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Cities of Swaziland

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Introduction

Eswatini, formerly known as Swaziland, is a land of striking contrasts, where dramatic landscapes cradle vibrant cities and towns threaded with rich cultural traditions. Though small in size, this southern African kingdom boasts an extraordinary variety of urban centers—each with its own story, economic role, and cultural treasures. The cities and towns of Eswatini form the arteries of the nation, connecting its people to their history, to one another, and to the promise of development in a rapidly changing world.

This book, *Cities of Swaziland*, offers readers a comprehensive look at the great cities of the nation—their unique histories, their pivotal roles in the country's growth, and the experiences they provide for visitors. From the executive capital of Mbabane, perched high in the misty hills, to the bustling marketplace of Manzini, and the royal ceremonies held in Lobamba, each city has helped shape the Kingdom's identity. Here, urban life coexists with tradition: modern shopping malls rise alongside open-air craft markets; government offices fringe verdant valleys; and annual festivals bring age-old customs to the forefront of vibrant public life.

Eswatini's cities are more than centers of administration and commerce—they are living showcases of the country's diverse heritage. Major urban hubs like Mbabane and Manzini illustrate the energy of economic activity and progressive development, while smaller towns like Piggs Peak, Big Bend, and Siteki capture the essence of rural life, agriculture, and artisan craftsmanship. Throughout, the dual rhythm of city and country is evident, as each locale weaves together the threads of tradition and aspiration.

For visitors, the cities of Eswatini present both gateway and destination. Whether exploring the stately heart of Mbabane, wandering through lively markets, or seeking adventure in the nature reserves that border many urban areas, travelers encounter a tapestry of experiences in every corner of the kingdom. Local markets teem with vibrant sights and sounds; cultural centers invite discovery of Swazi music, dance, and ritual; and natural wonders—from towering granite monoliths to sweeping valleys—lie just beyond the city boundaries.

The journey through Eswatini's towns and cities also reveals the challenges and opportunities facing this dynamic nation. Urbanization is on the rise, and towns are evolving under the pressures of modernization, migration, and economic change. Yet, the fabric of local life remains resilient: communities preserve their identity through festivals, craft traditions, and a close connection to the land.

In *Cities of Swaziland*, readers will find both a celebration of place and a practical guide. Each chapter illuminates a city's landmarks, way of life, and surrounding attractions, all within the broader sweep of Eswatini's past and future. Whether you are a traveler planning your journey, a student of African geography, or a Swazi wanting to rediscover your urban heritage, this book invites you into the living cities of Swaziland—where history continues to unfold, and every city is a story waiting to be explored.

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CHAPTER ONE: Mbabane: The Executive Capital

Nestled amidst the Dlangeni Hills, where the Mbabane River and its tributary, the Polinjane, weave through a landscape of rolling hills and temperate breezes, lies Mbabane – the executive capital and the most populous city of Eswatini. Perched at an altitude of 1,200 meters in the Highveld plateau of the Hhohho Region, Mbabane offers a refreshing climate, often a welcome respite from the hotter climes found elsewhere in the kingdom. It is a city that, while modern in its function, still retains a tangible connection to the natural beauty that envelops it, making it a compelling starting point for understanding Eswatini's urban tapestry.

The story of Mbabane as a significant settlement began in 1902, when it was designated as the administrative center under British colonial rule. This pivotal decision laid the groundwork for the city's future, cementing its role as the nerve center of governance. For nearly a century, it diligently served this purpose before officially gaining city status in 1992, a testament to its growth and increasing importance. Over the decades, Mbabane has expanded, transforming from a colonial outpost into a bustling hub of activity, reflecting the aspirations and evolution of the Eswatini nation itself.

Today, Mbabane is home to an estimated 68,000 to 95,000 residents, a vibrant mix predominantly composed of the Swazi people, alongside a diverse array of other cultures. This cultural mosaic contributes to the city's dynamic atmosphere, where traditional Swazi customs blend seamlessly with contemporary influences. Christianity and African indigenous religions are widely practiced, contributing to the rich spiritual and cultural fabric of the city. Strolling through Mbabane, one can observe this harmonious coexistence, from the architectural styles to the daily interactions of its inhabitants.

The economic pulse of Mbabane beats strongly to the rhythm of government activities. As the administrative capital, it naturally houses numerous government ministries, departments, and public institutions, providing significant employment opportunities and driving local commerce. Beyond its administrative functions, Mbabane serves as a crucial commercial hub for the surrounding region. The city's economy benefits significantly from tourism, drawing visitors who come to explore its urban amenities and use it as a base for venturing into the spectacular natural attractions nearby. Furthermore, sugar exports play a vital role in the national economy, with Mbabane contributing to the broader logistical and administrative framework supporting this key industry.

While the echoes of a bygone era can still be heard, particularly in the city's historical

buildings, Mbabane has embraced modernity in its infrastructure. The city center is remarkably accessible, making it easy for both residents and visitors to navigate on foot. The Swazi Plaza and Mbabane Mall form the bustling heart of the downtown area, offering a comprehensive range of services. Here, one can find major banks such as Standard Bank, Nedbank, Swazi Bank, and First National Bank, catering to the financial needs of the city. These commercial centers also host a variety of shops, internet cafés, and other contemporary amenities, providing a convenient and well-equipped experience for everyone.

