TOPONYMIC FACTFILE

pcgn The Permanent Committee on Geographical Names

South Africa

Country name	South Africa
State title	Republic of South Africa
Name of citizen	South African
Official languages	Northern Sotho (*nso*)[1]; Sesotho (*sot*); Setswana (*tsn*); Swati (*ssw*); Tshivenda (*ven*); Xitsonga (*tso*); Afrikaans (*afr*); English (*eng*); Ndebele (*nbl*); Xhosa (*xho*); Zulu (*zul*); South African Sign Language (*sfs*) [2]
Country name in official languages	Afrika-Borwa (*nso*) Afrika Borwa (*sot*) Aforika Borwa (*tsn*) Ningizimu Afrika (*ssw*) Afurika Tshipembe (*ven*) Afrika Dzonga (*tso*) Suid-Afrika (*afr*) South Africa (*eng*) Sewula Afrika (*nbl*) Mzantsi Afrika (*xho*) Ningizimu Afrika (*zul*)
Script	Roman script
ISO-3166 code (alpha-2/alpha-3)	ZA/ZAF
Capitals	Pretoria (administrative) Bloemfontein (judicial) Cape Town (legislative)[3]
Area / Population	1.22 million km^2 / 61 million (2023 est.)[4]

Introduction

Lying at the southernmost point of Africa, the territory of South Africa extends to include the Prince Edward Islands, two uninhabited islands located approximately 1770km to the south in the southern Indian Ocean. Completely surrounded by South Africa is the landlocked country of Lesotho. South Africa also shares land boundaries with Botswana, Eswatini[5], Mozambique, Namibia and Zimbabwe.

South Africa has three capitals: Cape Town, in Western Cape province is the legislative and commercial capital where the country's Parliament is found; Bloemfontein, in Free State province is the judicial capital;

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[1] Sometimes called Pedi or Sepedi.
[2] ISO 639 codes are given for languages mentioned in this Factfile.
[3] The South African constitution states: The seat of Parliament is Cape Town, but an Act of Parliament enacted in accordance with section 76(1) and (5) may determine that the seat of Parliament is elsewhere.
[4] www.statssa.gov.za
[5] Formerly Swaziland.

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Pretoria[6] in Gauteng province is the administrative capital. Pretoria, Bloemfontein and Cape Town should all be shown as capitals, an explanatory note can be added to mapping products. It is notable that Johannesburg, rather than any of the capitals, is the largest city.

Geographical names policy

Place names may derive from any of the local languages; these will be represented using Roman-script characters as well as special characters (see Languages below), which should be retained. For HMG use, geographical names should be taken from official South African sources, such as maps produced by South Africa's national mapping agency, the National Geo-spatial Information or the South African Geographical Names Council (SAGNC) website and publications.

The Africa Geoportal may be used as a helpful source of geospatial data and names[7]; the US Board on Geographic Names (BGN) Geographic Names Server can also be used as a source for names, although it should be noted that not all recent name changes may have been reflected.

Place name changes

Many city, town and street names in South Africa have been changed as part of post-apartheid efforts to promote inclusivity and better reflect the national languages' place names. While some changes involve restoring the majority languages' place names, others introduce entirely new names. It is notable that some name changes are more quickly adopted than others. The South African Geographical Names Council (SAGNC) is the body responsible for the standardization and regulation of geographical names in South Africa. It was established under the South African Geographical Names Act of 1998 and works to ensure consistency and inclusivity in naming of places across the country. The SAGNC regularly publishes Government Notices regarding official geographical names on the South African Government website.

On the next page are some examples of the place name changes. The previous names can be retained, if necessary (in brackets); however, once names are well established, PCGN usually recommends adopting the new names alone, with some exceptions such as Gqeberha (Port Elizabeth), where PCGN would recommend continued reference to the former name.

