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Visiting Swaziland

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Introduction

Welcome to "Visiting Swaziland: A Guide for Tourists," your comprehensive resource for exploring the unique and culturally rich nation of Eswatini, formerly known as Swaziland. Nestled in the heart of Southern Africa, Eswatini boasts a blend of breathtaking landscapes, vibrant traditions, and wildlife encounters that captivate every traveler. This book will guide you through everything you need to know to plan an enriching and memorable visit to this remarkable country.

Eswatini might be overlooked by travelers in favor of its larger neighbors, but those who do venture here are rewarded with an authentic African experience. From the majestic mountains and rolling savannas to the warm and welcoming Swazi culture, Eswatini offers something for every type of visitor. Whether you're seeking a cultural immersion, a wildlife adventure, or simply a retreat into nature's beauty, this guide will provide the essential insights and tips to maximize your journey.

Traveling to a new country can be both exciting and daunting, especially when it comes to understanding logistics, navigating cultural norms, and ensuring your safety. Our guide addresses these concerns, focusing on the details and specifics critical to your trip to Eswatini. We'll cover how to get there, the entry requirements, and the best times to visit, as well as offer tips on getting around, staying safe, and engaging with the local culture respectfully.

Throughout this guide, we emphasize the importance of responsible and respectful travel. Engaging with local communities and preserving the natural environment are key to ensuring a positive impact on Eswatini's cultural heritage. We'll also introduce you to the traditional festivals, historical sites, and diverse wildlife that make Eswatini a standout travel destination.

Lastly, we offer practical advice on planning your itinerary, including the must-see attractions and lesser-known gems that should not be missed. Whether it's witnessing the grand spectacle of the Umhlanga Reed Dance or exploring the rugged beauty of Malolotja Nature Reserve, our aim is to enhance your experience with insights that help you discover the true spirit of Eswatini.

Embark on this journey with us, and let "Visiting Swaziland: A Guide for Tourists" be your companion in unlocking the treasures of Eswatini. We hope this guide enriches your understanding and appreciation of this extraordinary kingdom and inspires you to explore all it has to offer.

CHAPTER ONE: Getting There

Reaching the Kingdom of Eswatini, a jewel nestled between South Africa and Mozambique, is arguably the first step of your adventure. While geographically compact, accessing this unique nation requires a bit of planning, depending on where your journey originates. Fortunately, whether you prefer the swift convenience of air travel or the scenic possibilities of a road trip, Eswatini is commendably accessible, particularly for those already exploring the Southern African region. Understanding the specifics of each approach will ensure your arrival is as smooth and hassle-free as the rolling hills that characterize much of this beautiful country.

Most international visitors arriving from outside Southern Africa will find themselves touching down at King Mswati III International Airport. Often referred to by its former project name, Sikhuphe Airport, and bearing the IATA code SHO, this is Eswatini's primary gateway to the skies. Located somewhat easterly, near the town of Manzini, it's a relatively modern facility, having replaced the older Matsapha airport for international passenger flights several years ago. While it might lack the sprawling terminals and endless shopping arcades of major global hubs, SHO offers a refreshingly manageable and often quicker arrival experience. Its scale reflects the nation itself – compact, functional, and generally unhurried.

The principal carrier connecting Eswatini to the region is Airlink, a South African airline known for its extensive network across Southern Africa. Eswatini Air, the national flag carrier, also operates services. The most common and frequent route by far is the short hop from Johannesburg's O.R. Tambo International Airport (JNB) in South Africa. Several flights operate daily on this route, making it the logical connection point for travellers arriving from Europe, the Americas, Asia, or elsewhere in Africa. Think of Johannesburg as the main aerial turnstile for reaching the Kingdom.

Beyond Johannesburg, direct flights also connect King Mswati III International Airport with other key Southern African cities, though often less frequently. You might find services linking Eswatini with Cape Town and Durban in South Africa, or potentially Harare in Zimbabwe, depending on current airline schedules. It's always prudent to check the latest flight information directly with the airlines or through a reputable travel agent, as routes and frequencies can change based on season and demand. Booking well in advance is generally recommended, especially if travelling during peak holiday periods coinciding with South African school holidays.

The flight into Eswatini itself can be quite scenic, particularly on a clear day. As the aircraft descends, you'll trade the vast South African Highveld or the coastal plains for the distinctively undulating terrain of Eswatini. Depending on the approach path, you

might catch glimpses of dramatic rock formations, forested valleys, and the patchwork of agricultural land that defines the Swazi landscape. It serves as a beautiful visual appetizer for the natural beauty awaiting you on the ground. Upon landing, the process of disembarking, passing through immigration (detailed in the next chapter), and collecting luggage is typically straightforward compared to larger international airports, getting you on your way relatively quickly.

For those already travelling within Southern Africa, particularly in neighbouring South Africa or Mozambique, arriving by road is an extremely popular and practical alternative. It offers unparalleled flexibility, the chance to soak in the changing landscapes at your own pace, and the ability to easily transport luggage or camping gear. The main arterial roads connecting Eswatini with its neighbours are generally well-maintained tarred highways, making the driving experience surprisingly smooth for much of the journey. Driving allows you to seamlessly integrate a visit to Eswatini into a broader Southern African itinerary.

The most common road entry point is from South Africa, which envelops Eswatini on three sides. Several border posts facilitate this movement, varying in size, operating hours, and the main destinations they serve within Eswatini. Choosing the right border post depends largely on where you are coming from in South Africa and where you are heading within the Kingdom. It's crucial to research your route and the relevant border post operating hours before you set off, as not all are open 24 hours a day. Arriving to find a closed border after a long drive is an experience best avoided.

