

Highs of the Lowveld

Our offbeat A to Z is all you need on Mpumalanga's splendid Panorama Route

WORDS AND PICTURES MELANIE VAN ZYL



The Blyde River Canyon Nature Reserve in the Ehlanzeni District is home to the Three Rondavels, the Blyderivierspoort Dam, Bourke's Luck Potholes, God's Window and the Motlatse Canyon that stretches over 26 kilometres.



LEFT: Glamping in style at AfriCamps. Each spacious tent faces the river and is just a step or two from the water. ABOVE: As well as productive farms, the Panorama Route is blessed with gardens, with blooms such as azaleas that live beside the Sabie Waterfall. BELOW LEFT: Go back in time at the various museums in Pilgrim's Rest, where the post office still works and the Royal Hotel still offers a cold pint. BELOW: The Sabie Brewing Company is located in a roadside heritage building and is open every day.



The Panorama Route, home to more waterfalls than any other part of South Africa, and blessed with the Motlatse Canyon, previously called the Blyde River Canyon and the world's largest green canyon, might just be South Africa's most beautiful roadtrip. Here's your insider guide to the land of tumbling waters.

A is for AfriCamps

Well established in the Western Cape, AfriCamps has finally opened a chic glamping destination. Just outside the tropical town of Hazyview, AfriCamps at Mackers offers self-catering tents with splendid outdoor decks that

overlook the Sabie River. Make the most of the serene waters and pack a lilo or floatie if visiting this summer. 063 170 4222, www.africamps.com

B is for Brummer Tours

The town of Pilgrim's Rest was declared a National Monument in 1986 and is one of two living museums in South Africa (the other is Matjiesfontein). Do a Pilgrim's Rest evening Ghost Tour with Brummer Tours and you might just meet a resident from the town's gold rush heyday. If an evening tour is not for you, there are also daily tours of the beautifully restored Alanglade House. 082 522 1958

C is for Chakalaka Vetkoek

Pair it with Shangaan Stout and you have the perfect lunch. Sabie Brewing Company is home to pet chickens, an outdoor dining area and home-made hops beer. Each beer is named after a character from local folklore, such as the Shangaan Stout, which shares the tale of how Sabie River got its name. 013 764 1005, www.sabiebrewery.com

D is for Delagoa Arts and Crafts

Named for Maputo Bay and the trading route that historically linked South Africa and Mozambique, this quirky shop stocks beautiful finds from across South Africa. There are stores in Dullstroom and Graskop. Once you're done



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Relax and dip your toes in the Treur River when dining at the rustic Potluck Kombuis. • On day two of the Blyderivierspoort Hike, hikers admire the view just around the corner from Clearstream Hut. • A bridge crosses the pools where the Blyde and Treur rivers meet in an area known as Bourke's Potholes in the Motlatse Canyon. • A rewarding sight, this beautiful waterfall and swimming hole lie at the end of a short trail that starts at Potluck Boskombuis and runs along the Treur River.



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: A highlight is the viewpoint looking across Blyderivierspoort Dam in the Motlatse Canyon to the Three Rondavels on the far side. Remember to take cash for the entry fee to the viewsite. • Look carefully and you'll see a face in this cliff. The Kadishi Tufa Waterfall seeps from the eyes and falls into Blyderivierspoort Dam. • Although these are replicas of the famous Lydenburg Heads – the earliest-known form of African sculpture in Southern Africa – they are worth stopping to see at Lydenburg Museum. • There are also picnic and swimming spots above Lisbon Falls if you're not up to a hike down to where the Lisbon River forms a series of shallower ponds.

browsing, grab a sweet or savoury treat next door at Harrie's Pancakes – it's become an institution on any Panorama Route roadtrip. 013 767 1081, www.delagoa.co.za

E is for Ehlanzeni District

This area of Mpumalanga to which the Panorama Route belongs encompasses the Drakensberg escarpment and Lowveld, and stretches from the Three Rondavels viewpoint in the north all the way south to the gold rush town of Barberton (home to the Makhonjwa Mountains, South Africa's newest Unesco World Heritage Site) and the Eswatini border.

