

A Merchant's Guide to Identity Verification in SOUTH AFRICA



Identity Verified

Real-Time Checks

Introduction

A customer in Johannesburg can prove who they are with a green barcoded ID book issued decades ago, its personal details entered by hand under laminate. A customer in Cape Town can hand over a polycarbonate Smart ID Card with a contactless chip. Both documents are valid, both are in daily use, and your verification flow has to read both. The Department of Home Affairs has been replacing the green book with the Smart ID Card since 2013, and a large share of the population still carries the old book while the change works through.

Fraud pressure concentrates on the weakest document. The green book's handwritten pages are easier to forge than laser-engraved polycarbonate, which is one reason the Department of Home Affairs wants it retired.

This guide gives you the working knowledge to verify South African customers with confidence. It covers the documents in circulation, the privacy law you verify under, which documents perform best, and the settings that pass genuine users first time while keeping forged documents out.



Understanding the Challenges of South African Identity Documents

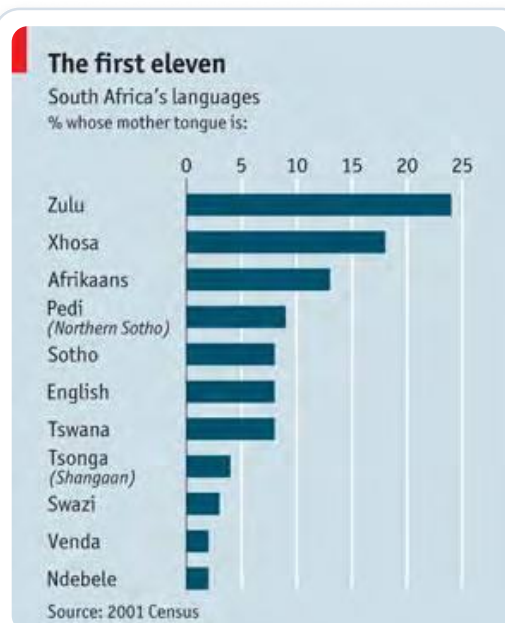
Two traits of South African documents decide whether your automated checks read them or reject them.

Reliable verification in South Africa starts with the documents themselves. They span four decades of issuance, two very different production methods, and a population that writes in eleven official languages. The two challenges below cause most failed reads and false rejections.

1 | Linguistic Diversity

English carries the core fields on every South African identity document. The holder's name, ID number, date of birth, and issuing authority appear in English, which keeps documents readable nationwide. **Afrikaans** appears alongside English on many documents, older ones especially. Surname appears as Van, and ID Number as ID Nommer, so field-label matching tuned only to English will misread the document's structure. **Regional languages** such as Zulu, Xhosa, or Sotho can also appear where local practice favours them. Surname in Zulu is Isibongo, and in Xhosa it is Ifani.

South Africa has eleven written official languages, and Parliament added South African Sign Language as the twelfth official language in 2023. An OCR engine built for one language per document will stumble here. Extraction has to recognise which language each field label uses before it can trust the value beside it. Shufti's OCR is trained on the label variants that appear across South African documents, so a Van field maps to the same surname parameter as a Surname field.



South Africa's eleven written official languages by share of mother-tongue speakers, 2001 Census data.

2 | Multiple Identity Document Formats



The older South African identity book carries the holder's photo beside handwritten entries, with field labels printed in English and Afrikaans.

South African identity documents vary with issuing era rather than region. **Older green ID books** carry handwritten entries, official stamps, and a photograph fixed under laminate, and no two clerks wrote the same way. **Newer Smart ID Cards** are machine readable and laser personalised in a standard layout. A verification system tuned only to crisp card text will reject a genuine forty-year-old book, and one tuned only to handwriting will underuse the smart card's structure. Shufti keeps its OCR and verification models current across both generations, so data extraction stays reliable whichever format your customer presents.

