

25.2.2018 Queenstown, Cala, Elliot

Next, we want to visit the Kingdom of Lesotho, the smallest and highest country of Africa, like an island it is completely surrounded by South Africa. With a land area of about 30,000qkm it is roughly the size of Northrhine-Westfalia in Germany. Lesotho has about 2 million inhabitants, 99% of the people are ethnically from the Basotho tribe, the capital city is Maseru.

We want to enter Lesotho from the east via the famous Sani-Pass. To get there we have to travel through the Eastern Cape Province aka the former Transkei. The Transkei is steeped in history: in the 17th century the Xhosa tribe first settled here, in the 19th century the British took over the area. With the start of the apartheid in 1948 the Transkei got a self-governance status and was declared independent from the Republic South Africa in 1976. The inhabitants became suddenly foreigners in their own country, however the UN never acknowledged this strange political set-up. In 1994 the Transkei became part of the Eastern Cape Province.

The Transkei is a very rural area with many uncontrolled settlements. Most people seem to live from subsistence agriculture which means many small paddocks for crops where mainly corn is grown. Goats and cattle roam freely on the community pastures, which have no or little fencing and are not managed.



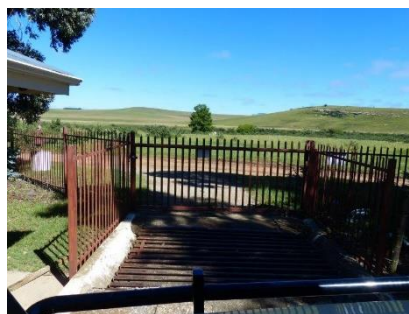
From Cradock we drive through Queenstown to Cala. In Cala, shopping is for the first time a bit annoying. In front of the supermarket quite a few young and obviously unemployed young men are hanging around. They constantly try to talk to us and beg for money and food, we try to speed up shopping as fast as we can.

It is getting late and we still do not know where to stay tonight. Freedom camping in this densely settled area is not such a good idea, especially not after our shopping experience this afternoon in Cala. There are very few camp grounds in this area, but on our map we find the Thompson Dam Elliot Camp in Elliot. The night guard is arriving at the same time with us. He is making his round with big bundle of keys, but we only realize later, that he did not open the bathroom for us.



26.2.2018 McLear, Mount Fletcher, Matatiele

Upon departure this morning from the camp site, we get a little surprise: the main gate is locked and no one around! Our smart night guard went home this morning and locked the gate. He obviously did not remember that guests are still in the camp or he did not care... Luckily, a service number is displayed at the gate and to our astonishment even someone picks up. Wilson already apologizes on the phone for this mishap and ten minutes later he arrives to release us from Elliot prison. He seems so embarrassed about the whole situation, that he does not ask us for any payment but wishes us farewell and a good onward journey.



We pass through McLearn and Mount Fletcher until Matatiele. In McLearn we discover the Cafe „The Bean & Bun“ and support the local economy. The town of Mount Fletcher has nothing to write home about. It's funny, how the expectations about a place - by just reading the place's name - differs so much from reality.



Matatiele is a much bigger place than we expected. The usual search for a camp site is resolved by having a chat with the filling station manager. He tells us, that there is an established camp ground in town – it just isn't listed in any of our guide books or maps. Indeed, it is a nice place with plenty of green grass and huge trees for shade.



27.2.2018 Underberg, Sani Pass

We take the direct road towards Sani Pass and pass through agricultural pasture. The landscape is remarkably green and corn is grown on terraced paddocks. All morning, we only meet three cars all the way.



For lunch we are in Underberg, the gateway to Sani Pass. Well, for the rest of the day, we don't get the iconic advertisement for Underberg out of our heads; Underberg is a very famous German herbal liquor.

From here it's only 35km to the South African border crossing, „only“ so we thought. For the last 10km the road gets so bad, that we are literally crawling. It takes us 1,5 hours for 10km. We start to get worried that we can't reach the border before closing, meaning we would have to camp at the border... Luckily, the border post is open until 6pm and not 4pm as mentioned in our guide book. The formalities are finished quickly as we are the only ones wanting to cross the border. The officers are friendly and very interested in our Unimog. They ask if they can have a look inside and take some photos.





