

# Adventure land

*Mpumalanga is known for its wildlife offerings but the province has more adventurous pursuits between its paths, pools and passes. Buckle up, it's a bumpy ride*

Find the perfect views over the world's biggest green canyon when staying at Blyde Canyon, A Forever Resort.





Camp right beside the fence for a chance to see the patrolling hyena at Maroela Satellite Camp in the Kruger National Park.

The Panorama Route is famous for its extraordinary views and iconic landmarks, such as God's Window and Bourke's Luck Potholes. However, to experience the Three Rondavels in their true majesty, I wanted to see a different side of the world's biggest green canyon. To uncover the province's best adventures, I planned to drive directly south from the town of Hoedspruit, all the way to Swaziland, leaving a chain of adrenaline-action in my wake. But first, a quick detour eastwards — there's no place to feel your heart thump more loudly than in the Kruger National Park in the dead of night.

Camping in Kruger is always an adventure, even if for one night, and the Maroela Satellite Camp is an intimate, old-school rest camp on the dry Timbavati Riverbed that only permits tents and caravans. True camping at its finest, it's relatively off-the-grid but with ablutions and in a prime game area within spitting distance of the far busier Satara Rest Camp. That evening, I'm visited by the resident honey badger while hyenas march the fenceline, sniffing out my braai. I snuggle in my tent, pitched below a starry sky, and fall asleep listening to their unsettling whoops.

The following morning, I briefly dip into Limpopo but the boundary line between Limpopo and the 'place of the rising sun' (as the Zulu translation defines Mpumalanga) materialises just before I enter the Blyde River Nature Reserve on the

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Swadini side. Here is where I would find the Three Rondavels at their best. The boat I've boarded shrugs off its mooring and we glide on water into the world's third-largest canyon that stretches over 26 kilometres and is more than 800 metres deep. A Trumpeter Hornbill flies above us, shrieking eerily, and towering canyon walls ensconce us — so high that the sun has dipped behind them by 3.30 pm. Once we arrive below the Three Rondavels, I look up and it certainly feels as though I am sitting nearly a kilometre below.

Back on land, I drive for an hour all the way around the canyon to the more popular Three Rondavels viewpoint on the R532. I wanted to get the best possible photograph of



the incredible view from above too, and there's only one way to see this vista at golden hour — by staying at Blyde Canyon, a Forever Resort.

'You can swim in the pools on the Loerie Trail,' says the General Manager, Francois Scholtz, when I ask about the walks in the area. 'Our hikes are great but not all of them are easy — what goes down must come up! They've had to rescue many hikers from the canyon as it gets very hot in the summer and people underestimate it.'

