

**SPOTLIGHT ON...**

# Eswatini

Handmade candles  
are one of Eswatini's  
many craft industries



## Crafting a Future

The small southern African nation of Eswatini has a rich history of handicrafts, and is populated by modern artisans. Can this cultural heritage help the country formerly known as Swaziland overcome contemporary challenges?

by Chris Fitch



- **Geographic location:** Southern Africa
- **Population:** 1,467,152 (2017)
- **Latitude/Longitude:** 26°38'13"S, 31°28'55"E
- **Languages:** SiSwati, English
- **Land area:** 17,364 sq km (6,704 sq miles)
- **Religion:** Protestant 35%, Christian 30%, Catholic 25%, Muslim 2%, other 8%
- **Life expectancy at birth:** 52.1 years
- **Literacy:** 87.5%
- **Urban population:** 23.8%
- **Land use:** Agricultural 68%, Forest 32%
- **GDP per capita:** \$9,900 (2017)

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yes closed in concentration, the man in the bright red boiler suit takes a moment to wipe beads of sweat from his shiny forehead. The furnace in the middle of the workshop is blazing away at up to 1,200°C – the necessary temperature for melting glass – so a little perspiration is no surprise. The deafeningly loud rumbling of machinery almost drowns out the shouts of the other workers running around. A thick smell hits in waves, a smoky aroma that sits uncomfortably on the back of your tongue.

Poised, he lifts up a long, sceptre-like tool, akin to a medieval jousting rod. It has a glowing, golden orb at one end, like a gigantic ET finger, which he raises gracefully towards the roof of the workshop. Puffing out his cheeks, he takes a deep breath, plants his lips upon the other end of the sceptre, and empties his lungs. The orb expands bulbously, growing like a massive bubble, radiating intense heat and light.

Ngwenya Glass has been manufacturing glass products in this way, using traditional glass-blowers, since a Swedish aid project was launched here back in 1979. European funding was utilised to build this factory, purchase the necessary equipment, and train a handful of local people in the skill of glass-

## ► WILDLIFE

■ While Eswatini is home to much distinctive and famous African wildlife – giraffes and zebra, antelope and buffalo, plus many other smaller mammals – it is the populations of rhino which are perhaps most noteworthy. The animals were wiped out in the late 1800s, then reintroduced in 1965, gradually burgeoning in number. The restored populations took a massive hit during the late 1980s and early 1990s, when 80 per cent were killed by poachers on the hunt for rhino horn. But subsequent increased protection – including more authority for rangers – has created a situation where poaching is far less a problem than in most of Africa, only occasionally dealing with poachers overflowing from neighbouring South Africa. Eswatini has also seen the mass reintroduction of elephant herds, while many rivers that flow through the country's protected areas are still full of hippopotamuses and crocodiles (locally nicknamed 'flat dogs').



Rhino restoration has been a success, despite the threat from poachers

## ► GEOPOLITICS

■ Swaziland gained independence from the UK in September 1968, taking with them the 'Westminster' system of democracy to run alongside the monarchy of the day. Parliament was dissolved five years later, and replaced in 1978 with a 'tinkhundla' system, a decentralised form of power where MPs are elected from lists drawn up by local tribal leaders. The hereditary king has an absolute monarchy, assisted by the Queen Mother, including the freedom to appoint MPs directly to the House of Assembly, and to appoint a prime minister from among the members of the House.

King Mswati III took the throne in April 1986. Under his reign, a new constitution, which came into effect in February 2006, shifted judicial power away from the monarchy and granted expanded freedom of assembly, but does not officially recognise political parties (each of the 65 MPs is therefore an independent).

Eswatini is a member of both the African Union and the Commonwealth. It is also the only African country to maintain official diplomatic relations with Taiwan, instead of the People's Republic of China. While Eswatini maintains good relations with neighbouring southern African states, the country claims parts of the territories of Mpumalanga and KwaZulu-Natal in South Africa, where the populations are highly ethnically Swazi.



King Mswati III recently changed the country's name from 'Swaziland'

blowing. There are now 70 people working at the factory, including these men working directly with the furnaces, and a number of local women who specialise in shining and polishing the finished products.

'This is all recycled glass,' shouts Nhlanhla Mavuso – a local guide more commonly known as 'Lucky' – over the din of scraping metal, the crack of hammers colliding with glass. 'The whole process begins from the community. They organise the bottles into broken or not broken, then they bring them here. They sell to this factory, and they get a little bit of money.' As Lucky points out, each perspiring glass-blower has an assistant running around after them, a younger apprentice, whom they educate with their skills and wisdom. It takes a few months for a beginner to learn the basics of glass-blowing, and over a year to become a fully-functioning member of the team.

