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South Africa: A Cultural Profile

by Bob Riel

Expatriates to South Africa will encounter a nation rich in cultural diversity. Although this country of 40 million people is predominantly black, its white population comprises the majority of the business community. The country is home to about 5 million Afrikaans and English-speaking whites. This diversity among the white population is the result of South Africa's settlement by the Dutch in the 17th century and its subsequent colonization by the British in the 19th century.

Among the majority black population, there are an abundance of tribal cultures, with the Xhosa and Zulu tribes among the most well known. There are also 1 million Asians in South Africa, many of whom practice Indian or Muslim customs, as well as several million "coloureds," or people of mixed African, European and Asian ancestry. Each of these cultural groups has its own history and traditions.

Following are some key themes that will provide a better understanding of the South African people. While this overview deals with universal themes relating to most South Africans, it is important for anyone living and working in the country to learn more about the unique differences that exist among the various racial and ethnic communities.

A collective consciousness

One of the most important traits of the South African mindset is its collective nature, which has been ingrained in the people through centuries of tribal traditions. Although urban areas influenced by European cultures have developed a more individualistic tradition, there is still a strong focus on the group, and life often centers on the family.

This focus on the group is mirrored in the black population, where tribal identity remains important. It also carries over into the business world, where employees value personal connections and long-term relationships. Since it is unusual for South Africans to do business with someone they have just met, expats would do well to nurture relationships and develop trust over a period of time.

The importance of authority

Despite an emphasis on collective identity, however, strong individual leadership is an important facet of the South African culture. Power is often centralized, and most decisions are made hierarchically. Since those in authority are rarely questioned, expats should forge connections to the most senior individuals, who are likely to be the primary decision makers.

Expats who are introduced by a third party should try to utilize someone who has status and connections to other high-ranking individuals.

If it ain't broke, don't fix it

South Africans are more oriented toward "being" than "doing." Again, this is less the case in urban areas and among the white population; but in general people place great importance on personal relationships and the enjoyment of life and are not as task-oriented as Americans are. In fact, an expatriate who feels driven to work and to achieve may be looked down upon, since this may be interpreted as an effort to show off his talents. South Africans also lean toward the status quo, and don't value change and progress in the way that Westerners do; if something already works, they often don't see the need to try changing or improving it.

A longer view of time

In keeping with the African sense of being comes a longer and more relaxed view of time. South Africans live more in tune with the natural cycles of life and tend to focus more on the present and the past than the future. Although business people in the cities are usually punctual in their everyday affairs, there is less of a sense of urgency about life and work than in many Western countries. Patience and flexibility are important traits for Westerners doing business in South Africa, and expats are better off going with the flow than becoming upset over their inability to control schedules or events.

Indirect communicators

When it comes to communication styles, South Africans are more indirect than their Western counterparts. Because of the history of close families and the value placed on personal relationships, there is significant emphasis on not offending others. Many people will say what they think others want to hear, rather than what is actually true. Expats will need to look for nonverbal cues, such as whether their colleagues are responding with enthusiasm or caution.

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