



## Baleni Salt Project

*The sacred salt harvest  
of Baleni*



tourism  
Department:  
Tourism  
REPUBLIC OF SOUTH AFRICA

Baleni —  
Salt Project



***For the Tsonga women, their calling as traditional salt-makers goes beyond building a business; it's about ensuring the survival of a sacred legacy and sharing their hard-earned, precious salt with rest of the world.***

## Business overview

Near the village of Shawela, around 46km from Giyani, Limpopo, women from seven local villages have formed the Baleni cooperative of salt-makers. Every year, in winter, the Tsonga women, mainly elders, process salt from the Baleni geothermal spring salt pans near the Klein Letaba River. The water here is high in sodium chloride, and the women use ancient traditional practices while working in harmony with the land and nature to produce a unique, organic salt.

With more minerals, such as calcium, potassium, and magnesium, than regular table salt and having been tested by the Council for Scientific and Industrial Research, this multi-dimensional product transcends mere culinary use. It is said to have health benefits and is used by traditional healers and in various religious ceremonies. From this rural outpost of South Africa, Baleni salt has gained international recognition, including the Slow Food movement's Ark of Taste, an international catalogue of endangered heritage foods. And in a world that constantly

seeks innovation, the Baleni cooperative is a custodian of timeless tradition and women empowerment.

## A rare natural resource

The Baleni salt pan in Limpopo is South Africa's only active salt-production site where salt is harvested in accordance with indigenous knowledge systems.

It is also the only undeveloped hot spring in Southern African region. This unique natural resource is set within the Mopani veld with its distinctive clusters of Mopani trees and holds deep cultural and historical significance for the Tsonga people. Regarded as a sacred place, ceremonies and traditional practices have taken place here for millennia. In 1999, Nelson Mandela declared Baleni a Natural Heritage Site and it has also been put forward as a UNESCO World Heritage Site.

The area surrounding Baleni faces several challenges, including poverty and unemployment. However, the salt-mining

activities, which take place on tribal land and enjoy the support of the royal family, offer significant potential to create jobs and boost tourism, while contributing to cultural preservation.

Central to this is a collective of about 30 Tsonga women, who uphold an ancient relationship with the Baleni hot spring and are passionate about transforming the salt residues into a pure, organic condiment.

***Theirs is also a narrative of heritage, spirituality and reverence for the environment that has prevailed for more than 2 000 years.***

## The sacred salt harvest

Salt-making in the Baleni area is the preserve of the local women. The practice is heavy with traditional customs, from the mandatory initiation of salt-makers and a succession of chief elders to interacting with the ancestors through various rituals and appeasements. Every harvest season starts with an offering to the sacred motswiri (leadwood) tree, regarded as the guardian of the salt pan.

The chief elder chants as the women place money and other offerings at the base of the tree and permission is asked to enter the site. The women then begin the back-breaking work of hand-harvesting the salt.

So, how is it done? The salt-laden soil is mixed with clean sand and then made into saltwater using water from the river. This is filtered several times through a traditional filter – a basin made of clay, leaves and sticks, supported by four wooden poles. The buckets of saline solution are then boiled until the water has evaporated,

leaving the salt crystals behind. Drying the salt in the sun and packaging it follows. The women harvest during the winter, in June and July, and live next to the pan for the duration.

## From local to global

The Transfrontier Parks Destinations (TFPD) Foundation has been working with the salt-makers and the local community since 2012 to introduce Baleni salt to the Western Cape and overseas. A unique product in the global marketplace, the specific ecological conditions that give rise to the salt mean that replication and competition are limited.

The salt cannot be mass-produced and mechanised without losing its rich cultural value, translating into exclusivity and monetary value locally and abroad.

Due to the TFPD's efforts, Baleni salt has been included in the Slow Food's Ark Taste catalogue, promoted at the Terra Madre Salone del Gusto food shows in Turin, Italy, and is used by several Michelin chefs for specialty foods.

With the age-old knowledge and skills handed down from generation to generation, the women explain that a lack of interest from the youth makes it challenging to keep salt-making alive. To improve the attractiveness of learning this practice, the TFPD has assisted with better pricing structures and boosting volumes through marketing.





## A cultural tourism drawcard

Baleni has immense potential as a cultural tourism hotspot offering a rich, immersive experience. Staying at the nearby rustic Baleni cultural camp, tourists can not only enjoy this remote, unspoilt destination but also witness the fascinating salt-making practices that have remained unchanged for centuries, while contributing to the sustainability of the cooperative.

Now part of the Department of Tourism Community Business Incubator (Limpopo), implemented by Sigma International, the cooperative is entering a new, modern era of marketing, social media, and business skills.

But for the Tsonga women, their calling as traditional salt-makers goes beyond building a business; it's about ensuring the survival of a sacred legacy and sharing their hard-earned, precious salt with rest of the world.

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**A:** Baleni, Limpopo, South Africa

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