Away from the factory floor, a local shop displays the final products, selling glass models in a huge variety of shapes and sizes, including homewares such as wine glasses and pitchers, often infused with daring streaks of colour. Most impressive are the animals, glass sculptures of iconic wildlife such as elephants and dolphins, sometimes stuck on bottle stops or turned into necklace pendants. Recycling 20,000 tonnes of glass a month, and producing an incredible 1,500 items every day, handcrafted Ngwenya Glass products can be found on sale in boutique shops in the big cities of Johannesburg and Cape Town in neighbouring South Africa, or even shipped around the world. It's just one example of Eswatini's obsession with highly skilled artisans, and the diverse and eclectic items they create.

## MELTING POT

Candle wax modelling shouldn't be a stressful activity, but somehow it is. As soon as the paraffin wax is removed from the heater, it quickly starts to cool and becomes harder to mould into your desired shape – in my case, a rhinoceros with a zebra-patterned skin. It's difficult not to feel somewhat inadequate, as I clumsily press my thumbs into the soft material, trying to make it vaguely resemble the intended animal. Mduzuzi Mnisi had made it look so easy, when, just a few minutes earlier, he had grabbed a warm, shapeless lump of wax and, with all the confidence of an expert Rubik's Cuber, turned it into an elephant in the blink of an eye, complete with trunk, tail, and eyeholes. 'Now we teach it to stand, because it is a baby,' he remarks, flattening its feet so it can stand independently upon the table. After 24 hours floating in water, it will be solid enough to have a wick inserted, and can then be dipped in hot liquid wax to complete the process of hand-crafting a fully-functional candle.

Located in an old dairy cowshed, the internationally-renowned Swazi Candles was launched in 1981, quickly growing to employ more than 200 people, producing high-quality candles with strict Fair Trade credentials. The rest of the shop is a kaleidoscope of shapes and colours, various safari animals decorated with the distinctive patterns of other fauna. Even distinctly non-native creatures, such as dolphins and pandas, make an appearance, often splashed with the bright, tie-dye vibrancy that these particular candle-makers have become known for.

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'I started making things very young,' recalls Mnisi, an artisan at Swazi Candles, who spends his days fielding the variety of questions directed his way by curious visitors, while simultaneously crafting candle-after-candle-after-candle, up to 40 a day. 'My father used to teach me. He used to do sculptures – stone and wood carvings – and he used to sell them in the community. I wanted to do something like that.' He makes a clear distinction between other people constantly churning out the same product over-and-over-again, and the freedom he has to create something new from his imagination every day. 'Maybe tomorrow I can make a crocodile with a rhino head, or a giraffe head,' he says, laughing at the thought. 'It's unlimited!'

### HIDDEN TALENTS

Almost everyone in Eswatini – formerly known as 'Swaziland', a name change instigated by King Mswati III earlier this year – is a master craftsman of some variety, or so it seems. Casual conversations across the country reveal some of the most unlikely people to be enthusiastic artists or skilled artisans. In the middle of a descent on the Malolotja zip wire – a popular tourist attraction that sends customers for a spectacular ride through the Malolotja Nature Reserve – safety instructor Peter describes being a passionate metalwork artist in his spare time, crafting wildlife such as butterflies and praying mantis out of scrap metals he finds, including wires, cans and old spark plugs. Similar metal artworks can be seen on sale by the road as you drive through the country, sitting comfortably alongside wood and stone carvings, everything from impressively large elephants, to busts of Bob Marley. The rest of the Swazi Candles complex pays tribute to this artisanal enthusiasm, with various stalls selling wood carvings, mohair fabrics, beaded hand-crafted bags and hand-made soaps.

One of the most impressive examples of such handicrafts making significant social and economic changes is at Gone Rural, an award-winning weaving operation that dates back to the 1970s, employing over 750 women of all ages from 13 remote communities. Utilising native lutinzi grass – known as baboon's tail – dyed into dramatically bright colours, they hand-weave baskets, place mats, table runners, fruit bowls and a variety of other household products, as well as jewellery. These are then exported and sold in over 1,000 outlets in countries around the world, including in Europe, Australia, and the US. Any extra profits are channelled into funding essential programmes that pay for mobile clinics, school fees, and have provided clean water to over 11,000 people to date.

