

The freedom to drive yourself

The ins and outs of self-driving tours in Africa

Ah, to have the steering wheel in your hands and be in control of where you go, what you see, of your destiny - at least for that day. Wouldn't you love to freedom to drive yourself in Africa? The question is, can you, or are you worried about driving in Africa? Don't be! It's lots of fun to be able to pick your own roads, your own time-schedule and your own stops. In and around the main cities traffic jams occur at peak hours, but once you hit the countryside, open empty roads are the norm. Like anywhere else in the world, drive cautiously and careful and you'll be fine self-driving. Having said that, some countries are much better suited to this than others. And each country has its own peculiarities and rules. To make it easy, we have made three categories for you: the emphatic 'YES', the careful 'ok' and the 'no'.

- Let's have the 'no' out of the way first: Rwanda, Kenya, Tanzania and Madagascar. Not because you can't rent a car or it's dangerous, but because the roads are not well signposted and can be very bad. This is especially true in the game reserves where you can easily get lost or stuck.
- The careful 'ok': Zambia, Zimbabwe and Malawi. You can self-drive, but be prepared for potholes and/or police checkpoints - and finding your destination can be tricky in places.
- The emphatic 'yes': South Africa, Namibia, Botswana, eSwatini and Lesotho. Mozambique is halfway between a 'yes' and an 'ok'.

From here on we will focus on the 'yes' destinations, all in southern Africa. Are you ready for an adventure in these countries? Here are our Tales from Africa Travel tips to make your self-drive holiday in southern Africa the best ever.



Driving conditions

Driving is on the left-hand side of the road and your steering wheel is on the right side (except in Mozambique and Rwanda). If you are not used to this don't worry: most people pick this up very quickly. Interestingly, when you think you are switching on your indicator your windscreen wipers will move instead. Yes, these are the other way around as well - in most cars.

The main roads are tarred roads, most of them in good condition. Secondary and tertiary tarred roads are sometimes well endowed with corrugation and/or potholes. Some of the most scenic drives are on the smaller gravel roads and this is part of what makes the freedom to drive yourself so much fun. Also, great experiences like most of

Namibia, the battlefields in Kwazulu-Natal, the R 355 through South Africa's Karoo region and Moremi game reserve in Botswana are only accessible by untarred, graded dirt roads. The well-maintained ones are actually not that hard to drive on, but you have to be able to stand a bit of sand and dust. The worst ones demand 4x4 skills. We always offer an optional 4x4 training if you include these roads in your itinerary.

Plan your journey

All distances and speeds are in kilometres and roads and turn-offs are usually well signposted. We'll plan your journey carefully: if you're not used to driving long distances, rather break the journey, as fatigue causes accidents. Also take into account your speed will be much lower than on a tarred road in Europe or America. Take your time and enjoy the ride!

Safety

Safety and car theft in (especially South) Africa have made headlines around the world and this can be a worry when thinking about the freedom to drive yourself. Though the situation in reality is much better than described, it IS wise to take precautions and do what most South Africans do. So, when driving anywhere in South Africa, use common sense and apply safety precautions like not driving after dark, keeping doors and windows locked up in towns, not leaving valuables in sight and parking in guarded spots.



Which car should I drive?

How you enjoy the freedom to drive yourself depends for a large part on picking the right car. Southern Africa has lots of mountains and huge distances. A small car is fine if you limit yourself to cities or a small area. If you go further afield, pick a car that has enough power to go uphill at some pace. A sedan type is good enough for most tours. However, a car with a higher ground clearance makes for a more comfortable ride, so we often offer that as a first choice. Most of these SUV's or 2x4's come with larger wheels than regular sedans and are as a result much more comfortable for long distance driving and for exploring the gravel roads. If you are travelling with more than 2 persons, the extra luggage space is a must.

A 4x4 is only needed for specific stretches or when going to Namibia. The gravel roads there are pretty good, but a 4x4 gives you much more grip, necessary unless you are an experienced gravel road driver.

What papers do I need?

You need to be at least 23 years of age and have your valid driving license for at least 3 years. If you are 21 or 22 you pay an additional surcharge (and still need to have your license for at least 3 years). If your driving license is not in English, you'll also need an additional International Driver's License. The main renter also needs a valid credit card in his/her name.

Traffic

Most other traffic is motorized, but donkey-carts are still used widely. These move much slower than most people expect. Also, many people use the road as a footpath. Take special care when schools go out: you'll see many pupils walking home and likely to cross without warning. Cyclists are not very common due to the many hills and mountains we have, but if the terrain is suitable for cycling there will be plenty.

Pay special attention to the many 'taxis': (usually) white minivans that form the backbone of public transport in Africa. These are exempt from speeding, stopping or indeed most other traffic regulations – at least in their own mind. And they have the uncanny ability to materialize out of nothing.



Game driving

Doing your own game drive is often one of the main reasons to choose the freedom to drive yourself. Inside game reserves animals ALWAYS have right of way. Give them respect and the space they need and you will be fine. If an elephant, buffalo or rhino shows signs of unrest or worse, approaches you, back-up immediately without making too much noise. And if it is a big cat, don't forget to close your window... Funny enough they won't bother with people sitting in an open safari vehicle! They consider that to be a weird moving rock, but limbs and appendages sticking out of a vehicle are recognized as edible parts. As are people on foot, so never, ever leave your vehicle inside a game reserve – except where allowed or with a licensed game ranger.

When you have booked with us you get a handy list of things to have in your car and more driving tips before you go. Now it's time to go out there and enjoy your road trip to Southern Africa!