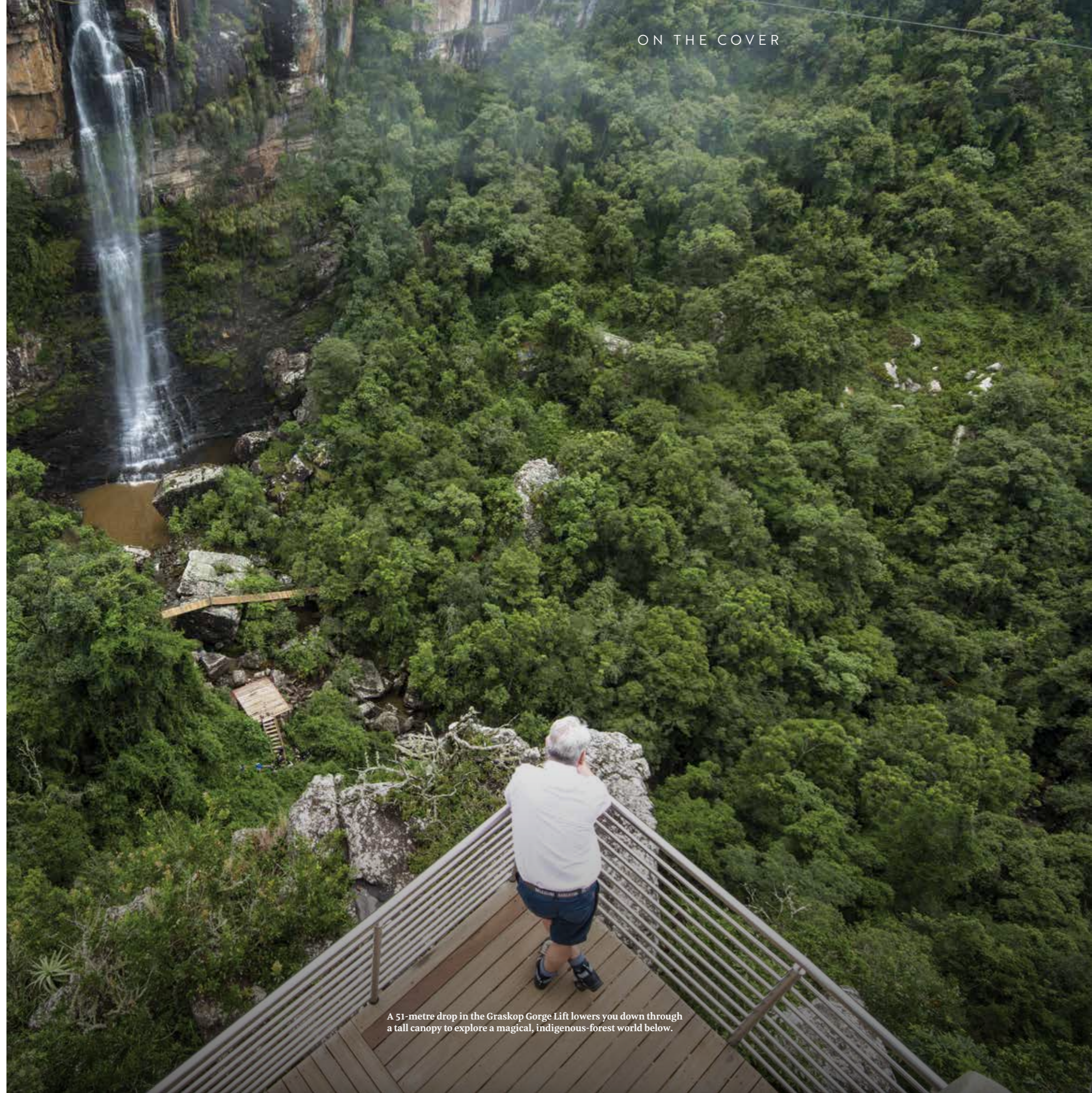
The Leopard Trail is the resort's best day hike and roughly five kilometres (depending on how you link up the other day trails). However, the start of the trail, 'World's End', is where you want to be at sunrise or sunset, to experience a true spectacle. After a challenging walk and the opportunity to capture some beautiful shots, I enjoy a quick rest before embarking on the next leg of my journey.

From happiness to supposed sadness, I leave behind the Blyde River Canyon and head towards the less joyfully named Treur Rivier, stopping at Bourke's Luck Potholes on the way. My destination is a secret swimming spot called Fann's Falls, a seven-kilometre riverside hike from the open air, lunch-only Potluck Boskombuis. Using no electricity, just a good old fire, my post-hike, post-swim reward is a real traditional South African feast — bobotie followed by *moer koffie*, all served in enamel crockery. This is country fare at its most enigmatic and I need fuel for my next endeavour.

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'All the farms in the area are named after capital cities around the world, showing the origins of the workers who laboured here in the gold fields,' says Phillicity Flischman from the nearby accommodation, Lisbon Hideaway. 'London, New York, Berlin and Lisbon — that's where the falls got their name.' Phillicity is showing me the route down to the bottom of Lisbon Falls, a whole different world to the viewpoint above. The closer we get to the unbelievably turquoise pool, the more we feel the spray of fine mist emanating from the falls. I am drenched but elated, and do not even need to swim to experience these sacred waters.

A short drive from Lisbon Falls, I find one of Mpumalanga's newest attractions, the Graskop Gorge Lift Company. A shiny new tourist centre offering crafts and a great cafe with outstanding views that would rival God's Window tempts me, but I'm here for a regular elevator ride to an unusual destination, not a coffee. A glass-windowed lift transports me down 51 metres into a forested wonderland and at the bottom, I wander around at will with 500 metres of a signposted boardwalk to guide me along the magical Mitsi River. The perfect way to wind down a day.