There are some examples of name changes having been subsequently reconsidered or reversed, for example, the renaming of Louis Trichardt, in Limpopo province, to Makhado (reflecting the name of the municipality). The change was reversed by the Supreme Court of Appeal in 2007, however, in 2011, it was announced once more that the name had been changed to Makhado. This decision was appealed, and in 2014 the name reverted to Louis Trichardt. For clarity, PCGN recommends putting Makhado in brackets: Louis Trichardt (Makhado).

Another example is the city of Durban, within the eThekwini Metropolitan Municipality (which also includes other towns and suburbs), established in 2000. Despite efforts to rename the city to eThekwini,

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[6] There was a proposal to change the name Pretoria to Tshwane, which is the name of the metropolitan municipality, however, there has been resistance, and the change has not occurred to the city itself.

[7] This is a source collated from multiple sources, including Esri, organisations working in Africa and crowdsourced information. It should be used as a supplementary reference.

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resistance persists, and the name of the city remains unchanged. Therefore, for the time being PCGN recommends simply using the name Durban.

For further specific information, please contact PCGN.

Example place name changes in South Africa

New name	Former name	Feature type	Province	Year of change
Bela-Bela	Warmbaths	Town	Limpopo	2002
Bishop Limba	Adendorp	Village	Eastern Cape	2026
Bo-Kaap	Schotchekloof	Suburb	Western Cape	2016
Chief Dawid Stuurman International Airport	Port Elizabeth International Airport	Airport	Eastern Cape	2021
Gqeberha	Port Elizabeth	City and seaport	Eastern Cape	2021
Kariega	Uitenhage	Town	Eastern Cape	2021
KuGompo City	East London	City	Eastern Cape	2026
Musina	Messina	Town	Limpopo	2003
Ngqayi	Katkop	Town	Eastern Cape	2021
Nqanqarhu	Maclear	Town	Eastern Cape	2021
Polokwane	Pietersburg	City	Limpopo	2005
Qonce	King William's Town	Town	Eastern Cape	2021
Robert Sobukwe	Graaff-Reinet	Town	Eastern Cape	2026
Thema	Kudube	Town	Gauteng	2021
Uhelo	Driehoek	Town	Mpumalanga	2021
Winnie Mandela	Brandfort	Town	Free State	2021
Xamdeboo	Aberdeen	Town	Eastern Cape	2026

Languages

South Africa is multilingual, with eleven official spoken languages: Northern Sotho (*nso*)[8]; Sesotho (*sot*)[9]; Setswana (*tsn*)[10]; Swati (*ssw*)[11]; Tshivenda (*ven*)[12]; Xitsonga (*tso*)[13]; Afrikaans (*afr*); English (*eng*); Ndebele (*nbl*)[14]; Xhosa (*xho*); Zulu (*zul*); plus, South African Sign Language (*sfs*). Most South Africans can speak at

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[8] Northern Sotho, also known as *Sesotho sa Leboa*, commonly referred to as Pedi or Sepedi.
[9] Southern Sotho, also known as Sotho.
[10] Also called Tswana, previously spelled Sechuana.
[11] Also called Swazi.
[12] Also called Venda.
[13] Also called Tsonga.
[14] Also called Southern Ndebele.

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least two or more of the official languages. Of these, Afrikaans, Zulu, Xhosa and English are the four most widely spoken languages. English is commonly used in education, government documents and communication at a national level.[15]

In addition to the twelve official languages, the South African constitution makes provision for further non-official "national" languages which the Pan South African Language Board promotes, including the Khoi, Nama and San (*khi*) languages.

All South Africa's languages are written in the Roman script. However, it should be noted that some of South Africa's languages include click consonants: most have between 3 and 5 separate click consonants, and these are represented in differing ways in the written form. For instance, in the Xhosa name Gqeberha, /q/ is a click; in Xhosa, typically clicks are represented with the Roman letters /c/, /q/ and /x/.[16] Others, including the Khoi, Nama and San languages, use symbols from the International Phonetic Alphabet: Bilabial click /ʘ/ [Unicode encoding 0298]; dental click /ǀ/ [Unicode encoding 01C0]; Retroflex click /ǃ/ [Unicode encoding 01C3]; Alveolar click /ǂ/ [Unicode encoding 01C2]; Lateral click /ǁ/ [Unicode encoding 01C1], so these should be reflected in place names as appropriate. For example, the Khoi language name for Cape Town is ǁHui !Gaeb (although PCGN would not recommend using this name on HMG products).

