Preserving Tradition: South Africa's Cultural Villages

South Africa is a veritable “potjiepot” of diverse cultures and traditions, from the Afrikaner to the Zulus. Over the last few years the increasing demand for accessible cultural tourism has brought to life the heart and soul of South African cultural heritage through the establishment and development of the concept of The Cultural Village. A cultural village allows a visitor to experience a traditional way of life, whether it is in the hills of Zululand or along the dusty streets of Soweto.

Less than an hour's drive from Johannesburg, a kaleidoscope of African cultures awaits you at Lesedi Cultural Village. This multi-cultural African village is divided into four reconstructed traditional homesteads: Zulu, Xhosa, Pedi and Basotho. Each homestead is inhabited by a family, and visitors to Lesedi will become the welcome houseguests of one of these families. Additional huts have been constructed for this purpose, but include all the creature comforts of the western world – like flushing toilets, hot showers and cozy beds!

The head of each home will act as personal escort to guests for the duration of their stay, allowing the visitor to get to know the many colourful and fascinating aspects of the cultures of the people of Lesedi. The full cultural program on offer includes a traditional welcome by all the people of Lesedi, a multi-visual presentation on the history and origins of today’s rainbow nation, guided tours of the four homesteads, participatory traditional singing and dancing at the Boma, ancestral storytelling (accompanied by Mamba Juice – a unique Lesedi potion) and a Pan-African Buffet in the Nyama Choma Restaurant. The Ndebele craft market and curio shop offers guests a shopping experience of a lifetime.

All the traditions of the Basotho people have been preserved in the Basotho Cultural Village, in the QwaQwa National Park (recently incorporated into the world-renowned Golden Gate Highlands National Park).

Here Basotho huts ranging from the sixteenth century to present day are on display. Each one is built and furnished accordingly and decorated in the traditional “litem” art by Basotho women. People in traditional dress play different roles to accurately portray the bygone culture and lifestyle of the South Sotho people.
Visitors to the village are taken to the "Khatloa", the gathering place of men, where the chief bestows his permission to guests to enter his village and explore the ways of his people. He will offer his hospitality in the form of a sip of traditional Sotho beer and a game of "Maraba-raba".

Visitors have the opportunity to consult the "Ngaka" (the chief’s bone thrower) in his professional capacity as traditional healer. Invited into the homes of the first and second wives, visitors will enjoy some "motoho" and "dipabi".

The Matlakeng Herbal Trail is a walking trail along typical sour grassveld that will reveal impressive sandstone cliffs and unpolluted mountain streams. Escorted by an ecologist and the Basotho Ngaka; grasses, roots, herbs, leaves and bark are pointed out and explained how they can cure ailments ranging from toothache to sexually transmitted diseases.

In the heart of Zululand, near Empangeni, Stewart’s Farm Zulu Lodge offers ethnic overnight accommodation, affording the visitor an enriching experience of traditional Zulu culture.

Dumazulu Lodge and Traditional Village is surrounded by the Hluhluwe-Umfolozi, Mkuzi and St Lucia Parks. An ideal location for a combined game-viewing and Zulu cultural experience, Dumazulu Lodge and Traditional Village portrays Kraal residents carrying out age-old traditions, including spear, shield and clay pot making, basket-weaving, beadwork and Sangoma bone-throwing.

Situated in the breathtaking Mfule Valley, Protea Hotel Simunye is a remote natural heritage site that can only be accessed by horseback, donkey cart, ox cart, or (as requested) by 4x4. Created in the Zulu tradition using natural and sustainable materials from the surrounding valley, accommodation is either in the village or in the lodge across the Mfule River. Guests will experience traditional Zulu ceremonies including vibrant dancing, fireside storytelling, and rhythmic drumming, and learn about the use of natural herbal medicines from a resident Sangoma.
Protea Hotel Shakaland offers visitors a romantic stay reliving the mystery and excitement of the days of Shaka Zulu, King of the Zulus in the Great Kraal, authentically recreated overlooking the Phobane Lake. The village and hotel resort have been built on the set of ‘Shaka Zulu’, the movie, and serve up a cultural experience that includes tribal dancing, ancient lore, assegai-wielding warriors, spear-making and beer-drinking ceremonies, and afford a deeper understanding of the Zulu nation. Accommodation in the traditional beehive huts is first class, with en-suite bathrooms.

12km west of Middelburg, the Botshabelo Historical Town is a typical Ndebele Village that has been set up by the Middelburg town council to preserve the century’s old culture.

Made famous by the short stories of Herman Charles Bosman, the Groot Marico in the North-West Province is one of the places first settled by the Voortrekkers in the Transvaal. The Mampoer Tour allows the visitor to taste the extraordinarily powerful alcohol of the indigenous mampoer fruit. There is a cultural tour to old farm houses where bread is still baked in an outside oven. Visitors can enjoy traditional
boere geregte
(cuisine) in the form of
gemmer bier
(ginger beer) and
melk tert
(milk tart).

Soweto is a former township from the Apartheid era. Originally it housed the temporary living quarters for mine workers before it was declared a ghetto for the black population of Johannesburg in the infamous Urban Areas Act in 1923.

Now a city in its own right, Soweto is a mix-and-match world of stark contrasts. Luxurious mansions rub shoulders with tin shanties. Outside dilapidated low-cost housing the latest BMW is parked in the sun. Home to the largest public hospital in the world, Soweto still claims the world's highest HIV infection rate.

Township tours into Soweto are increasingly popular, with visits to historical sites including Hector or Petersen Museum, Nelson Mandela’s House and Freedom Square.
A cultural village not only offers the overseas (or local) visitor an unforgettable, once-in-a-lifetime peek into the traditions and heritage of a specific culture, but acts in proactively preserving that culture for future generations.