



Around town

Around Johannesburg, there are enough marvels to keep familial tantrums at an all-time low. Presented here are 10 reasons to venture into the wild and unknown while piling into the family wagon.

TEXT LUCY CORNE

It's a city of extremes – of world-class restaurants and great value street eats; of bustling city sidewalks and calm air-conditioned malls; of glistening glassy skyscrapers and impoverished suburbs. And while the CBD (Central Business District) is clogged with city traffic and stressed-out office workers, just an hour out of Johannesburg lies a lush region of misty mountains, elaborate caves and up-close animal encounters – a breath of fresh air for



families keen to escape the city limits. So named for its important archaeological finds, the Cradle of Humankind is the first recreational region to greet you as you head northwest from the city. Directly north, you'll find the Hartbeespoort Dam, a favourite weekend haunt for Johannesburg citizens seeking some quiet time, while the striking peaks of the Magaliesberg Mountains form a formidable change of scenery further west. The region abounds in family-friendly pursuits – here's our round-up of 10 essentials within easy reach of the City of Gold.

DARE

The Magaliesberg is filled with adventurous activities from river rafting to abseiling. But, if you're not looking for a white knuckle ride, the long-established canopy tour blends adventure with family fun. Open to anyone from seven to 70, the tour offers a bird's-eye view of the forest as you zip along a series of cable slides, the magnificent Ysterhout Ravine below you. Reaching heights of 30m above ground, it's an eco-friendly way to see the forest, offering the opportunity to view the

Above and left: Neither a game reserve nor a zoo, Lion Park has been split into two areas – one for the herbivores and the other for the carnivores.

animal and plant life without running the risk of crushing anything beneath your hiking boots. Tours last two and a half hours and include lunch.

LEARN

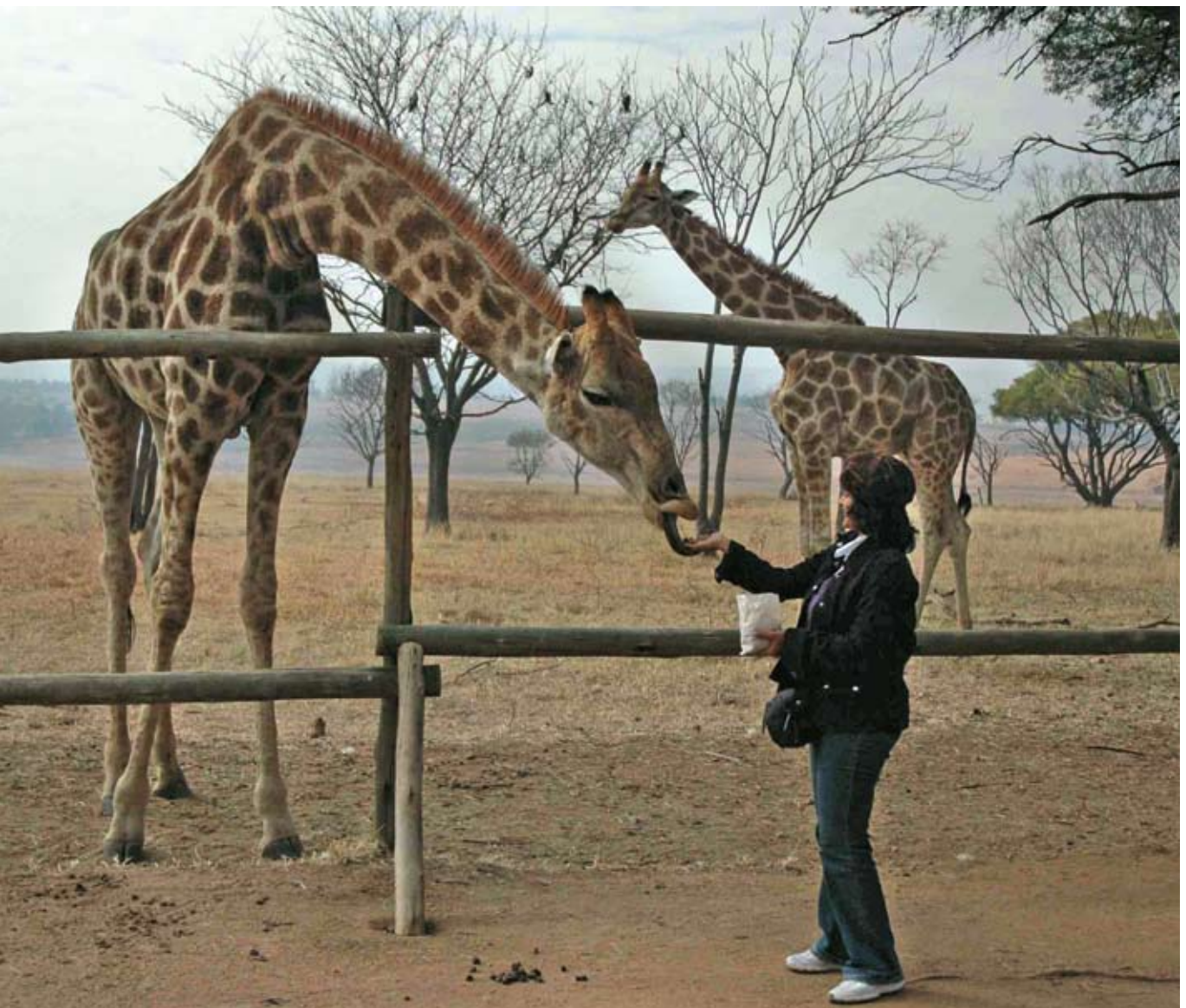
Part interactive museum, part low-adrenaline theme park ride, Maropeng is the flagship attraction of the Cradle of Humankind. Meaning 'returning to the place of origin' in the local language of Setswana, Maropeng charts the beginnings of Earth and the history of humankind in a way that will make kids keen to learn. Take an underground boat ride through a mock ice age and experience a black hole before playing with hands-on exhibits in the various galleries. Built with children in mind, the light-hearted look at the history of the world also appeals to the big kid in us all.

