

Highway to heaven

Lesotho – the Kingdom in the Sky – may be a wonderful overland destination, but it's not a place where compact SUVs and crossovers often venture. Until now, that is. A tar road is being built through the heart of the country, opening up the interior and making Lesotho accessible to even the softest of soft-roaders

Text and photography: GG van Rooyen



The Maletsunyane Falls – the Place of Smoke. This waterfall near the small town of Semonkong is not only one of the most impressive scenes in Lesotho but one of the most striking sights in southern Africa. At a height of 192m, it is the highest single-drop waterfall in Africa.

Why is it called the Place of Smoke? Well, as water tumbles over the edge, a smoke-like mist is created.

But it isn't only the height of the waterfall and the smoky haze that make it so impressive. The entire setting makes it a very special place to visit.

In this part of the Mountain Kingdom, the country truly lives up to its name. Mountains surround the waterfall, stretching as far as the eye can see.

As you approach the falls, you first become aware of a massive tear in the countryside, as if some gigantic creature has ripped out a chunk of earth. As the road bends, the waterfall reveals itself. From atop a hill, water drops 200m into this unlikely, cauldron-like chasm. The first time you see it, it will take your breath away.

I had been to Maletsunyane only once before, in May, when winter was fast approaching and water levels were dropping, so the waterfall wasn't at its best. This is why I was keen to go again in summer, when there was lots of rain.

Getting to Semonkong and the Maletsunyane Falls has never been particularly difficult. The road was not in great condition – some might

even have called it horrible – but as long as you took your time you could get there in just about any vehicle. Many a maltreated rental vehicle has been forced there at the hands of brave (or, more likely, misinformed) foreign tourists.

Now, though, I had been told that driving to Semonkong was easy. A tarred road was being built that led straight to the town. Moreover, the road would eventually continue from Semonkong to Qacha's Nek, making it possible for the first time to enter Lesotho from the Free State near Maseru and travel through the country to the border with the Eastern Cape near Matatiele.

This development was certainly worth investigating, so I headed for Semonkong in an appropriately "soft" SUV – the Ford Kuga. Now, the Kuga is a pretty capable compact SUV but still, our top-spec Titanium test model sported some pretty low profile tyres, which made it the perfect guinea pig for this trip. It would give us an idea of how a road-oriented urban SUV with big rims would fare in the Mountain Kingdom.

Heading for the hills

To get to Semonkong, you need to travel through the small town of Ramabanta. It is only 70km from Maseru, but the last time I travelled this road it wasn't in a great state, so getting to Ramabanta took a while. Because of this, we decided to spend a night at the Trading Post Lodge in the town.

With my dad riding shotgun, we set off

for Lesotho early on a Friday morning. We left Johannesburg around 06h00, and headed out on the N1. Once through the Grasmere Toll Plaza, we took the R57 towards Vanderbijlpark and Sasolburg, and headed for Heilbron. This isn't the most popular route from Johannesburg to Lesotho, but it is pretty quiet and the roads are in good condition. And there aren't any tolls on this route.

We stuck to the R57, turning towards Petrus Steyn and Reitz. This section used to be in a terrible state, but it's much better now. We then took the R707 towards Lindley and Arlington, which wasn't in great shape, and then the R70 towards Ficksburg.

In Ficksburg we filled the Kuga with 50ppm, and set off for the Peka Bridge border post. Peka is one of the best entry points into Lesotho – always quiet. In fact, nine times out of ten you will be the only people there. Maseru Bridge can be chaotic on a Friday, so it is worth entering at Peka.

From Peka we headed towards Maseru. As you approach the city there is a road that turns off towards Roma, which allows you to bypass the busy capital. We weren't sure what state the road was in so we didn't take it, but were told later that it is in fact a good tar road.

Maseru was, as usual, very busy. You have to be particularly patient on a Friday, with taxis stopping without warning, and motorists forcing their way into your lane. It's best just to relax, keep your head down, turn up the radio and work your way through the traffic.

The Ford Kuga goes exploring near Semonkong and the Maletsunyane Falls



SOFT-ROADER GETAWAY
FORD KUGA IN LESOTHO



Locals regularly amble past the Semonkong Lodge with their ponies, donkeys and horses.

The road to Ramabanta

Eighteen months ago there were roadworks on the Maseru-Ramabanta road so I thought it would be in decent condition, but I wasn't prepared for just how great it would be. As you pass Roma and the National University of Lesotho, you hit a small section of gravel. Once you're through this, the road turns into a driver's dream – a smooth, sweeping ribbon of tarmac that winds its way through the stunning mountains.