### GROWTH INDUSTRY

Perhaps not specifically with glassware or candles, but Eswatini has a long and intimate relationship with handicrafts. Prior to the arrival of Europeans, such material possessions were fundamental to traditional ways of life. Shields covered in the skin of jackals, baboons, monkeys or genets were vital tools, be they ceremonial, or actually employed for defence against external invaders. Spears and wooden battle axes played a similar role. Combs made from animal bones allowed women to untangle knotted hair, while the

### PHYSICAL GEOGRAPHY

■ There is a sharp contrast between the west and the east of the country. In the far west – geologically the eldest region of the country and known as the Highveld ('veld' is Afrikaans for 'field') – underlying granites and quartzites forced the land to Eswatini's highest altitudes, as much as 6,000 ft (1,800m) above sea level. Heading east, the land slopes down to the central Middleveld, where clays and sandy soils have been weathered away to create rolling valleys, and then to the Lowveld, a savannah-like landscape with highly fertile soils (known locally as 'Lihlanze', meaning 'warm place with trees'). Finally, Lubombo in the far east, a thin strip of land along the Mozambique border, sees the land rise up again, with deep gorges cut into the earth, through which three main rivers flow; the Mbuluzi, the Usutu, and the Ngwavuma.



Eswatini's landscape is small but diverse

crafting of delicate bracelets from weaved grass was a popular hobby and fashion accessory for Swazi women. Large clay pots inscribed with traditional patterns were used to keep water and food cold ('like a fridge,' insists Lucky), while smaller containers made it possible to ferment milk. Special carved bowls and spoons served as crockery and cutlery.

With the 20th century bringing a new age of industrial production, so handicrafts evolved into distinctly more modern creations, incorporating the various new materials which had become available. Slingshots using rubber from bicycle tires became a popular child's toy for practising hunting. Drums – once only used to call to the ancestors, but since the 1920s allowed to be used for dancing, ceremonies and celebrations – began being crafted by wrapping animal skin around metal drums, alongside rudimentary 'guitars' made from sunflower oil cans strapped to a single plank of wood. The traditional knack of crafting useful items continued, even as the materials and items involved were dramatically changing.

The country as a whole was going through a dramatic transition during this time. Named Swaziland by colonialists (after King Mswati II, who ruled from 1840 to 1865), the country had officially become a British colony in 1906, as part of the takeover of southern Africa after the war of 1899-1902. Unlike the power struggles and violence that accompanied much African decolonisation, Swaziland's independence movement



Pre-European traditions remain prevalent among Eswatini citizens

### TIMELINE

- **1820s**  
Beginnings of nation formed by Nkhosi-Dlamini, Sotho, Nguni and Thonga clans
- **1844**  
Arrival of first Christian missionaries, who fail to gain a foothold in the country
- **1906**  
Officially becomes a British colony, in the aftermath of the Anglo-Boer war, with Mbabane assigned the capital
- **1968**  
Independence is achieved by King Sobhuza II as 'Swaziland'
- **1982**  
The death of King Sobhuza II, resulting in a long period of national mourning
- **1986**  
Crowning of King Mswati III, ending power struggles within the royal family
- **2006**  
A new constitution comes in effect, supposedly to create a more democratic political system
- **2018**  
Renaming of the country from Swaziland to the indigenous name 'Eswatini', in recognition of 50 years of independence

over the next 60 years came about through careful and relatively peaceful diplomacy. Sobhuza II, great-grandson of Mswati II, became *Ngwenyama* – head of the country's symbolic throne, often depicted as a lion – in 1921, making ambassadorial visits to London during his reign, helping to cement his position as the natural post-independence leader. In September 1968, with apartheid taking hold in neighbouring South Africa, Swaziland finally obtained independence from Britain, with Sobhuza II installed as king. This made Swaziland the only African country to maintain a continuous monarchy through the period of colonialism.

The subsequent half century has witnessed a nation emerging scathed but intact from the rigours of Empire. The challenge: to forge a modern, independent nation, but one that remains faithful to the traditional, pre-European cultural habits of the past. The King's ongoing plan, 'Vision 2022,' revolves around the admirably ambitious idea of rapidly accelerating development to make Eswatini a 'first-world nation' by 2022. With two-thirds of the population below the poverty line, and around a quarter of the population afflicted with HIV – the highest prevalence in the world – the clock is ticking loudly for people trying to somehow achieve this goal in the few years that remain.

### LOFTY GOALS

In the luscious and colourful grounds of Summerfield, Eswatini's only botanical garden and resort, the

daytime temperatures have dropped and the crickets are chirping a pulsating aural backdrop. Owner John Carmichael is waxing lyrical about the future prospects for the country, emphasising the prospect of dramatic social and economic development based on the 'potential' they have at their disposal. 'Eswatini has high goals of attaining first-world status by the year 2022,' he reminds us, cracking the easy smile of a man comfortable holding court, as well might be expected given his ten years sat around the Swazi government Cabinet table during his political days. 'This implies that the Kingdom must accelerate its socio-economic development programmes. To address the high unemployment and to dramatically increase our revenue, we need to go into manufacturing.'