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[15] Incremental Introduction of African Languages – ISASA

[16] "Click" sounds can be difficult for those who are not native speakers to master. There are many online examples of how to say the new names, including this helpful video on YouTube.

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Map of South Africa

ZIMBABWE

BOTSWANA

■ WINDHOEK

Musina

Louis Trichardt
(Makhado)

MOZAMBIQUE

Polokwane

GABORONE ■

Mbombela

NAMIBIA

Rustenburg

■ PRETORIA

Mahikeng

MBABANE

MAPUTO

Soweto Johannesburg

LOBAMBA

Standerton ESWATINI

Vryburg

Kuruman

Thabong-Welkom

*Indian
Ocean*

Upington

Ladysmith

Kimberley

BLOEMFONTEIN ■

■ MASERU

Pietermaritzburg

Springbok

LESOTHO

Durban

De Aar

Kokstad

*Atlantic
Ocean*

Calvina

Victoria
West

Middelburg

Mthatha

Komani

Beaufort
West

Bhisho

Vredenburg

KuGompo City
(East London)

Worcester

Kariega

George

Gqeberha
(Port Elizabeth)

CAPE TOWN ■

LEGEND

– ∙ – ∙ – ∙ –
International
boundary

■ National capital

● City

Note
South Africa has 3 capitals
Pretoria: administrative
Cape town: legislative
Bloemfontein: judicial

*Map produced by PCGN for illustrative purposes only, and is not to be taken necessarily as representing the views of the
UK government on boundaries or political status.*

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Administrative structure

South Africa is divided into nine provinces at the first-order level of administration. The provinces are divided into 52 districts, which are either metropolitan or district municipalities.

Province (English)	ISO 3166-2 code	Available official language province names	Administrative centre	Location of centre
Eastern Cape	ZA-EC	Kapa Bohlabela (*nso*) Kapa Botjhabela (*sot*) Kapa Botlhaba (*tsn*) Kapa Vhubvaḓuvha (*ven*) Kapa-Vuxa (*tso*) Oos-Kaap (*afr*) iPumalanga-Kapa (*nbl*) Mpuma-Koloni (*xho*) Mpumalanga-Kapa (*zul*)	Bhisho	32°50'58"S 27°26'17"E
Free State	ZA-FS	Freistata (*nso*) Freistata (*sot*) Foreisetata (*tsn*) Fureisitata (*ven*) Free State (*tso*) Vrystaat (*afr*) iFreyistata (*nbl*) Freyistata (*xho*) Fuleyisitata (*zul*)	Bloemfontein	29°07'00"S 26°13'00"E
Gauteng	ZA-GP	Gauteng (*nso; ssw; tsn; ven; tso; afr; zul*) Kgauteng (*sot*) iGauteng (*nbl*) Rhawuti (*xho*)	Johannesburg	26°12'16"S 28°02'44"E
KwaZulu-Natal	ZA-KZN	GaZulu-Natala (*nso*) Hazolo-Natala (*sot*) KwaZulu-Natal *(tsn; tso; afr*) HaZulu-Natal (*ven*) iKwaZulu-Natal (*nbl*) KwaZulu-Natali (*ssw; zul)* KwaZulu-Natala (*xho*)	Pietermaritzburg[17]	29°37'00"S 30°23'00"E
Limpopo[18]	ZA-LP	Limpopo (*afr; nbl; nso; sot; ssw; tso; tsn; xho; zul*) Vhembe (*ven*)	Polokwane[19]	23°54'00"S 29°27'00"E

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[17] Often shortened to Maritzburg or PMB.
[18] Formerly Northern Province until 2002.
[19] Name changed in 1995, formerly Pietersburg.