Just north of the Hartbeespoort Dam, families, couples and single travellers alike can enjoy a truly intimate encounter with the gentle giants.

INTERACT

Wildlife viewing opportunities abound in South Africa, but at the Lion Park you can get closer to the animals than you do on safari – a lot closer. Start off cuddling a lion cub, perhaps join a cheetah on its afternoon walk and end with an experience rare even in a country abundant in animal encounters. The feeling of a half-metre-long giraffe tongue brushing your hand as you feed them their lunch is an African memory that will remain long after you return home.

The giraffe feeding platform at Lion Park allows visitors to touch and feed the giraffes at eye level.





© Inna Felker, Dreamstime.com; Bill Harrop's "Original" Balloon Safaris

Above: Bill Harrop's balloon safari captures the muted colours of Cradle of Humankind, suburban landscapes and a foggy Johannesburg. Below: The traditional dress of Ndebele women was born of a need to assert their individuality in their strictly patriarchal society.

SOAR

In a region known for its game reserves, mountain ranges and general striking beauty, there can be no finer way to explore than taking it all in from above – specifically in a hot air balloon. You'll soon forget the early start (rides depart just before sunrise) as you glide over the majestic Magaliesberg Mountains and the river shrinking beneath you. Bill Harrop's "Original" Balloon Safaris are the best way to see this amazing landscape from a new vantage point. The hour-long trip ends with a hearty breakfast and a certificate of bravery for every participant. For the ultimate splurge, enjoy a game-viewing balloon safari from Entabeni Safari Conservancy or Mabula Private Game Reserve – pricey, yet at the same time, priceless.

ADORE

It's a picky traveller that wouldn't go gooey at the thought of touching an elephant. Just north of the Hartbeespoort Dam, families, couples and single travellers alike can enjoy a truly intimate encounter with these gentle giants. Start with a beauty session – grooming the elephants before their morning walk; then join them for their daily exercise, walking 'trunk-in-hand' as their keepers educate you in pachyderm practices. The experience ends with a feeding session where you'll have the elephants eating out of your hand, or at least taking their lunch from your hand with their surprisingly gentle trunks. Add on an optional ride (over 8s only) to round off the encounter.

EXPERIENCE

South Africa's self-adopted tag, the Rainbow Nation, is wonderfully illustrated at the Lesedi Cultural Village. Here, five of the country's largest cultural groups are represented – the Zulu, the Xhosa, the Basotho, the Pedi and the Ndebele. Explore traditional homes, sample some typical food, watch a dance performance and if you're feeling particularly uninhibited, join in with the multicultural music and dance show. Overnight stays are available to complete the experience, with rooms based in each of the traditional-style houses.

SHOP

Even if the kids (or the men) are not keen on shopping, the Ngwenya Glass Village is a worthwhile stop. The glass products make for fabulous souvenirs or gifts. And those who aren't eager to browse can marvel at the glistening mountain of glass waiting to be recycled or watch talented glassblowers turn the crushed glass into new works of art. There's a playground for the children too.



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Above: The tours at the Sterkfontein Caves give detailed information on finds such as Mrs Ples, the Taung Child and Little Foot.

EXPLORE

In 1997, archaeologists discovered an almost complete hominid skeleton they named 'Little Foot' for its diminutive dimensions. This crucial clue in the 'missing link' conundrum was unearthed on the same site as an earlier famous discovery – the two-million-year-old bones of Mrs Ples – making Sterkfontein one of the most important palaeoanthropological sites in the world and giving the region its poetic moniker

– the Cradle of Humankind. Fascinating and well-led tours explore the cave, where archaeologists can still be heard chinking away to release Little Foot from his stony prison. Not far away, the Wonder Cave offers an alternative grotto experience, with the emphasis more on breathtaking stalagmite and stalactite formations – perfect for younger children.

EAT

Canopy rides and cheetah walks can work up quite the appetite, but there's one restaurant in the Cradle of Humankind that will make sure you won't go hungry. Like its sister eatery in Nairobi, Carnivore Restaurant serves up a meat feast featuring up to 10 types of meat (vegetarian options are also available) and invites diners to dine until they drop. Just make sure you leave a little room for dessert and plenty of time to digest before rolling back to your hotel.

SLEEP

After a day packed with elephant brushing and tribal dancing, going to bed could seem a little dull. Accommodation options abound in this region, but none is as unusual and unique as the Ox Wagon Lodge at Hartbeespoort Dam. Here you get the chance to play at Voortrekkers for the evening, bedding down in a lovingly restored ox wagon just as South Africa's European pioneers did. Luckily, things are a little more luxurious now and each wagon comes attached to its own chalet with a bathroom and beds to retreat to if the winter nights get too chilly. ■

QUICK FACTS

GETTING THERE

Jet Airways has regular flights to Johannesburg from Mumbai.

ACCOMMODATION

In addition to the quirky Ox Wagon Lodge at Hartbeespoort Dam, the city of Johannesburg also has many comfortable and luxurious options to stay in. Mapungubwe Hotel Apartments and The Grace In Rosebank are two good options to start your search with.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

www.southafrica.net