F is for Fann Falls

About 25 kilometres north of Graskop on the R532, the short riverside walk to the falls (about seven kilometres, and two hours return) from the best alfresco eatery in the area. And

the rushing waterfall is likely to be far quieter than other easier viewpoints. After you've worked (and walked) up an appetite, settle in at the Potluck Boskombuis. Unfussy with rustic tables overlooking the Treur River, this off-the-grid bush kitchen serves up good old South African meals (think pap and wors) cooked over fires. 073 705 4734

G is for Geckoing

An undertaking for the more adventurous, geckoing (or white-water tubing) in a one-man inflatable with Kestell Barnard of Kestell Adventures (in Sabie town) will introduce travellers to the more turbulent side of the Sabie River. Pack a pair of water booties or closed shoes, costume, towel and set aside four hours. 072 351 5553 www.kestelladventures.com

H is for Heidelspruit

This is the starting point of the recently relaunched Blyderivierspoort Hiking Trail. Closed for almost a decade, this trail is back in business as a three-day route that begins near God's Window outside Graskop and ends at Bourke's Luck Potholes in the Blyde River Canyon. The moderate trail doesn't require any hard-core scrambling and the basic overnight huts are set in prime locations beside dreamy swimming spots. 082 8793 945, www.mpumalanga.com

I is for Iron Age Art

Before you start the ascent up Long Tom Pass on the R37, the Lydenburg Museum just outside the town is well worth a stop. Entry is free and inside you'll find historical displays on the various inhabitants of this area, plus the earliest-known examples of Iron Age art south of the equator – replicas of the intricately carved, terracotta Lydenburg Heads dated to about 490 AD. 013 235 2213

J is for Joubert Bridge

Situated in downtown Pilgrim's Rest, this pretty stone bridge was built in 1896, named after JS Joubert (the mine commissioner in the 1890s) and is the start of Robbers Pass. A mountain pass with that kind of name has to have a great back story. In this case, it harks back to 1899, when two highwaymen held up a stagecoach and robbed it of £10 000 worth of gold. It took 13 years to bring the culprits to justice. 013 768 1060

K is for Kadishi Tufa Waterfall

The Kadishi Tufa waterfall is in the canyon but accessed via Hoedspruit and the Swadini Road. Known as a living waterfall, the Kadishi builds up sediment with its water flow, rather than eroding the rock, as normally happens with waterfalls. It's best seen from a boat on the Blyderivierspoort Dam, which also takes you below the Three Rondavels. 086 512 9186, www.blydecanyon.co.za

L is for Locomotive.

There are two train-themed eateries in the Panorama Route area. Housed in an actual carriage, the Smokey Train Diner (013 764 3445) in Sabie is famous for fold-over pizzas served hot from the old Engine Room. Sleepers Railway Station Restaurant (015 793 1014) in Hoedspruit is a popular local hang-out, has great specials, super Sunday roasts and brims with memorabilia.

M is for Motlatse Canyon

You might better recognise it as the Blyde River Canyon but, officially, in 2005 the Blyde River was renamed Motlatse River which means 'a river that is always full' in the SePulane language. The canyon walls plummet more than 800 metres from the plateau and the spectacle is best admired from the Three Rondavels viewpoint.

N is for New York

New York, London, Berlin and Liverpool are just some of the names of farms in this area. The names reflect the origins of the many miners who flocked there during the gold rush, in search of riches. Another place inspired by its early settlers is Lisbon Falls just north of Graskop, at 94 metres the highest waterfall in Mpumalanga. Don't miss the hour-long hike to the bottom, and swim in the crystal-blue pool.

O is for Otis Elevator

The same brand that sails down Sandton's tallest towers can be found on the edge of a cliff in Mpumalanga. The Graskop Gorge Lift drops 51 metres into a magical forest world. Wander the brilliantly signposted boardwalks and enjoy views across the Motitsi Falls. 066 305 1572 www.graskopgorgeliftcompany.co.za



P is for Potholes

A bone of contention among many locals (who will tell you the ‘P’ on the Mpumalanga number plates stands for potholes), many of the roads in Mpumalanga sadly have fallen into disrepair. Keep your eyes on the road. You can also find natural (much prettier) potholes at the Bourke’s Luck Potholes visitor centre.