The Sani Pass is quite famous and they claim that people come from far away to once in their life drive this pass. The Sani Pass link between the two border posts of South Africa and Lesotho is only 9km long but 1000 m of elevation have to be covered.

Our Unimog is crawling steadily up the rocky track with constant speed. Towards the top it is getting steeper with a few 180 degree turns which are too narrow for us to take in one go. We have to reverse to make it around the corners, with the bum of our truck hanging over the edge. Our Unimog is swaying quite a bit, but luckily after one hour we reach the top.





The border crossing in Lesotho is easy-going and we receive a seven-day visa for the Kingdom of Lesotho. Lesotho has declared independence from England in 1966 and is since then a constitutional monarchy. Interestingly, Lesotho has the highest literacy rate in Africa, even more women can read (89%) than men (70%).



Just behind the border post there is the „Sani Mountain Lodge“ hosting the highest pub in Africa. We have our well deserved „Top of the Mountain“ beer and try the local Maluti brand. Temperatures up here are much cooler and our hearts are beating faster due to the altitude.

Next to the lodge is a backpacker hostel, which also serves as a campsite. We camp right in front of the hostel. As the generators are switched off in the evening, we spent a quiet night at over 2800 m of elevation.



28.2.2018 Afri-Ski, Moteng Pass

All Lesotho seems to be a roller coaster ride. Most of the main roads are tarred already which makes driving a lot easier. Nevertheless, the elevations which we need to cover are huge with up to 1000 m altitude. The constant up and down slows us down dramatically despite the tarred roads.

Just behind Sani Pass we cross the Khamoqana Pass and reach the highest point at 3240m of elevation – only to descend again on the other side. We stick to the old trucker rule: Descend at the same speed as you ascend. This will prevent your brakes from overheating. We constantly engage our engine brake and beat all slow-drive-records in the world.

It goes all day like this, we constantly work our way up to the top, just to drive down on the other side; always at an altitude between 3200m and 2000m. After the pass is before the pass.





Lesotho is the only country in Southern Africa with a skiing area. Afri-Ski is the proud owner of one downhill skiing slope and one ski lift.

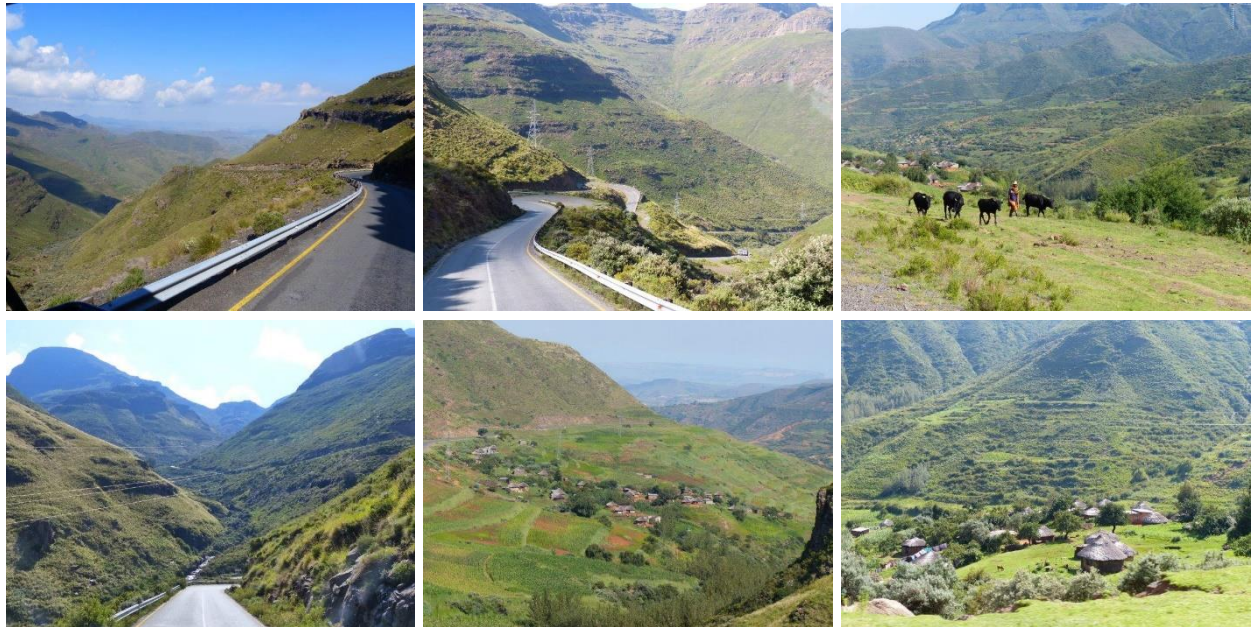
But even in winter it's usually not snowing enough or the snow is melting too quickly during day time. Therefore, snow guns have been installed. One might wonder if it is not a wrong allocation of resources to waste so much water, electricity and funds installing snow guns in such a poor country.