Mbabane's strategic location further enhances its economic significance. It hosts the headquarters of many of Eswatini's corporations, including the Central Bank of Eswatini, underscoring its role as a financial powerhouse within the kingdom. For those engaged in trade and industry, the city features two designated sites for light industries, supporting local manufacturing and production. Connectivity to the broader region is also excellent, with the Ngwenya-Oshoek border crossing to South Africa situated a mere 26 kilometers away, facilitating trade and travel between the two nations.

The Mbabane Municipality is not content to rest on its laurels; it is actively engaged in Local Economic Development (LED) initiatives, demonstrating a forward-thinking approach to urban growth. These initiatives are designed to attract further investment in key sectors such as retail, real estate, manufacturing, and business-support services. The municipality also champions the growth of small businesses, recognizing their crucial contribution to local economies and job creation. Furthermore, efforts are underway to enhance the skills of the local workforce, ensuring that Mbabane remains a competitive and attractive destination for both businesses and individuals.

Beyond its economic and administrative functions, Mbabane offers a delightful blend of urban convenience and natural allure, making it an increasingly attractive destination for tourists. While it may not boast grand, singular tourist attractions within its immediate urban sprawl, its charm lies in its vibrant local market and its position as a gateway to some of Eswatini's most breathtaking natural and cultural sites. The local market is a sensory feast, a lively tableau where visitors can immerse themselves in Swazi culture. Here, one can browse an impressive array of local arts and crafts, discover traditional Swazi medicine, and sample fresh produce, all while soaking in the authentic atmosphere of everyday life.

For those seeking adventure and a deeper connection with nature, Mbabane serves as an ideal launchpad to a plethora of exciting destinations. Just a short drive from the city lies Sibebe Rock, the world's second-largest monolith. This majestic granite dome offers not only breathtaking panoramic views of the surrounding landscape but also presents challenging and rewarding hiking opportunities for the intrepid explorer. The sheer scale and natural grandeur of Sibebe Rock are truly awe-inspiring, making it a must-visit for anyone in the region.

Another jewel in Eswatini's crown, easily accessible from Mbabane, is the Mlilwane Wildlife Sanctuary. As Eswatini's oldest protected reserve, Mlilwane offers a tranquil escape into the wild, providing opportunities for guided walks, invigorating horse riding excursions, and thrilling mountain biking trails. The sanctuary is a haven for an abundance of wildlife, including graceful zebras, various species of antelopes, and charming warthogs, all roaming freely in their natural habitat. It's a place where one can truly unwind and reconnect with the natural world, far from the hustle and bustle of city life.

Venturing further afield, but still within comfortable reach of Mbabane, lies the Malolotja Nature Reserve. This vast highland reserve is a testament to Eswatini's rugged beauty, characterized by its dramatic mountains, verdant valleys, and cascading waterfalls. Malolotja is a paradise for hikers and birdwatchers, with numerous trails catering to all levels of experience, offering unparalleled opportunities to explore its diverse ecosystems. For those seeking an extra dose of adrenaline, the reserve also offers a thrilling canopy tour, allowing visitors to glide through the treetops and experience the forest from a unique perspective.

For a deeper dive into Swazi culture and history, the Mantenga Nature Reserve and Cultural Village is an essential stop. This serene sanctuary provides a peaceful retreat into Eswatini's wild side, with lush forests, meandering rivers, and the captivating Mantenga Waterfall. The adjacent cultural village offers a truly immersive experience, showcasing traditional Swazi architecture, lifestyle, and customs. Visitors can witness captivating performances of traditional dance and storytelling, gaining a profound appreciation for the rich heritage of the Swazi people. It's a living museum, vibrant and engaging, that brings history to life before your very eyes.

The famed Ezulwini Valley, often referred to as the "valley of heaven," is conveniently located near Mbabane and is another popular tourist destination. This scenic valley is dotted with resorts, craft markets, and cultural sites, making it a vibrant hub for both relaxation and exploration. It's a place where one can indulge in a luxurious stay, discover local crafts, or delve deeper into Swazi traditions, all within a picturesque setting. The valley's name itself evokes a sense of peace and natural splendor, perfectly capturing its essence.

Within Mbabane itself, the King Sobhuza II Memorial Park stands as a site of profound historical and cultural significance. This memorial honors King Sobhuza II, a revered monarch who played a pivotal role in Eswatini's journey to independence and nation-building. It serves as a place for reflection and remembrance, offering visitors an insight into the nation's past and the legacy of its leaders. Additionally, for those with an appreciation for the performing arts, the Swaziland Theatre Club in Mbabane provides a venue for various performances, contributing to the city's cultural scene.

Mbabane is also a center for education, housing one of the three campuses of the University of Eswatini. This institution plays a vital role in nurturing the intellectual growth and development of the nation's youth. Furthermore, the city is home to the Waterford-Kamhlaba United World College of Southern Africa, an internationally renowned school that attracts students from across the globe, fostering a diverse and multicultural learning environment. These educational institutions contribute to the city's vibrant intellectual atmosphere and underscore its importance as a center of learning.

In essence, Mbabane is more than just the executive capital; it is a city that embodies the spirit of Eswatini itself. It seamlessly blends administrative efficiency with commercial dynamism, all while offering a warm welcome to visitors eager to explore its unique cultural tapestry and the stunning natural wonders that lie just beyond its urban embrace. From its humble beginnings as a colonial administrative center to its current status as a bustling and progressive city, Mbabane continues to evolve, reflecting the enduring spirit and aspirations of the Kingdom of Eswatini.

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