We now had an opportunity to see how the new Kuga behaved on a challenging road. Could it live up to the reputation of its sporty predecessor? Since the previous Kuga had an ST 2,5-litre petrol mill and excellent handling, I had my doubts. But the 2.0 TDCi Kuga quickly showed that it can handle a twisty road. It didn't feel as sporty and eager as the old 2.5, but it was undeniably fun to pilot on a mountain pass. The ride and handling were probably geared a bit more towards

comfort than the previous Kuga's, but that wasn't necessarily a bad thing. For this sort of vehicle, its balance between dynamic handling and comfort was spot-on.

The engine/gearbox combo was fantastic as well, especially in accelerating from slow speeds. The Kuga certainly didn't waste time getting up to speed.

While the road did give us a taste of what the Kuga could do, we were soon slowed down by the number of trucks, since the road is still being tarred all the way to Semonkong. And trucks weren't the only problem. There might be a new road, but this remains a very rural region, meaning that you could encounter a herd of cattle or sheep around any bend. My advice would be: don't frustrate yourself by treating this stretch of road like a rally stage. Slow down and enjoy the beautiful scenery.

Ramabanta Trading Post Lodge

If you're planning on heading to Semonkong, we'd recommend that you spend a night at Ramabanta. The Trading Post Lodge boasts truly spectacular views as well as comfortable accommodation and excellent service.

With the road now fully tarred from Maseru to Ramabanta, the lodge is easy to get to, in just about any car. There are few places that feel as untouched and remote, yet are so easily accessible. The Trading Post Lodge is one of Lesotho's must-visit destinations.

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The Trading Post Lodge

Even taking the trucks, animals and pedestrians into consideration, you'll be at Ramabanta before you know it. Thanks to the new road, getting there is quick and easy. We certainly arrived at the Trading Post Lodge much earlier than we had expected, which gave us the chance to look around.

As its name suggests, the lodge used to be a trading post, but it is now a popular tourist destination. It provides the best accommodation you can hope to find in the region. Even the king of Lesotho stays here when he visits Ramabanta!

Hardcore off-roaders will probably know of it because it is close to the start of the infamous Baboons Pass.

There's no electricity in Ramabanta, which means the lodge has to use a generator, so there is power only between 18h00 and 22h00. But don't let that put you off. The stunning views alone make the Trading Post worth visiting. You can count on clean and comfortable accommodation, excellent service and a peaceful night's sleep.

Fighting through to Semonkong

The road from Ramabanta to Semonkong was one of my favourite routes anywhere in southern Africa, so I looked forward to the next stage of our trip. But I was also worried. How had the construction of the tar road changed it? When I drove to Semonkong in 2012, it was an unexpectedly magical experience. Soon after leaving

Ramabanta, the small villages and other signs of human activity had disappeared, leaving nothing but lofty wilderness in all directions. About halfway between the two towns, I'd stopped and simply basked in the quiet and solitude. Lesotho is a small country, but at that moment I felt thousands of kilometres away from civilisation. I might as well have been on the moon.

As we now hit the road in the Kuga, it didn't take long to realise that things had changed significantly. The road I had fallen in love with had disappeared. The 50km stretch was nothing more than one long construction site. Virtually none of the work between the two towns had been completed.

As the odometer ticked over, I kept waiting for things to clear, but they never did. Despite the fact that it was a Saturday, construction was in full swing. Workers were everywhere, with diggers and other earth-moving equipment busy on all sides. And trucks? Well, I'd never seen anything like it. We often found ourselves stuck behind four or five of them, trundling in formation up the steep inclines. It was a frustrating experience.

Moreover, in some areas the road was actually in worse condition than before, though this could not be blamed completely on the road building. There had been a lot of rain, so there were patches of mud between the construction work. At one point the road was washed away, so we were directed onto a temporary track created next to the main road.



The Maletsunyane Falls near Semonkong are very dramatic, and definitely worth a visit.

SOFT-ROADER GETAWAY

FORD KUGA IN LESOTHO



Above, left: Building a highway through the Lesotho mountains is a dangerous task for construction workers. Above: Tourists admire the Maletsunyane Falls. Left: The impressive tar road being built all the way to Semonkong.

Of course, this is a temporary situation. Soon the construction equipment will be gone, and all that will remain is a beautiful tar road. There's no denying that this will be a boon to Lesotho as a whole, and make the interior of the country far more accessible, especially to tourists. But I'd be lying if I didn't admit that I was saddened by the loss of that previous gravel road. With a tar road stretching between Maseru and Qacha's Nek, this area will no longer be the wonderful wilderness of yesteryear.

The Place of Smoke

About two hours after leaving Ramabanta, we arrived at Semonkong. Had the old dirt road still been in place, it would have taken us about the same amount of time to get there, but it would have been far less frustrating. Regardless, we were now in Semonkong and it was time to visit the falls!

