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## Travel & Outdoors | Africa -- A Story Of Cannibalism And A King's Forgiveness

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**T**HABA BOSIU, Lesotho - For those adventurous enough to seek it, the stark mountains of this southern African kingdom offer a fascinating no-frills look at history, a dark tale of 19th-century cannibalism and a king's forgiveness.

Lesotho, a Belgium-sized country of 2 million within South Africa's borders, was off most tourism itineraries even before South African troops crossed the border on Sept. 22 to quell an army mutiny and strikes that had paralyzed the capital, Maseru.

An agreement to hold new elections has quelled the unrest. Maseru's airport functions. Some comfortable, modern tourist hotels in Maseru escaped damage in the intervention and are open.

### Potential for disorder

Although the situation appears to have stabilized, the U.S. State Department on Oct. 15 posted a warning that «travelers should be aware that the potential for disorder and random violence remains high.

Local anger at the military intervention was directed at South Africa, and, although Americans have not been specifically targeted, if Americans were mistaken for South Africans, they might be at risk of sudden and unprovoked attacks.»

The place to visit is not Maseru - an unremarkable capital whose business district was heavily damaged in rioting during the intervention - but Thaba Bosiu.

This mountain fortress, 10 miles east of Maseru, was once the stronghold of cannibals.

### Mountain fortress

In 1824, King Moshoeshoe (moh-SHWE-SHWE), seeking a natural redoubt to protect his Basotho people, led them to the 350-foot-high, flat-topped mountain whose summit is ringed by cliffs. Springs on the mountain would enable the Basotho to survive long sieges.

As the vanguard of Moshoeshoe's group approached the mountain, cannibals attacked, killing some of the trekkers and dragging their bodies to caves.

By the time Moshoeshoe's main force arrived at the caves, the cannibals already had body parts boiling in cooking pots.

Some of Moshoeshoe's wives - he eventually had more than 40 - were among the cannibals' victims.

Moshoeshoe's warriors overwhelmed and captured the outnumbered cannibals. They brought the captives to the king and demanded their execution.

«The king responded that he must respect his wives' graves, which were the cannibals' bodies,» recounts tour guide Patrick Rafutho.

«He also told the cannibals that if they stopped eating people, they could join the Basotho.»

The cannibals did so.

Arriving at the fortress-like mountain after dusk, Moshoeshoe dubbed it Thaba Bosiu, or Mountain of the Night.

National monument

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Over the next four decades, the Basotho fended off invasions by British troops, Boer irregulars and rival tribes from the mountain.

Today, Thaba Bosiu is a national monument.

On a recent visit with a reporter and a photographer, Rafutho stopped to catch his breath, then clambered up a hill a mile from Thaba Bosiu.

He stood on an 18-foot-wide ledge overlooking round thatch-roofed huts at the base of the hill. On the ledge were remnants of the cannibals' caves. The ceilings are still charred from ancient cooking fires.

A pile of stones marks the end of the path to the summit. Over the past 175 years, visitors have been adding stones, one for each visitor, to the pile as a way of conveying prayers to ancestors. Tens of thousands of stones are now on the pile, which stands 6 feet tall.

Notches scar a rock ledge on the summit, overlooking emerald valleys that turn golden brown in the dry season. The notches were made over the decades as Moshoeshoe's warriors sharpened their spears while on the lookout for enemies below.

### Burial place of kings

Moshoeshoe and the kings who succeeded him are buried on the summit. The last to be interred was King Moshoeshoe II, who died in a 1996 car crash.

His son, King Letsie III, is Lesotho's current ruler and sometimes climbs to Thaba Bosiu's summit to pray to his ancestors.

Arrayed in a circle around Moshoeshoe's grave are the graves of his wives, marked by piles of stones. Moshoeshoe II's grave is more elaborate, with a marble tombstone.

Ruined stone houses stand sentinel on the summit, the wind whistling through gaps in the crumbling piles of rocks.

### Clinging to tradition

No one lives on the mountain now. But two people still reside in the old cannibal caves - a witch doctor and her apprentice.

There, they cling to tradition, making potions from herbs and roots and praying for long-dead ancestors to help smooth the way for the living.

Adorning nearby rocks are ochre paintings of spear-carrying hunters and their prey, made by cave men thousands of years ago.

After hiking down from the heights, Rafutho gazes up at the cannibal caves and toward the rocks with the caveman paintings. Thaba Bosiu looms in the distance in the evening light.

«You can't tell all this is here - the cliff dwellings, the paintings, the history,» Rafutho remarks, shaking his head in wonder.

«From a distance, it just looks like some mountains and rocks.»

### ----- IF YOU GO

#### Planning a trip to Lesotho

A passport is required for U.S. citizens traveling to Lesotho, but no visa is needed. For more information concerning entry requirements, travelers may contact the Embassy of the Kingdom of Lesotho, 2511 Massachusetts Avenue, N.W., Washington, DC 20008; phone 202-797-5533. Overseas inquiries may be made at the nearest embassy or consulate of Lesotho.

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