Q is for Quinine

Best served in a tonic and mixed with gin. Local varieties include Duke Gin made using litchis farmed at Summerfields Rose Retreat and Rottcher Citrus-based Slowveld Gin, both found in Hazyview. Attend the Lowveld Gin Fest on 27 April to find more flavours. 076 674 5536, www.lowveldginfest.co.za

R is for Rissington Inn

If you’re after true country feel and hearty fare, look no further. Set up to enjoy sweeping views of Hazyview’s macadamia farms and avocado fields, this relaxed inn is a wonderful base for exploring the Panorama Route and dipping into the Kruger National Park, with Phabeni Gate just a 15-minute drive away. 013 737 7700, www.rissington.co.za

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: The Graskop Gorge Lift (known as the Otis Elevator) drops 51 metres into pristine forest where you can wander along well-signposted boardwalks and enjoy views across the Motitsi Falls • At Rissington Inn outside Hazyview, ask after the owner Chris Harvie to hear hearty stories about the area, and hilarious travel capers. • Take a boat cruise on Blyderivierspoort Dam, whose calm emerald waters are home to hippo, crocodiles and offer a different perspective to the third-largest canyon in the world. • Potholes and pine plantations – elements that define the Panorama Route.

S is for Shiloh Coffee Estate

Bring your binocs. Not only will you find informative coffee-growing and tasting tours, freshly baked cakes, quiches and waffles, but unusual bird species. A pretty pitstop outside Hazyview, the restaurant overlooks a lake that includes some unusual species, such as the Pygmy Goose and Half-collared Kingfisher. 079 290 9567

T is for Toboggan

Also known as an ‘alpine coaster’, this unique mountain-side ride at Misty Mountain in Sabie offers three minutes of pounding adrenaline that will satiate any restlessness if you’ve spent too much time in the car. 013 764 3377, www.longtomtoboggan.co.za

U is for Uzuri

The Uzuri Skin Booster facial and African Pinotage Deep Tissue Muscle Melt massage are just two offerings you can expect from the new AM Spa at Skukuza. The first spa to be opened in a Kruger National Park rest camp, it will soothe your body and soul in the bushveld. 079 285 7769, www.amspa.co.za

V is for Vaalhoek Road

Ditch the pothole-riddled roads and use this scenic route. If you have a vehicle with some clearance, this gravel back road between Bourke’s Luck Potholes and Pilgrim’s Rest follows the Blyde River and is a wonderful detour. Find it sandwiched between the R532 and the R36.

TOP LEFT: A-Z marks the spot. TOP RIGHT: Spike your adrenalin on this unique three-minute toboggan ride down the mountain-side at Misty Mountain between Sabie and Lydenburg. ABOVE: At an altitude of 1 730 metres, the views from God’s Window are worth the stairs.

W is for World’s End

This is where you want to be at sunrise or sunset to experience a true spectacle. Perched on the edge of the Motlatse Canyon near Three Rondawels, you can’t get closer to Mpumalanga’s best views than at Blyde Canyon, A Forever Resort. The provincial park viewpoints close early, but here you can photograph well into the golden hour from within the resort grounds. 086 122 6966, www.foreverblydecanyon.co.za

X is for Xavier Vigroux

An avid classic-car collector, Xavier has a splendid vintage assembly of Chevys, Minis, Landies and more at 24 Degrees South. The classic cars and motorbikes alone are worth the stop, but they are just a small part of this delightful complex of gift stores and restaurants that make up this bushveld ‘mall’ near Hoedspruit. Anne’s Cotton Club is particularly popular so book ahead if you want a great lunch. 072 467 3310, www.24degreessouth.co.za

Y is for Yield

Blessed with acres of agriculture, the Panorama Route has plenty of places to pull off the road and purchase the fresh subtropical fruits that thrive in this region. Find bananas, mangoes, pawpaws, macadamias and more.

Z is for Zenith

God’s Window is said to be the zenith of the Panorama Route. Such a picturesque viewpoint (on the R534 loop off the R532) it was given holy connotations, it gives you a view across the entire Lowveld on a clear day. ■

Map reference B8 see inside back cover