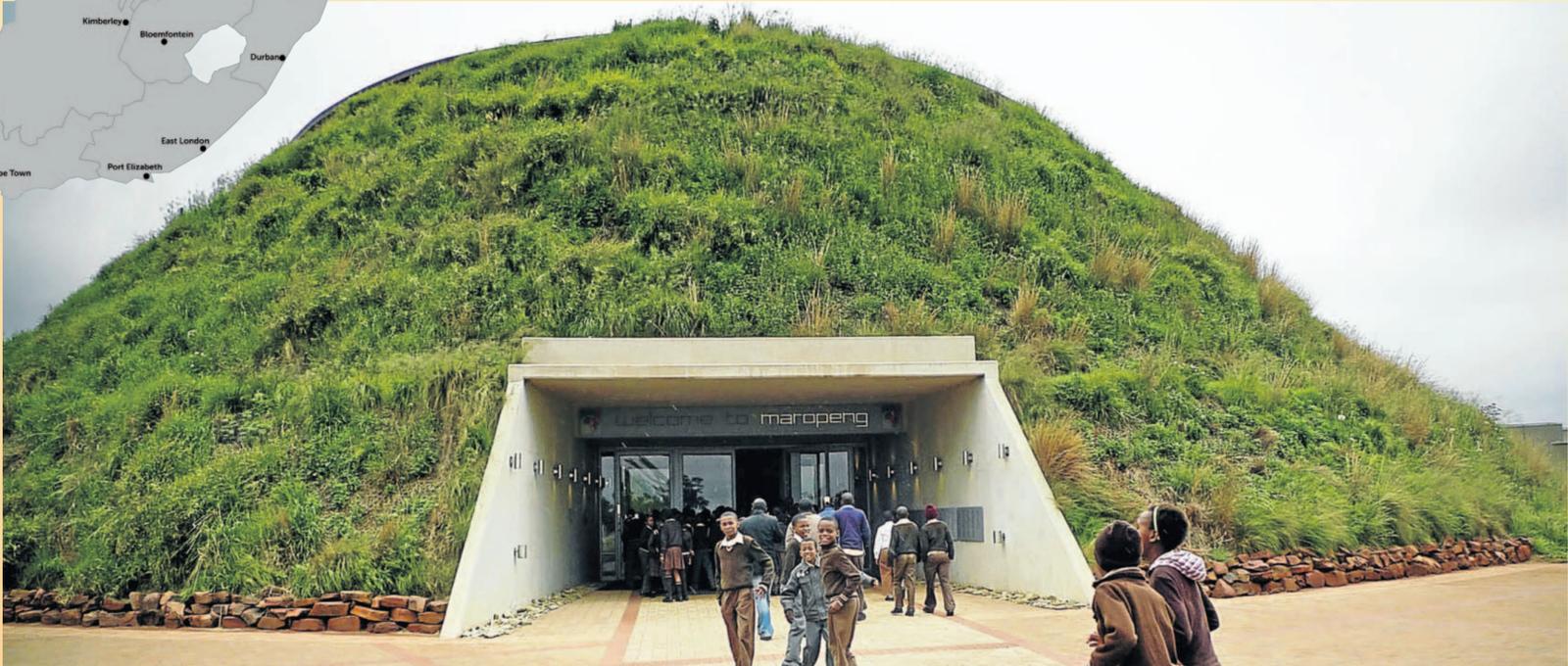


# Sunday Times FINDERS KEEPERS

BROUGHT TO YOU BY  
**TOMSA**  
Tourism Levy South Africa  
Adding Value to Tourism

#### WHAT IS TOMSA?

TOMSA is the 1% tourism levy collected by tourism businesses with the aim of contributing to the promotion of South Africa as the preferred tourist destination locally and internationally. The levy is added to the consumer's bill for their use of various travel and tourism services in South Africa such as accommodation, car hire, tour operators, travel agencies and tourism experiences. The levy is applicable for both local and international tourists.



## FROM THE ANCIENT ...

For a long view of our history, head to the Sterkfontein Caves and Maropeng – truly the cradle of humankind, writes **Paul Ash**

**D**ID they fall while foraging for food? Or did they stumble into these fissures in the earth while being chased by predators such as sabre-tooth cats?

The question is one of the enduring mysteries surrounding the remains of hominid creatures who have been found in the warren of limestone caverns in the Cradle of Humankind. The caves, which loop and twist under the earth around Sterkfontein in Gauteng's north-western corner, have yielded the remains of 700 of one of our early ancestors named *Australopithecus africanus*, who lived here nearly 3 million years ago.

