

WELCOME TO LOBATSE AND THE SOUTH



South of Gaborone is hill country, with a lot of interest for both hikers and historians. We'll return to the hiking and the history later, because there is more.



Lithops lesliei from the seed catalogue of 'Lithops Passion'. Growing in the wild these plants are very difficult to spot.

Botanists will find populations of Lithops, the aberrant succulent plants that avoid being eaten by blending in with the surrounding stones. They are popular in succulent houses around the world, but here they are growing in their natural habitat. Aloes of various species abound in the area. And ferns are rare in most of Botswana, but not in the deep, shaded gorges amongst the Mogonye hills.

Wildlife enthusiasts will find the biggest colony of vultures in the country, nesting on the rocky face of a hill near Otse; and freshwater crabs in the perpetual streams around Lobatse itself. And the grassy hills are home to Botswana's only near-endemic bird species, the short-clawed lark.

Golfers will find the smallest golf club in Botswana, boasting just four members, and an overgrown course with an enormous fairway which once doubled as a runway for Air Alaska as they flew enormous planes with questionable cargoes to other parts of Africa during the Cold War.





The view from the upstairs deck of the derelict Lobatse Golf Clubhouse

Those with an interest in culture will find much of interest in the village of Kanye, capital of the Bangwaketse Tribe and host of the annual Mmakgodumo Cultural Festival. There is ancient San rock art in the hills, and modern potteries in the surrounding area.

But now for the history and the hiking.

This is David Livingstone country. You can visit his mission station, preserved as a national monument, along with a tree he used for holding weekly medical clinics. The mission station was destroyed by a Boer commando in the middle of the 19th Century.

The hills were also the scene of the Battle of Dimamwe, a battle which saw a Tswana confederation defeat the Boers of the Transvaal in the 1850's and which established the Notwane and Limpopo Rivers as the formal boundary between Bechuanaland and the Transvaal.

There are battlefields from the Boer War at the end of the 19th century too, and a small war cemetery.

Lobatse itself was the training camp for the Batswana volunteers who went to fight in the Second World War; and the place where King George VI came to thank the Batswana for their contribution to WW2, said to be the largest per capita effort of any African nation.



Lobatse was also an important staging post for political dissidents fleeing both apartheid South Africa and colonial Mozambique, and some very famous people spent time here. Samora Machel, Oliver Tambo and Nelson Mandela were just three of many. The Samora Machel Museum in Lobatse is a joint venture between the governments of Mozambique and Botswana, and dedicated to this period of history. You can also see the house which was a temporary home for Nelson Mandela, now preserved as a national monument.



Later, Lobatse was the home of the Bechuanaland Legislative Council, the body which drafted the constitution of Botswana prior to independence. The Legislative Council buildings still stand near the Lobatse High Court. And finally, the hiking. This is an area of hills and gorges, and there are tracks and trails everywhere. It is also home to the highest hill in Botswana. Strangely, there are two contenders for this title and no-one really knows which is the higher of the two. They are so close in height that we may never know. If you want to be sure that you have reached the highest point in Botswana the only solution is to climb both. At around 1500m this is easily possible.



Monalanong Hill, the highest hill in Botswana ? The Mogonnye Gorge campsite makes a convenient base for an ascent.