

## Lesotho: How an African country can offer winter sports.

For many people, winter sports are one of the highlights of the year: skiing or snowboarding down towering mountain slopes before warming up with a drink in a cozy ski lodge. Most people associate this experience with countries such as Austria, Italy, and Switzerland. But deep in southern Africa lies a ski resort that completely breaks this stereotype: Afriski.

Located at an altitude of 3,222 meters (10,571 feet) in the Maluti Mountains, Afriski sits in the small, mountainous kingdom of Lesotho. Thanks to its exceptional elevation, Lesotho is one of the very few African countries where winter sports are genuinely possible.



Flag of Lesotho. Source: Wikipedia.org

### History of Lesotho

Lesotho is a country in southern Africa. Like Eswatini, it is completely surrounded by South Africa, making it an enclaved country with no direct access to the sea or the ocean.

Although Lesotho's history as an independent nation is relatively short, it is remarkably rich. During the early nineteenth century, southern Africa was engulfed in a period of widespread conflict and upheaval known as the *Lifaqane*. Under the leadership of Chief Moshoeshe I, the ancestors of today's Basotho people sought refuge in the Drakensberg Mountains, also known as the Maloti (or Maluti) Mountains. The region's rugged



terrain provided natural protection and enabled them to survive this turbulent period.

Following incursions by both Dutch settlers and the British, the Basotho eventually came under British control. In 1880, however, the Basuto Gun War broke out—a violent conflict between the Basotho and the British colonial authorities. The war ended in favor of the Basotho, who successfully resisted British attempts to disarm them. Four years later, Basutoland was declared a British Crown Colony, placing it directly under the authority of the British Crown.

On October 4, 1966, the Kingdom of Lesotho officially gained its independence. Forty years later, in 2006, the country's current national flag was adopted (see the source at the top of this article).



Lesotho on the South African map. Source: Trouw.nl

## How are winter sports in Lesotho possible?

Now that we know how Lesotho came into existence and how the Basotho people settled in the Drakensberg Mountains, an important question arises: how is it possible to go skiing or snowboarding in an African country?

The Drakensberg Mountains, also known as the Maloti (or Maluti) Mountains, reach exceptionally high elevations. Large parts of the range lie above 3,000 meters (9,840 feet), with the highest skiable point at the Mahlasela Pass, which stands at 3,222 meters (10,571 feet). At these elevations, temperatures are significantly lower than at the foot of the mountains.

But why is that? As you climb higher, the air becomes thinner, meaning there are fewer air molecules above you and the atmospheric pressure decreases. Because thinner air retains less heat, temperatures drop with increasing altitude. The way the Sun heats the Earth also plays an



important role. The Sun does not directly warm the air; instead, it heats the Earth's surface, which then radiates heat into the atmosphere. The farther you are from this warmed surface, the colder the air becomes.

The exceptional elevation of the Drakensberg Mountains therefore makes snowfall possible, creating the conditions needed for winter sports such as skiing and snowboarding. Without these unique geographical conditions, winter sports in Lesotho would simply be impossible.

## **Holiday advice**

Before you trade your annual ski trip to the Alps for a flight to the Drakensberg Mountains, there are a few things you should know about Lesotho's ski resort.

The resort is relatively small, featuring just one ski slope, a restaurant, and an après-ski bar. Only one part of the mountain is suitable for skiing and snowboarding. What we consider the summer months in the Northern Hemisphere is actually the peak winter sports season in Lesotho. The best conditions can be found between June and August. So, if you're planning a ski trip in February or March, Lesotho won't be an option—instead, you'll have to swap your summer holiday for a relatively modest ski or snowboarding experience.

Because natural snowfall is unpredictable, much of the slope is covered with artificial snow. This helps Lesotho maintain its winter sports industry and ensures that skiing and snowboarding remain possible every year, even when natural snowfall is limited.



The only ski slope in Lesotho. Source: [skiinformatie.nl](http://skiinformatie.nl)



## Conclusion

Although Lesotho's ski resort is modest in size, the story behind it is anything but ordinary. What began with the Basotho people seeking refuge in the Drakensberg Mountains to escape conflict eventually led to the creation of an independent nation less than eighty years ago. The fact that this mountainous sanctuary now offers winter sports tourism makes Lesotho's story truly unique.

The ski resort is therefore much more than just a place to ski or snowboard. It tells the story of a people who grew into a nation and of a country that, even in the heart of Africa, has carved out its own unexpected place on the world map.

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