If you're looking for a reason to justify the creation of the tar road, you need look no further than the Maletsunyane Falls. It is a natural wonder that deserves to place

Semonkong on the tourist map.

The falls are on a dirt road about 9km from town. The track is in pretty bad shape, especially after rain, but the Kuga traversed it without hassle.

As suspected, the falls were indeed looking good. Massive amounts of water tumbled over the edge of the cliff, falling 200m into the gorge below. There is an excellent viewing site opposite the falls.

An adventurous diversion is to abseil down the waterfall. Semonkong Lodge runs what



Left: 'M'e Masetho Elizabeth Letsie of Semonkong Lodge offers fantastic presentations on the history of those colourful Basotho blankets, and the messages contained in the designs. You can book a presentation through the lodge. Above: The Kuga is quite a road-oriented SUV, but it is capable off road as well.

Camelroc, near Fouriesburg

Camelroc is located right outside the Caledonspoort border post, a few kilometres from Fouriesburg. We stayed there on our way back from Semonkong to Johannesburg, and were blown away by the beauty of this wonderful lodge.

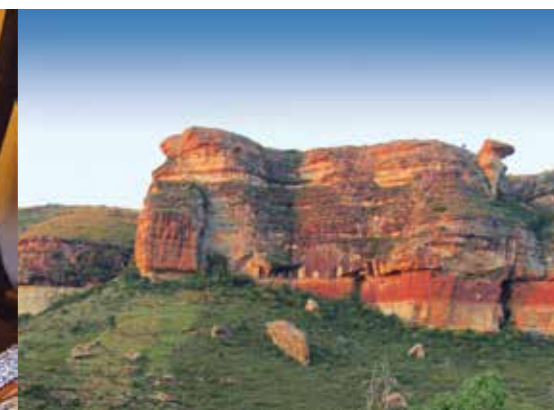
It gets its name from a local rocky outcrop that looks very much like the head of a camel.

Views from all the chalets are stunning, and the self-catering accommodation is clean and comfortable. Moreover, its location next to the border post makes it ideal as stopover on the way to Lesotho. If you're heading for a destination such as Afriski, Camelroc is well worth a visit.

Website: www.camelroc.co.za

Tel: 058 223 0368

GPS: S28 41' 35.1" E28 14' 23.4"



or in your 4x4. All of these activities can be arranged at Semonkong Lodge.

Once we'd had our fill of the falls, we headed for the lodge. The heavens had opened up, and the Kuga faced quite a challenge getting us there, but thanks to all its traction aids, it performed admirably.

Back at the lodge, we watched as the Maletsunyane River's water level rose dramatically. The river runs right past the lodge, and when the water gets really high, it covers the low bridge, making the lodge inaccessible. Fortunately this doesn't happen very often.

Like the Trading Post Lodge, Semonkong Lodge is a great place for those who want to explore Lesotho's highlands in comfort.

Thanks to a nearby hydro powerplant, there's electricity in Semonkong (except when the river is too low to generate power). The

food is top notch.

After a day in the mountains, the lodge's bar and restaurant are a perfect spot to unwind and try the local Maluti Lager. And there's another unusual evening attraction – a donkey pub crawl. Semonkong Lodge will provide you with a donkey and escort you to the town's four pubs to enjoy a tipples with the locals.

Heading home

After a night at Semonkong Lodge, it was time to head home, which meant that we once again had to tackle that road. Thankfully it was Sunday, and no construction work was taking place. The road was deserted, much like it had been the first time I travelled it. It was somewhat blighted by all the construction work, but it was peaceful enough to enjoy the natural surroundings. And the trip back to Ramabanta took only an hour this time!

The new road will undoubtedly make this region much busier than it is now, and I'd recommend that you visit it soon, before this relatively undiscovered gem is placed firmly on the tourist map. **LW**

is claimed to be the longest commercially operated single-drop abseil in the world – 204m non-stop to the bottom of the gorge.

If you'd prefer a more sedate experience, you can go pony trekking or hiking, enjoy fly-fishing or simply explore the region's countless little trails on your mountain bike,

Semonkong Lodge

Semonkong is one of Lesotho's best adventure destinations.

Not only does it have the Maletsunyane Falls, where you can abseil down a 204m drop, but it also offers mountain biking, hiking and 4x4 experiences.

If you're looking for insight into Lesotho and its culture, Semonkong Lodge also offers pony treks into the mountains, during which you sleep over in a local village. Through the lodge, you can also go pub crawling to the local bars by donkey, and attend a unique presentation where you discover the true meaning behind those colourful blankets the Lesotho people wear.

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