile.

Information correct on 9 July 2007.

Fast facts

Location: Southern tip of the continent of Africa

Capital: Pretoria

Population: 44 million

Official Language(s): Afrikaans, English, Ndebele, Xhosa, Zulu, Sesotho (Southern Sotho), Sesotho sa Leboa (Northern Sotho), Setswana, Swati, Tshivenda, and Xitsonga

Ethnic Groups: 79% black African, 9.6% white, 11.4% other (including Asian & Indo-Malay)

Religion(s): 11.1 % Zion Christian, 8.2% Pentecostal/Charismatic, 7.1% Catholic, 6.8% Methodist, 6.7% Dutch Reformed, 3.8% Anglican, 36% 'other' Christian, 1.5% Muslim, 18.1% other/non-specified

Currency: Rand

Dialling Code: +27

Time: +2 hours GMT

The 'Rainbow Nation'

South Africa is often referred to as the "Rainbow Nation", a term coined by Archbishop Desmond Tutu and later adopted by then - President Nelson Mandela. Mandela used the term "Rainbow Nation" as a metaphor to describe the country's newly-developing multicultural diversity in the wake of segregationist apartheid ideology.

South Africa is one of the most multicultural countries in the world, and in urban areas especially there are many different ethnic groups that will make up the population.

In addition to the indigenous black people of South Africa, colonialism and immigration have brought in white Europeans, Indians, Indo-Malays, Chinese and many more.

Due to this diversity, it is very difficult to generalise at all on South African etiquettes and culture.



The 'Rainbow Nation': contestants perform in the final competition for the title of Miss South Africa 2004

Rural and urban differences

- There are vast differences between the values of the rural and urban dwellers.
- The majority of the whites living in rural areas are Afrikaner farmers who are descended from the Calvinists. Their views on the world can come across as somewhat narrow. However, at the same time they value human decency over materialism.
- City dwellers on the other hand are much more open to change and as a result will come across differently.
- The many rural black communities are still rooted in the traditions of their heritage, whereas the increasingly urban black community combine their roots with the urban environment and international influences that surround them.



Traditional Zulu headwear

Business meetings

- Use initial meetings to establish a personal rapport and to establish trust in you and your business. Remember it will be difficult to schedule meetings from mid December to mid January or the two weeks surrounding Easter, as these are prime holiday periods.
- Be prepared to outline the exact nature of your business, your qualifications and the background of your company. Preferably, offer a list of references the South African counterpart may recognise.
- Although times are changing, women have yet to attain senior level positions. If a woman is sent to represent the company she must be prepared to encounter some testing behaviour and attitudes.
- Start negotiating with a realistic price. South Africans do not like haggling.
- Decision making may be concentrated at the top of the company and decisions are often made after consultation with subordinates, so the process can be slow and protracted.

Meeting and greeting

- There are several greeting styles in South Africa depending upon the ethnic heritage of the person you are meeting. However, as a foreigner a simple handshake, with eye contact and a smile, is fine.
- Some women may not shake hands and will merely nod their head, so it is best to wait for a woman to extend her hand.
- Greetings are leisurely and include time for social discussion and exchanging pleasantries.
- Most business people associate on a first-name basis. However, this only occurs after some time has passed; so it is best to remain formal until your counterpart switches to first names.
- There is no need to translate business cards as English is the language of commerce.

Networking

- The South African business community is built on and maintained by networks, so it is important to build strong relationships and a solid reputation.
- If your company is not known in South Africa, it is important to find a local associate who can introduce you to business people and recommend approaches, places to go, and give you some background.
- Most businessmen are looking for long-term business relationships, so try not to concentrate on short-term aims.
- Although the country leans towards egalitarianism, businesspeople respect senior executives and those with position, power or influence.
- For the most part, South Africans want to maintain harmonious working relationships, so they avoid confrontation.
- Most South Africans, regardless of ethnicity, prefer face-to-face meetings to more impersonal communication mediums such as email, letter, or telephone.



Table Mountain, overlooking Cape Town

Further resources

UK Trade & Investment: Support for those wanting to do business in/with South Africa. www.uktradeinvest.gov.uk
South African Chamber of Business: the largest business organisation in the country with a total membership of close to 20 000 businesses, most of them small and medium-sized. www.sacob.co.za
The South African Business Club: launched in 1993 to provide a meeting point and networking framework for South African business people living and working in the UK, and for people who have an interest in, or business connection with, South Africa. <http://www.sabusinessclub.com/>
Business Report: up-to-date business news from South Africa. <http://www.busrep.co.za/>
Foreign & Commonwealth Office: Up to date travel advice for South Africa. <http://www.fco.gov.uk>

Please note: While every effort is made to ensure accuracy, the Regional Language Network does not take responsibility for the content of this briefing. Opinions expressed are not necessarily those of the Regional Language Network or of CILT, the National Centre for Languages.