A 51-metre drop in the Graskop Gorge Lift lowers you down through a tall canopy to explore a magical, indigenous-forest world below.





Feel true thrills on the Long Tom Toboggan ride.

The smooth elevator ride is quickly overtaken by a far bumpier one the following morning. I sit down with Kestell Barnard at the headquarters of Kestell Adventures in nearby Sabie and he briefs me on our upcoming adventure. A quick 4x4 trip later and I find myself wearing a wetsuit and lifejacket, and strapping on a helmet before I hurl myself into the Sabie River with a one-man raft. With names like 'Pinball Machine' and 'Hell's Gate,' I knew to expect a bumpy journey but rafting the Sabie River gets my heart well and truly thumping. So much for the Slowveld (as some locals tenderly call the Lowveld); I wanted adventure and boy, did I get it.

I'm barely dry before landing myself on another wild jaunt. Just 20 kilometres from Sabie, the Long Tom Toboggan has me gripping on for dear life yet

again. A steel rail winds its way across the plains and down the slopes of Misty Mountain. It is just three minutes long but can reach thundering speeds of 45 kilometres an hour. It almost feels as though I'm on a motorcycle, leaning into the bends, tearing up twists on the tar. Giving my poor heart a rest, I take the evening off and prepare for my final stop at the Devil's Office the following day.

The little mining town of Kaapsehoop was initially known as Duiwel's Kantoor (Devil's Office) thanks to the twisted and spooky rock formations that line the escarpment as well as the mist that commonly swirls into the village. In the spirit of this history, it seems fitting to see Kaapsehoop on a downhill daredevil ride. Designed for Switzerland's mountain slopes, the scooter I am riding is not electrified

and my trip with owners Rudi du Plessis and Juliette Whelpton begins in flatter grasslands, so I can get the hang of it before we start cruising down some really steep slopes. I'm nervous at first but after conquering some of the switchbacks, it's pure exhilaration. After the tour, we drink glasses of rewarding Oros beside a stream before I make my way to my last stop.

South Africa has just gained its 10<sup>th</sup> UNESCO World Heritage Site and the first in Mpumalanga: At a meeting in July 2018, a mountain range between Barberton and Swaziland made the cut, joining the iSimangaliso Wetland Park, Vredefort Dome, Robben Island and more. The Barberton Makhonjwa Mountains typifies the best-preserved succession of volcanic and sedimentary rock dating back 3.6 to 3.25 billion years when the first continents were starting to form on primitive Earth. Forget the Cradle of Humankind; in South Africa, we live in the Cradle of Life itself.

My journey ends in one of the world's oldest geological structures where I find some of the first fossils of life. They are no more than little charcoal flecks stained into the rock but it is a fitting end to my exploits. Looking out across yet another breathtaking view, I have to admit that the string of activities I've conquered in Mpumalanga sure made me feel alive. ■

#### MPUMALANGA PITSTOPS

- 1 Take a boat cruise on Blyde River Canyon, [blydecanyon.co.za](http://blydecanyon.co.za)
- 2 Go camping in the Kruger National Park, [sanparks.org](http://sanparks.org)
- 3 Hike the Leopard Trail, [sanparks.org](http://sanparks.org)
- 4 Swim in the Treur Rivier, [facebook.com/littleboskombuis](https://facebook.com/littleboskombuis)
- 5 Look up at Lisbon Falls, [lisbonhideaway.co.za](http://lisbonhideaway.co.za)
- 6 Glide down the Graskop Gorge Lift, [graskopgorgeliftcompany.co.za](http://graskopgorgeliftcompany.co.za)
- 7 Paddle on the Sabie River, [kestelladventures.com](http://kestelladventures.com)
- 8 Hold tight on the Long Tom Toboggan, [longtomtoboggan.co.za](http://longtomtoboggan.co.za)
- 9 Race downhill with Kaapsehoop Scootours, [scootours.co.za](http://scootours.co.za)
- 10 Drive the Barberton Makhonjwa Geotrail, [geotrail.co.za](http://geotrail.co.za)