It's a logical thought process, especially given how important the practice of making things has traditionally been across Swazi society. But Carmichael is dismissive of the aforementioned small-scale organisations. 'Handicrafts are still at a stage of incubation,' he argues, 'and will not feature significantly in Eswatini's quest for rapid and sustained growth in a sophisticated and vibrant economy.' Instead, he advocates expanding the country's optimal agricultural environment (thanks to plentiful water and a favourable climate) into advanced 'agro-industries,' among other new business prospects. Pointing down the road, he highlights new business parks focused on research, development and innovation, centralised

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locations to attract external investment to the country. His plans may sound a little vague, but his confidence is assuredly unwavering.

Independent experts certainly side with this point of view, in regards to the economic strategies necessary to bring prosperity to the country in the long-term (if not necessarily to 'first-world status' within just a few years). 'Compared to other countries of a similar size and level of development, Eswatini's economic structure and exports are surprisingly diversified,' points out Dr Matthew Stern, managing director of DNA Economics, an independent specialist economics consultancy operating throughout southern Africa. 'The economy is dominated by agricultural production, most notably sugar, but it also produces sizeable amounts of fruit, beef, timber, clothing and textiles, and niche manufactured products such as refrigerators. With the exception of sugar – which is exported to the EU market – trade is dominated by the large South African market, which accounts for more than half of Eswatini's exports and more than 90 per cent of its imports.' Dr Stern therefore argues that the best and fastest way for Eswatini to grow economically is to escalate the existing trading relationship with South Africa, while looking further afield in the long-term for buyers who might be interested in the produce of their various industries.

### DOSE OF REALITY

So perhaps John Carmichael is correct. Perhaps industrial manufacturing, intensive agriculture, and other highly technological industries are the best way for the newly-renamed nation to meet its undeniably ambitious targets for economic and social development – leaving handicrafts as a niche business opportunity for those with the skills and passions to pursue such creative pursuits. But while he may aspire for more hard industry to build Eswatini's future, and these macroeconomic strategies might pave the way for national growth, foreign investment, and the connecting of Eswatini to the global network of commerce, that's not to say this will necessarily change the lives of original Swazis.

Strategies such as Vision 2022 may eventually make a significant difference on the ground, but will likely apply to the medium-term at the very earliest. There are already thousands of local people and hundreds of remote communities reliant upon a wide variety of craft businesses, leveraging their traditional heritage to provide an essential source of income in an uncertain working environment.

### CLIMATE

■ Generally Eswatini has a subtropical climate, but with major microclimates depending on which of the four regions you are situated within. As little as 50km can separate the cool and wet temperate forests of the Highveld from the hot and dry Lowveld. Winters (May to September) are cool and dry, while summers (October to April) see highly humid conditions across the country, and as much as 80 per cent of the annual rainfall. Summer can also bring with it dramatic and

violent electrical storms, and it is believed that Eswatini has the world's highest fatality rate for lightning strikes.

Escalating storm intensity, prolonged droughts, desertification and frequent crop failures are evidence of how climate change is already afflicting the country. Eswatini's historical contribution to global emissions has been minimal-to-none, and, as such, its climate adaptation plans focus on sustainable development with a push for renewable energy sources, particularly solar.



Iconic wildlife form the inspiration for many of Ngwenya Glass's items

The country is populated with numerous modern craft markets and community projects, both in the main 'urban' centres of Manzini and Mbabane, and in smaller surrounding towns and villages. SWIFT, the national Fair Trade organisation, boasts nearly 50 members – including Swazi Candles, Ngwenya Glass, and Gone Rural – employing over 5,000 local artisans, almost entirely women, who can now access an independent source of income. More than just a source of knick-knacks or a nostalgic throwback to the past, it's a thriving sector that provides community support and vital independent income (usually more than twice the national average) for people who would otherwise have few places to turn in search of work.

Therefore, while Eswatini's elite ponder the next 50 years, hoping that – regardless of whether or not 2022 proves to be a significant turning point – they are on a path towards progress that will see them emerge triumphantly on the international stage as a 'first-world nation', perhaps it could be a wire metalwork toy, a colourful handwoven basket, some perfectly-sculpted glassware, or even a misshapen, oddly-coloured rhino candle that will prove to be the catalyst the country can truly build upon. ●

### LINKS

- [South African Airways - flysaa.com](https://www.flysaa.com)
- [Eswatini Tourism - thekingdomofeswatini.com](https://www.thekingdomofeswatini.com)