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Province (English)	ISO 3166-2 code	Available official language province names	Administrative centre	Location of centre
Mpumalanga	ZA-MP	Mpumalanga (*afr; nso; sot; ssw; tso; tsn; ven; xho; zul*) iMpumalanga (*nbl*)	Mbombela[20]	25°27'57"S 30°59'07"E
Northern Cape	ZA-NC	Kapa Leboya (*nso; sot*) Kapa Bokone (*tsn*) Kapa Devhula (*ven*) Kapa-N'walungu (*tso*) Noord-Kaap (*afr*) iTlhagwini-Kapa (*nbl*) Mntla-Koloni (*xho*) Nyakatho-Kapa (*zul*)	Kimberley	28°44'18"S 24°45'50"E
North West	ZA-NW	Lebowa Bodikela (*nso*) Leboya (le) Bophirima (*sot*) Devhula-Vhukovhela (*ven*) Bokone Bophirima (*tsn*) N'walungu-Vupeladyambu (*tso*) Noordwes (*afr*) iTlhagwini-Tjhingalanga (*nbl*) Mntla-Ntshona (*xho*) Nyakatho-Ntshonalanga (*zul*)	Mahikeng[21]	25°51'56"S 25°38'37"E
Western Cape	ZA-WC	Kapa Bodikela (*nso*) Kapa Bophirimela (*sot*) Kapa Bophirima (*tsn*) Kapa Vhukovhela (*ven*) Kapa-Vupeladyambu (*tso*) Wes-Kaap (*afr*) iTjhingalanga-Kapa (*nbl*) Ntshona-Koloni (*xho*) Ntshonalanga-Kapa (*zul*)	Cape Town	33°55'31"S 18°25'26"E

Disputed areas

The Orange river forms the international boundary between Namibia and South Africa. South Africa claims the river to the high-water level of the northern bank, but since independence from South Africa, Namibia has sought to change the delineation to the middle of the river. This remains disputed.

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[20] Name changed in 2009, formerly Nelspruit.
[21] Previously spelt Mafikeng.

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Other Significant Locations

PCGN Recommended Name[22]	Variant Names/Spellings	Location	Feature Type
Table Mountain	Huri‡oaxa (*naq*), Tafelberg (*afr*)	33°57'S 18°24'E	Mountain
Cape of Good Hope	Kaap die Goeie Hoop (*afr*)	34°21'N 18°29'E	Cape
Orange	Gariep, Oranjerivier (*afr*), Senqu (Lesotho), Kai !Garib (*naq*)	28°38'N 16°27'E	River (South Africa, Lesotho, Namibia)
Limpopo	-	25°12'S 33°30'E	River (South Africa, Botswana, Mozambique, Zimbabwe)
Kalahari Desert	-	23°00'S 22°E	Desert (Botswana, Namibia, South Africa)

Useful references

- Africa Geoportal: https://www.africageoportal.com/
- BBC Country Profile (no longer updated): South Africa country profile - BBC News
- Ethnologue: www.ethnologue.com (for information on languages)
- FCDO Geographical Names Index (GNI): https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/geographical-names-and-information
- FCDO Travel Advice: South Africa travel advice - GOV.UK (www.gov.uk)
- ISO Online Browsing Platform (OBP): ZA - South Africa (iso.org)
- Omniglot: www.omniglot.com (for information on languages and scripts)
- PCGN Country Names list: https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/country-names
- South Africa Geographic Names Site: https://www.sagns.gov.za
- South Africa national statistics institute: Statistics South Africa (SSA).
- Unicode: www.unicode.org
- US Board on Geographic Names GEOnet Names Server: GNS Search & Download WebApp (nga.mil)

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[22] PCGN usually recommends conventional English names for international features, unless national variants are specifically required, or the relevant countries share an official language.