

South Africa's most scenic routes and mountain passes

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With almost 2800km of often lush, windswept coastline that runs along both the Atlantic and Indian oceans, the snow-capped mountain peaks of the Drakensberg mountain range, and the stark, barren beauty of the Karoo desert lands – the hundreds of scenic drives that slice and meander across South Africa are a traveller's delight.

So get your road-maps out, pack some *padkos* (that's Afrikaans for snacks) and hit the road! Here are some of the more popular routes you can explore.

Sani Pass, Kwa-Zulu Natal

The gateway to Lesotho, Sani Pass is a difficult-to-navigate road that's best attempted in a 4x4 (although the route is being upgraded by government). The reward is the spectacular view of the valleys below the 'Roof of Africa'. When navigating the Sani Pass, that's highest point is 2874m above sea level and features bends and turns that have been named 'Ice Corner' and 'Suicide Bend', be sure to pencil in a beer or two at the highest pub in Africa at the Sani Top Chalet.

Chapman's Peak, Western Cape

The winding 9km road that hugs Chapman's Peak, which is on the western side of the Cape Peninsula between Noordhoek and Hout Bay, is one of the most beautiful coastal drives in the world. It's a feast for the eyes, as you are treated to 180-degree views of the ocean, with a sharp drop down the cliff-side that makes you feel immersed in the seascape. Today Chapman's Peak is a toll road, and should you wish to enjoy the short-but-scenic drive, you pay around R30 for the experience, which goes towards maintaining the road which would otherwise be frequently beset with dangerous rock-falls.

The Garden Route

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Without a doubt, the Garden Route is consistently voted the most scenic drive in South Africa. It is a long, meandering trip that stretches along the coastline from Stormsriver to Mossel Bay. Tourists and holidaymakers typically make the trip over a few days along the N2 highway that connects the towns of Stormsriver, Plettenberg Bay, Knysna, Sedgefield, Wilderness, George and Mossel Bay. There are plenty of activities to keep you busy when staying over in each town, including whale-watching, which is what the Garden Route is most well-known for. Another way you can explore the beautiful climate and scenery of this part of South Africa, is to hop on board the Outeniqua Choo Tjoe, the only remaining scheduled steam train in the country, that'll take you on a scenic 52km adventure through the Garden Route.

Blyde River Canyon, Mpumalanga

The third-largest in the world, the Blyde River Canyon offers one of the most beautiful views in South Africa, in what has become known as the Panorama Route. The drive down the R532 from Graskop takes you to this unique 25000ha reserve located along the Drakensberg escarpment that has some unusual and beautiful features – such as the Bourke's Luck Potholes and the Three Rondavels, which mark either end of the canyon. Perhaps the most well-known viewpoint is from God's Window, which offers the visitor an exquisite panoramic view of the Lowveld, which lies almost 900m below the cliff-side viewing decks.

The Eight Passes, Eastern Cape

As a 4x4 challenge, completing the 'eight mountain passes route' is becoming increasingly popular. First up is the Naudés Nek Pass which is the highest dirt road in South Africa, then the Volunteershoek Pass, which will take you from Rhodes to Tiffindell Ski Resort, and then the Carlislehoek Pass which meanders down to Wartrail. You'll travel through Lundean's Nek, Joubert's Pass, Otto du Plessis and Barkley Pass, before finishing your drive at the scenic Bastervoetpad. What an adventure!