

Sustainability: SA Success Stories

Sustainability has become a defining force in global tourism, influencing how destinations design, deliver, and refine their offerings. Across the world, tourism products are increasingly expected to consider their environmental, social, and economic impacts not only to meet visitor expectations but to ensure long-term resilience.

In South Africa, this shift is not simply a trend; it is a necessity. The country's natural beauty, rich biodiversity, and vibrant cultures form the foundation of its tourism appeal. Sustainable tourism is therefore a commitment to protect these assets so they can continue to be shared with future generations. It is also a commitment to ensuring that the economic and cultural benefits of tourism reach local communities in meaningful ways.

"Tourism isn't only about creating great experiences, it's about making a meaningful impact," says Arlene Pienaar, Brand Experience Manager at South African Tourism. "Sustainability is central to driving that impact and ensuring our destinations thrive well into the future. South Africa has made remarkable progress in this space, and we celebrate that success through powerful storytelling."

This article highlights a collection of some, regrettably not all, of South Africa's tourism products that are embedding sustainability into their day-to-day operations. Through partnerships between South African Tourism and various tourism product owners, a collection of sustainable tourism stories was compiled. Each story demonstrates, in its own way, how environmental care, cultural preservation, and community upliftment can coexist within a thriving tourism sector.

Conservation in Practice: Golden Gate Highlands National Park



Nestled in the Drakensberg mountains, Golden Gate Highlands National Park shows how protected areas can balance visitor enjoyment with ecological responsibility. Beyond its iconic sandstone cliffs, the park's conservation-driven model supports diverse wildlife and fosters environmental awareness through guided tours and educational programmes.

Infrastructure choices reinforce the park's sustainability ethos: LED lighting, solar-heated water systems, and independent water and energy supplies reduce environmental impact. Community participation is also integral, with local residents employed in a range of roles and local suppliers contributing to the park's operations.

"It's very important in terms of sustainability that you have the right people, with the right training, in the right places," says Paddy Gordon, Park Manager, Golden Gate Highlands National Park.

View story here: <https://www.southafrica.net/gl/en/travel/article/a-golden-approach-to-sustainability>

Cultural Knowledge and Biodiversity: Setšong Tea Crafters



In Limpopo, Setšong Tea Crafters demonstrates how small enterprises can merge cultural preservation with environmental stewardship. The female-owned business collaborates with rural cooperatives to craft teas from indigenous plants, ensuring economic opportunities remain embedded in local ecosystems and community knowledge.

Each tea blend celebrates Bapedi heritage and indigenous flora, while the company's inclusive business model highlights the role of rural women and youth in shaping sustainable value chains.

View story here: <https://www.southafrica.net/gl/en/travel/article/setsong-tea-building-communities-today-for-tomorrow-future>

Community Ownership and Ecological Living: Bulungula Lodge

Bulungula Lodge on the Eastern Cape coast is an example of community-owned tourism where sustainability forms the centre of operations. Fully off-grid, the lodge uses solar power, groundwater, compost toilets, and highly efficient water systems. Greywater irrigation, long-distance recycling efforts, and reforestation projects demonstrate a holistic environmental approach.



Its community programmes spanning education, health, livelihoods, and social cohesion show how tourism infrastructure can serve as both an environmental and social asset.

View story here: <https://www.southafrica.net/gl/en/travel/article/bulungula-lodge-a-pioneer-in-sustainable-living-and-community-development>

Urban Sustainability Meets Culture: Lebo's Soweto Backpackers



In the heart of South Africa's largest township, Lebo's Soweto Backpackers blends sustainability with cultural storytelling. Volunteer opportunities, after-school activities, and responsible tourism partnerships offer visitors ways to contribute to local development.

Local sourcing, communal cooking experiences, and guided heritage walks support small producers and township entrepreneurs. Low-impact mobility options cycling, Tuk-Tuks, and walking tours, spread economic benefits across the community while reducing environmental footprint.

View story here: <https://www.southafrica.net/gl/en/travel/article/lebo-s-soweto-backpackers-offering-experiences-anchored-on-sustainable-and-responsible-practices>

Inclusive Rural Tourism: WOWZULU

WOWZULU, driven by Africa!Ignite, connects rural entrepreneurs and artisans in KwaZulu-Natal to the broader tourism market. Through craft workshops, cultural tours, food experiences, and artist engagements, WOWZULU ensures that tourism income flows directly to under-resourced communities.

The initiative supports women and youth in particular and highlights how rural cultural heritage can be a cornerstone of economic sustainability.

View story here: <https://www.southafrica.net/gl/en/travel/article/wowzulu-pioneering-sustainable-community-tourism-in-rural-kwazulu-natal>



Local Entrepreneurship and Resource Efficiency: Thaba Legae Guest Lodge



Thaba Legae Guest Lodge in North West's Bojona District shows how small accommodation providers can adopt greener practices while supporting community empowerment. Solar installations reduce reliance on the national grid, while reusable water systems and local sourcing reduce waste and strengthen local economies.

Staff-led sustainability initiatives, such as a vegetable garden irrigated with repurposed wastewater, demonstrate how employee creativity can enhance environmental and social outcomes.

View story here: <https://www.southafrica.net/gl/en/travel/article/from-humble-beginnings-to-a-sustainable-oasis-in-the-north-west>

Upcycled Innovation: Lilly Loompa

In Paarl, Lilly Loompa transforms waste into homeware products, showing how sustainable design can drive both environmental and economic value. Using discarded glass, plastic, tin, and wood, the enterprise creates functional goods while generating local jobs.

Plans for a regional upcycling hub reflect the potential for collaboration between universities, entrepreneurs, and sustainability programmes. Through workshops and community outreach, Lilly Loompa raises



awareness about waste reduction and demonstrates how small businesses can influence broader environmental behaviour.

View story here: <https://www.southafrica.net/gl/en/travel/article/transforming-trash-into-treasure-the-lilly-loompa-story>

Sustainability Told Through South African Stories

These examples illustrate how sustainability in South Africa's tourism sector is not a single initiative but a collective movement. Whether through conservation, cultural inclusion, renewable energy, responsible sourcing, or community partnerships, each story shows how tourism can contribute to a more resilient and equitable future.