The caves grabbed the world's attention in 1947 when palaeontologist Professor Robert Broom discovered a female *Australopithecus africanus*. She was later named "Mrs Ples" and the scientific world looked on in wonder. The discovery led to what might be called a "fossil rush" as palaeontologists descended on Sterkfontein. Other discoveries followed in quick succession, culminating in the more recent discoveries such as "Little Foot" and the child "Karabo".

In 2015, a team of scientists and researchers led by Professor Lee Berger of the University of



Fossils on display at Maropeng. Right, the Tswaing crater. Main picture, the entrance to the Tumulus building at Maropeng

the Witwatersrand stumbled on what is believed to be a new hominid species while scouring the deep cave system. It was named *Homo naledi* after the chamber deep in the Rising Star caves in which it was found. The story made headlines across the world — for nothing quite piques our interest as much as knowing where we may — or may not — have



come from.

It makes sense, then, to begin this tour of South Africa's greatest attractions and wonders with a visit to the Cradle of Humankind. Start at the Maropeng visitor centre where an interactive journey takes you through the millions of years of our shared human history. Then head for the caves. Wonder Cave,

estimated to be 5- to 10-million years old and the third-largest chamber in South Africa, is stuffed with marvellous stalactite and stalagmite formations. When you see them for the first time, you'll understand how the cave got its name.

FOR a more recent but no less impressive

event in the country's history, head eastwards across the province to Tswaing, where you can gaze into the crater left by a plummeting meteorite 220 000 years ago.

The large chunk of space debris made it through the planet's protective atmosphere and slammed into the Earth's crust with the force of 100 nuclear bombs. The resulting hole — 1.4km across and 200m deep — is one of just 170 found on Earth.

From the lip of the crater, you are confronted with the absorbing sight of an electric-blue-green lake that lies in the embrace of the crater walls. Walk down into the impressive silence and you will understand why people who lived here centuries ago regarded it as a sacred place.

Iron-Age people collected salt from the lake, which is around six times saltier than the sea. To protect their resource from outsiders, they told stories of a huge snake that lived in the lake. These did not scare off the farmers who later arrived to mine the lake for soda ash and salt.

In the 1990s drilling activity revealed the glass sediments that could only have been created by a forceful impact — such as a meteorite. Museum authorities took control in 1992 and the site is now managed by Ditsong Museums which also runs the excellent Willem Prinsloo Agricultural Museum nearby.

A footpath circles the rim and leads down to the lake shore. Sicklebush and buffalo thorns carpet the slopes where traditional healers search for medicinal plants with the permission of the museum.

Tswaing makes an astonishing diversion to the noise of daily life. The peace and silence are immense. You should go.

**DETAILS:** Maropeng: Phone (014) 577-9000 or see [maropeng.co.za](http://maropeng.co.za). Tswaing: See [ditsong.org.za](http://ditsong.org.za).

#### THIS WEEK'S SPONSORED PRIZES

**Tsogo Sun – Southern Sun Gold Reef City Hotel**  
2-night weekend stay for 2 or a family of 4, including breakfast at Tsogo Sun – Southern Sun Gold Reef City Hotel. Conditions apply

**Intundla Game Lodge & Bush Spa**  
2 people, buffet breakfast and 60-minute full-body massage per person (Total of 6 vouchers/prizes)

**Court Classique Hotel**  
2-night weekend stay for family of 4, including breakfast

**Glenburn Lodge & Spa**  
2-night stay in 2-bedroom chalet, including breakfast for family of 4

Go to [www.finderskeepers.mobi](http://www.finderskeepers.mobi) for more information

#### THE ROADSIDE ATTRACTIONS

##### STEAM TRAIN RIDES

Steam-locomotive operator Reefsteamers runs regular trains from its depot in the old steam loco shed in Germiston to the weekend market in Irene and also via Park Station to Magaliesburg. It's a full-day outing into lovely countryside with a fine steam locomotive up front. Take your own lunch or book a picnic lunch from Reefsteamers (from R125 per person). This month, the depot has its annual open day where visitors can see some of the love that goes into keeping the dream alive — for it can only be love that drags a man out of bed before sunrise on a freezing morning to work all day in a Dickensian workshop full of hoists and gantries and brooding locomotives.

**DETAILS:** Phone (011) 280-5122, e-mail [bookings@reefsteamers.com](mailto:bookings@reefsteamers.com) or see [reefsteamers.com](http://reefsteamers.com). Over in Pretoria, local steam club Friends of the Rail runs regular steam trains to the diamond-mining town of Cullinan. It's an all-day trip with lunch served in the classic station building in the village, after which you can amble around and maybe, just maybe, buy a diamond for your girl. **DETAILS:** Phone (012) 467-0293, e-mail [bookings@friendsoftherail.co.za](mailto:bookings@friendsoftherail.co.za) or see [friendsoftherail.co.za](http://friendsoftherail.co.za). Paul Ash



  
**TSOGO SUN**

  
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