Facts about the Golden Gate Highlands National Park

Golden Gate Highlands National Park was officially proclaimed on the 13 September 1963.

Golden Gate was proclaimed during the period in which national parks were proclaimed for pristine area protection of which Golden Gate has much geological significance, aesthetic beauty as well as representing the threatened grassland biome.

- Golden Gate derives its name from the sunrays of the setting sun that casts a soft shade on the west facing sandstone cliffs and turns them into a glowing gold colour. This was what Mr van Reenen observed in 1878 when he first moved to his new farm Vuurland, while coming down the pass at the western entrance to the park. In awe of this magnificent sight, he named his new land - Golden Gate.
- Golden Gate is currently the only proclaimed National Park that protects the grassland biome which is the most neglected biome from the point of view of conservation.
- The first inhabitants of this area were the San, judging by the stone tools and rock paintings found at various places throughout Golden Gate. They no doubt lived under the many overhangs in the area. After the arrival of the Basuto and European hunters, farmers and trekkers the Bushmen moved away out of this area.
- Wodehouse peak was named after Sir Percy Wodehouse, the governor of the Cape in the 1840's, who was responsible for the erection of beacons on the Rooiberge to create some border system. The first beacon was erected on Wodehouse kop.
- The highest loose standing peak in the Park, as well as in the Free State, is Ribbokkopkop at a height of 2829 m above sea level.
- Golden Gate is situated in the upper catchment area of the Little Caledon River.
- Golden Gate lies on a watershed, which means that rain falling on the shed-area; either runs down via the Caledon River into the Orange or via the Wilge River into Vaal Dam – Vaal River, all the way to the Atlantic.
- Golden Gate is situated in one of the most important Water Catchment Areas in South Africa and that more than 50% of the water supply of South Africa comes from this area.
- The first ever fossilized Triassic dinosaur eggs were found in the park at Rooi Draai in 1973.
- An array of examples of fossilized dinosaur bones, roots, ferns and footprints in the Park.
- Golden Gate has become an integral part of one of South Africa's Transfrontier Conservation Areas, the Maloti-Drakensberg Transfrontier Project.
- The Golden Gate Valley was one of the areas which was used as a route for the English and Boer armies during the Anglo-Boer War (South African War) and there are several historical sites in the park linked to this period. One such an example is when the retreating Boer army burned their ammunition wagons near the Mount Pierre area in the park, to prevent them from falling into English hands, where the severe heat of the burning/exploding wagons caused sterile patches of land and bullet remnants that are still visible after 105 years.

- The caves and hollow kranzes of Gladstone and Vuurland, two old farms in the park, gave shelter to woman and children who hid away there for many weeks to escape the concentration camps, during the Anglo-Boer War.
- With the completion of Golden Gates Tourist facilities there would be a total of 526 beds available in the park. (Three rest camps, hotel complex, guest house, environmental education centre and overnight hiking hut)
- There is a Living Museum known as the Basotho Cultural Village situated in the park. A second living cultural museum at Klerksvly is in the process of being established.
- Golden Gate has one of the best equipped Environmental Education Centres in the country and can accommodate groups of up to 92 in total.
- The geological formations in Golden Gate form the upper part of the Karoo sequence. The formations were deposited while the climate became progressively drier until arid desert conditions set in. The sedimentation process was terminated when lava flowed out over the desert 190 million years ago.
- Golden Gate has an example of one of the most spectacular forms of sandstone weathering in South Africa known as the Cathedral Cave – a cavern carved over millions of years by water, wind and variations in temperatures of some 250 metres in length and 50 metres in depth.
- The most scenic and best examples of the Clarens sandstone formations in South Africa can be seen and experienced in the park.
- The park is one of the last refuges of the rare Bearded Vulture.
- The rare bald ibis annually breeds in the Cathedral Cave in the park.
- Golden Gate has 10 antelope species which are the Eland, Red hartebeest, Black wildebeest, Blesbok, Springbok, Mountain reedbuck, Grey Rhebuck, Grey duiker, Stenbok and the threatened Oribi.
- At the turn of the century in 1800, the plains around Golden Gate teemed with game. In 1836 it was noted by Cornwallis Harris that it sometimes seemed as if the whole landscape was one moving mass of antelope which included thousands of blesbok, zebra and black wildebeest. Attempts have been made to re-settle animals in the park but aspects such as the fact that game that formerly occurred in the area was mainly migratory, has been taken into account and re-establishment of animals is carried out in a scientific way that is informed by much research.
- The three main challenges to conservation management in the park are EROSION control, FIRE management and ALIEN PLANT control.
- The willow is an alien plant species but is not removed from the main valley, due to the fact that they form an integral part of the aesthetic-historical part of the area.
- The ouhout (Leucosidea sericea) is the most common tree in the park.
- The park harbours more than 50 grass species. Three of the most common species are the Tambookie grass (Miscanthidium erectum), Red grass (Themeda triandra) and Thatch grass (Hyparrhenia hirta).
- Lichens occur on sandstone. They can be identified as the irregular red, yellow or blackish blotches on the sandstone. A Lichen consists of a colony of blue green algae which are capable of photosynthesis and a fungus which attaches the lichen to the rock.