The Ngwenya/Oshoek border post, located on the N17 highway from Johannesburg and Pretoria, is typically the busiest. Situated in the northwest of Eswatini, it provides direct access towards the capital city, Mbabane, and the popular Ezulwini Valley. Due to its strategic location and connection to South Africa's economic heartland, expect potential queues, especially during peak travel times like the beginning and end of South African holiday long weekends. It usually operates extensive hours, often 24/7, but verifying this before travel remains essential. The drive from Johannesburg to Ngwenya typically takes around four hours, traffic permitting.

Further south, connecting Eswatini with KwaZulu-Natal and the coastal city of Durban, is the Lavumisa/Golela border post. This crossing is situated in the southeastern lowveld region of Eswatini. The drive from Durban might take approximately four to five hours. This border is a key entry point for visitors heading towards the southern game reserves like Mkhaya or exploring the hotter, flatter landscapes of the Lubombo region. While generally less frantic than Ngwenya, it still experiences periods of high traffic. Check its operating hours carefully, as they may not be round-the-clock.

For travellers seeking alternatives or accessing different regions, other posts exist between Eswatini and South Africa. The Mahamba border post, also in the south but further west than Lavumisa, offers another route from KwaZulu-Natal and is often

quieter. Matsamo/Jeppes Reef, in the northeast, is conveniently located for those travelling from or towards the Kruger National Park area in South Africa's Mpumalanga province. Sicunusa/Houdkop lies on the western border, connecting to less-travelled routes in Mpumalanga. Each of these smaller posts usually has more restricted operating hours than Ngwenya, making careful planning even more vital.

Entering from Mozambique involves choosing between two main border posts. The Lomahasha>Namaacha crossing is in the northeast, connecting directly to the main highway from Maputo, Mozambique's capital. This is the primary route for travellers coming from Maputo and the southern Mozambican coast. The Mhlumeni/Goba border post is located further south along the Lubombo mountains and provides an alternative, often quieter, route from the Maputo area or southern Mozambique. Driving from Maputo typically takes a couple of hours, depending on the chosen crossing and conditions at the border.

Regardless of which border post you choose, the crossing procedure involves several steps. You will first need to stop at the exit point of the country you are leaving (South Africa or Mozambique) for passport control. Then, you proceed a short distance to the Eswatini entry point. Here, you will need to present your passport for immigration inspection (visa requirements are covered in Chapter Two). If you are driving a vehicle, additional steps are necessary. You must declare the vehicle and pay a mandatory road toll fee. This fee is payable in cash, typically in either Emalangeni or South African Rand.

Be prepared with the vehicle's original registration documents. If you are driving a rental car, it is absolutely essential to have arranged cross-border authorization with the rental company beforehand. They must provide you with a letter of permission and potentially certified copies of the registration papers. Attempting to cross an international border in a rental car without the explicit permission and correct documentation from the rental agency will almost certainly result in being denied entry or exit. For borrowed vehicles not registered in the driver's name, a police-certified affidavit from the owner granting permission is usually required.

Border officials may also conduct customs inspections, asking about goods you are bringing into the country and potentially searching your vehicle. It's wise to be aware of customs allowances and restrictions beforehand. Patience is key during the border crossing process. While officials are generally professional, procedures can sometimes seem slow, especially if there are queues or during shift changes. Having all your documentation readily accessible will help expedite the process on your end. Filling out any required entry forms completely and legibly is also important.

A significant point of caution concerns driving near the borders, particularly after dark. The reference information highlights a risk of carjacking, and this warning should be heeded. The areas immediately surrounding border posts, especially on quieter routes

or during nighttime hours, can unfortunately attract criminal elements targeting vehicles perceived to belong to tourists or travellers carrying valuables. It is strongly advised to plan your journey so that you cross the border and drive away from the immediate border vicinity during daylight hours. If unavoidable delays mean you arrive near a border close to closing time or after dusk, consider finding secure accommodation nearby and crossing the next morning.

The road toll fee mentioned earlier is a standard charge for foreign-registered vehicles entering Eswatini. The amount can vary slightly but is usually quite modest. Ensure you have sufficient cash in either South African Rand (ZAR) or Emalangi (SZL) to pay this, as card facilities are often unavailable for this specific payment at the border itself. South African Rand is widely accepted throughout Eswatini at a one-to-one parity with the Lilangeni, so carrying Rand obtained before crossing is very convenient.

For those contemplating using cross-border bus services, companies like Greyhound or Intercap sometimes operate routes from major South African cities (like Johannesburg or Pretoria) to Eswatini, typically terminating in Mbabane or Manzini. While this can be a budget-friendly option, it offers less flexibility than self-driving and journey times can be significantly longer due to multiple stops and border procedures for all passengers. The comfort level may also vary. While a viable choice for some travellers, weighing the convenience against potential drawbacks is important.

In essence, whether you choose to fly directly into King Mswati III International Airport or embark on a road trip through one of the well-trodden border crossings, getting to Eswatini is a manageable undertaking. Air travel offers speed and convenience, particularly from Johannesburg, whisking you into the heart of the region quickly. Road travel provides flexibility, scenic opportunities, and is often the preferred method for those exploring Southern Africa more broadly. Whichever path you take, a little preparation – checking flight schedules or border hours, ensuring vehicle documentation is in order, and planning your arrival time strategically – will set the stage for a smooth and enjoyable entry into this captivating kingdom. The journey itself becomes part of the experience, offering glimpses of the diverse landscapes that await within Eswatini's borders.

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