South Africa's Identity Documents

The legal regime you verify under, the documents you can accept, and how each one performs. Identity verification in South Africa sits under the **Protection of Personal Information Act (POPIA)**, which has applied in full since July 2021 and governs how you collect, process, and store the personal data a verification check touches. The Information Regulator supervises the law and treats the 13-digit ID number as personal information in its own right. Anti-money laundering duties come from the **Financial Intelligence Centre Act (FICA)**, with the Financial Intelligence Centre acting as the country's financial intelligence unit. The **Financial Action Task Force** placed South Africa on its grey list in February 2023 and removed it in October 2025 after the country strengthened its controls, and regulators now expect firms to keep those standards up rather than relax them.

Compliance and conversion are the same problem in practice. A flow that asks for the wrong documents or stalls at capture loses customers mid-signup, so a compliant check that still passes genuine users first time protects both your regulatory standing and your completion rate.

1 | Verification Modes

Shufti supports two verification modes, and the right choice depends on who collects the proofs.

ONSITE VERIFICATION

The end user completes verification inside your flow through Shufti's iFrame or Verify component. The user submits ID proofs directly, gets real-time guidance during capture, and you receive results in the Back Office portal or through the API response. This mode suits consumer signup, where guided capture prevents the blurry photos and

OFFSITE VERIFICATION

You collect the proofs from your customers and submit them to Shufti for verification. Results come back through the same Back Office portal or API response. This mode suits businesses that already hold customer documents or run verification in batches.

2 | Document Types Selection

Shufti accepts the following South African documents for identity verification.

ID Card. Two generations of the national ID circulate side by side, and your flow should be ready for both.

Green Barcoded ID Book. The green barcoded ID book was issued from 1986 to 2013 and identifies its holder with a photo, printed and handwritten details, and a barcode. The handwritten style makes automated processing harder, and the book's dated security has made it a favoured target for document fraud, which is why the Department of Home Affairs has announced plans to retire it. Treat it as valid but higher risk while it remains in circulation.



Inner pages of the green barcoded ID book.

Smart ID Card. The Smart ID Card has been issued since 2013. It is a polycarbonate card in a standard layout with a contactless chip, and the Department of Home Affairs accepts applications at its offices and at participating bank branches. The standard format makes it the easiest South African document to verify, though reading its laser-engraved detail still takes OCR built for it.



Front of the South African Smart ID Card specimen.

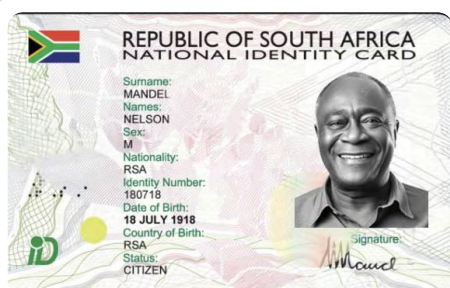
Driver's Licence. South African driving licences are card-format documents carrying the holder's photo, licence data, a barcode, and holographic security marks. The card carries its title in English and Portuguese, Carta de Condução, a layout shared across the Southern African Development Community. Licences work well for verification in lower-risk scenarios such as transport and employment checks.

Passports. South African passports are machine-readable travel documents issued by the Department of Home Affairs. They carry a digital photo, a machine readable zone, and layered anti-fraud features, and they are the strongest option where you need globally recognised proof.

Credit/Debit Card. Credit and debit cards exist to move money. They prove possession of an account rather than a person's identity, and they carry no photo, no biometric anchor, and no issuing-authority attestation of who the holder is. Do not accept them as identity proof.

3 | Document Type Preference and Performance

Different South African documents produce different verification success rates. Here is how each performs in practice.



The Smart ID Card, the strongest performer for South African verification.

Smart ID Card

Strong security and a clean, standard design give Shufti clear reads and reliable results on the Smart ID Card, and it outperforms every other South African document.

Extraction parameters: name, date of birth, issue date, document number, expiry date, gender, nationality.



The card-format South African driving licence.

