


Free State

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Capital:	Bloemfontein
Principal languages:	Sesotho 64,4% Afrikaans 11,9% isiXhosa 9,1%
Population:	2 965 600
Area (km ²):	129 480
% of total area:	10,6%
GDPR* at current prices (2004):	R75 827 million
% of total GDP**:	5,5%

* *GDPR (Gross Domestic Product per Region)*

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The Free State lies in the heart of South Africa, with Lesotho nestling in the hollow of its bean-like shape. Between the Vaal River in the north and the Orange River in the south, this immense rolling prairie stretches as far as the eye can see.

The capital, Bloemfontein, has a well established institutional, educational and administrative infrastructure, and houses the Supreme Court of Appeal. The city, also referred to as the City of Roses, is home to some of the province's many tertiary educational institutions, including the University of the Free State and the Central University of Technology.

Important towns include Welkom, the heart of the goldfields and one of the few completely preplanned cities in the world; Odendaalsrus, another gold-mining town; Sasolburg, which owes its existence to the petrol-from-coal installation established there; Kroonstad, an important agricultural, administrative and educational centre; Parys, on the banks of the Vaal River; Phuthaditjhaba, well known for the beautiful handcrafted items produced by the local people; and Bethlehem, gateway to the Eastern Highlands of the Free State.

Nestled in the rolling foothills of the Maluti mountains in the north-eastern Free State, the Golden Gate Highlands National Park is the province's prime tourist attraction. The park derives its name from the brilliant shades of gold cast by the sun on the spectacular sandstone cliffs, especially the imposing Brandwag rock, which keeps vigil over the park.

The national road, which is the artery between Gauteng and the Western and Eastern Cape, passes through the middle of the Free State.

The annual Mangaung African Cultural Festival, popularly called Macufe, is now being hosted in partnership with the Tourism Authority and the Performing Arts Centre of the Free State. It is expected to develop into a true global arts and cultural pilgrimage.

The People

The Free State houses more than 2,9 million people on about 129 480 km² of land (*Mid-Year Population Estimates, 2007*). The main languages spoken are Sesotho and Afrikaans. Some 16% of the population aged 20 years or older have no schooling (Census 2001).

According to the *Labour Force Survey* of March 2007, the official unemployment rate is 26,4%.

Many of the towns display a cultural mix that is clearly evident in street names, public buildings, monuments and museums. Dressed-sandstone buildings abound on the Eastern Highlands, while beautifully decorated Sotho houses dot the grasslands. Some of South Africa's most valued San rock art is found in the Free State. The districts of Bethlehem, Ficksburg, Ladybrand and Wepener have remarkable collections of this art form.

Agriculture

This summer-rainfall region can be extremely cold during the winter months, especially towards the eastern mountainous regions. The western and southern areas are semi-desert.

Known as the "Granary of the country", the Free State has cultivated land covering 3,2 million ha, while natural veld and grazing cover 8,7 million ha.

Field crops yield almost two thirds of the gross agricultural income of the province. Animal products contribute a further 30%, with the balance generated by horticulture. Ninety percent of the country's cherry crop is produced in the Ficksburg district, while the two largest asparagus-canning factories are also situated in this district. Soya, sorghum, sunflowers and wheat are cultivated, especially in the eastern Free State, where farmers specialise in seed production.

About 40% of the country's potato yield comes from the high-lying areas of the Free State.

The province produces about 100 000 (tons) t of vegetables and 40 000 t of fruit each year.

The main vegetable crop is asparagus, both white and green varieties. The industry is expanding and becoming increasingly exportorientated.

In terms of floriculture, the Free State has an advantage due to the opposing seasons of the southern and northern hemispheres. The province exports some 1,2 million t of cut flowers per year.

Mining

The mining industry is the major employer in the Free State. Investment opportunities are substantial in productivity-improvement areas for mining and related products and services.

South Africa is the world's largest producer of gold. A gold reef of over 400 km long, known as Lejweleputswa (formerly known as the Goldfields), stretches across Gauteng and the Free State; the largest gold-mining complex being Free State Consolidated Goldfields, with a mining area of 32 918 ha.

Some 82% of the region's mineral production value is derived from this activity, primarily in the goldfields region, which comprises the districts of Odendaalsrus, Virginia and Welkom. Twelve gold mines operate in the province. Roughly 30% of South Africa's gold is obtained from this region, and the province lies in fifth position as a global producer.

Harmony Gold Refinery and Rand Refinery are the only two gold refineries in South Africa.

Gold mines in the Free State also supply a substantial portion of the total silver produced in the country, while considerable concentrations of uranium occurring in the gold-bearing conglomerates of the goldfields are extracted as a by-product.

Bituminous coal is mined in the province and converted to petrochemicals at Sasolburg. Diamonds from this region, extracted from kimberlite pipes and fissures, are of a high quality.

The largest deposit of bentonite in the country occurs in the Koppies district.

The Free State Provincial Government has approved the establishment of two biofuel plants in Bothaville and Hoopstad.

Manufacturing and industry

Since 1989, the Free State economy has changed from being dependent on the primary sector to being a manufacturing, export-orientated economy. The Free State GDP amounted to about R75 827 million in 2004, representing a 5,5% contribution to the South African economy.

Some 14% of the province's manufacturing is classified as being in high-technology industries, which is the highest percentage of all the provincial economies.

An important manufacturing industry in the province can be found in the northern Free State, which is one of the most important chemical hubs in the southern hemisphere. The province has competitive advantages in the production of certain fuels, waxes, chemicals and low-cost feedstock from coal.

The growth in high-tech industries is significant in the context of the changing contribution of the goldmining industry to gross geographic product (GGP).

The province's development strategy centres on competitiveness, empowerment, capacity-building and benefitation.

2010 World Cup

Mangaung Stadium Park in Bloemfontein will host five first-round matches and one second-round match in the World Cup. It has 48 000 seats.

The province was expected to embark on the following projects from 2007:

- developing the N8 Road-Development Corridor
- rehabilitating and reviving the rail network from Thaba Nchu to Bloemfontein
- constructing an international convention centre, which will be linked to other 2010 initiatives such as the revamping of the Bloemfontein airport, Macufe and the intermodal transport facility.
- developing the R220-million Inter-Model Public Transport Facility project.

Source: [South Africa Yearbook 2007/08](#)

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