At 4:00pm we call it a day and stop at an even site just behind New Oxbow along the Moteng pass. The travel group and the Unimog are pretty exhausted from the many passes and the constant up and down. Our place looks quite remote, but still here a few goat and cattle herders are passing by. They greet or just look at us, but no one is approaching us asking for food or money. As we have good look around with our binoculars we discover a few small villages and tiny huts, which we assume are for the herders during summer time. They can hardly be seen with the naked eye as they are little dots glued to the slopes and are constructed entirely of local natural materials.



1.3.2018 Maseru, Semongkong

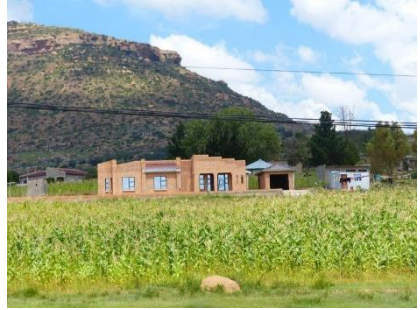
Due to the many mountain passes distances in Lesotho take much longer than they appear. The road is winding around and up and down the mountains; the great elevations are still amazing. It's a very rural area and the rural village life is very interesting to watch, although mainly while passing by only. In the rural areas, the herders often take possession of the entire road with their livestock. There is little traffic and local drivers do expect livestock on the road at all times and are prepared to stop.



We notice that a lot of construction of new houses is going on in Lesotho, with many half-finished buildings. It appears as if construction is always continued as soon as enough money is available.

The traditional round houses are called Mokhorro, but increasingly concrete bricks are used instead of clay bricks and the traditional thatched roofs are replaced by corrugated iron sheets. Some houses are big villas with a double garage and look a bit out of space here.





We follow the „A1“ and pass through Butha Buthe, Teyateyaneng „TY“ and the capital city Maseru in the west of Lesotho. The landscape is amazing, everything is lush green, we can't get enough of the village life and enjoy the many impressions. Our destination for today is Semongkong, location of the highest waterfalls in Africa.





As usual we do get some attention with our Unimog, many people wave or shout at us or whistle loudly as we pass by. But one insane guy decides to lay down on the road right in front of us. We have to break quite hard, as this idiot just doesn't get up – we are not sure if he wanted to commit suicide or if he was simply so impressed by our high clearance that he thought we could just drive over him. We almost come to a full stop and have to slowly crawl up the rather steep pass, as we cannot gain speed anymore. A few swear words in Sesotho would have come in handy now. Well, sign language also works.





In the late afternoon we finally reach Semongkong. The access road to the Semongkong Lodge is pretty wild, we almost thought we were at the wrong place. But one really has to drive through a market with many horses parked by the road and the road looks like a rough 4x4 track.

After driving 270km in 8 hours we are definitely ready for a sundowner beer.