Driver's Licence

The driving licence suits KYC because it packs the holder's photo, personal data, and licence detail into one card. Shufti's OCR reads its varied formats with high accuracy and strong first-attempt conversion.

Extraction parameters: name, date of birth, issue date, document number, expiry date, face image, vehicle class.



Photo page of the green barcoded ID book, with typed personal details.

Green Barcoded ID Book

The green book remains usable for KYC thanks to its detailed personal data. Shufti reads its barcode and printed entries accurately, and handwriting-tolerant extraction keeps conversion high on older books.

Extraction parameters: name, date of birth, issue date, document number.



South African passport data page with machine readable zone.

Passport

The passport's standard international format suits precise verification. Shufti reads the machine readable zone and cross-checks it against the printed data for a high-confidence result.

Extraction parameters: name, date of birth, issue date, document number, expiry date, gender, nationality.

4 | Preferred Document for Identity Verification

Shufti recommends the Smart ID Card, the passport, and the driving licence as the preferred documents for identity verification in South Africa, in that order. The Smart ID Card leads on security and format consistency, the passport is the strongest alternative where international recognition matters, and the driving licence covers customers who hold neither. The green barcoded ID book stays acceptable while it circulates, and treating it with extra scrutiny is sensible given its fraud record. Shufti's OCR is tuned to the specific characteristics of all four, so data extraction stays quick and accurate whichever one the customer presents.

1ST

Smart ID Card

Security and consistency

2ND

Passport

Global recognition

3RD

Driver's Licence

Broad coverage

ACCEPTED

Green ID Book

Valid, extra scrutiny

Verification Settings

Four configuration choices that decide your pass rate in South Africa. The documents are half the picture. These four settings decide how well your South African verification flow performs in production.

01

Verification Mode (Onsite vs. Offsite)

Onsite verification is the better default for South Africa. Fraud pressure concentrates on the older documents, and guided real-time capture with biometric checks gives you stronger control over authenticity than reviewing files a user gathered elsewhere.

02

Data Extraction

Turn on OCR extraction. South African documents mix printed, laser-engraved, and handwritten text across English, Afrikaans, and regional languages, and extraction tuned for these formats reads a 1990s green book and a new Smart ID Card alike. Manual keying at this volume introduces errors that automated extraction avoids.

03

Identity Document's Backside Proof

Switch on the backside proof requirement. The Smart ID Card carries details such as the issue date and document number on its reverse, so a front-only check misses fields your compliance record needs. Capturing both sides also gives the fraud checks more surface to test.

4 | Real-Time Proof Capture vs. Proof Upload

Real-Time Proof Capture. Shufti's auto-capture detects the document and photographs it without user fumbling, which makes it the fastest and most reliable route for physical documents.

Proof Upload. Users can also upload pre-captured images of their identity documents, which suits people who already hold clean scans and prefer a simple upload.

Merchants control both routes through the **Allow Online** (real-time proof capture) and **Allow Offline** (proof upload) options in the Verification Settings tab. Offering both keeps completion rates high across South Africa's mix of old books, cards, and passports.

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Global reach, local precision

Shufti verifies identities across 240+ countries and territories and reads each market's documents with local accuracy. In **South Africa** that means the old paper RG, the blue CPF card, every CNH format, and the new national identity card are all handled correctly, so you onboard real people fast and keep fraud out.

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Shufti is based in the United Kingdom and operates offices worldwide.



United States

16200 SW Pacific
Hwy, Suite H PMB
1053,
Tigard, OR



Cyprus

Arch. Makarios III
Avenue 229,
Limassol



Dubai

Unit 507, Level 5,
Gate District
Precinct
Building 03, DIFC,
Dubai



Hong Kong

8 Queen's Road
East, Wan Chai,
Hong Kong



Pakistan

322-G3 Main Blvd,
Johar Town, Lahore,
Pakistan



Singapore

68 Circular Road
#02-01, Singapore



United Kingdom

Office 408,
Coppergate
House, 10 Whites
Row, London E1
7NF

shuftipro.com

sales@shuftipro.com