

A wide-angle photograph of a valley in South Africa. In the foreground, several people are riding horses through a field of tall, dry grass. The middle ground shows a valley floor with scattered trees and a fence line. The background consists of rolling, rocky hills under a clear blue sky. The overall scene is a mix of natural beauty and human activity.

NATIONAL TREASURES

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Want to go somewhere special to celebrate Heritage Month? We've identified nine must-see local sites, one in each province, that celebrate South Africa's unique character and charm.

BY DANIELLE MCDONALD

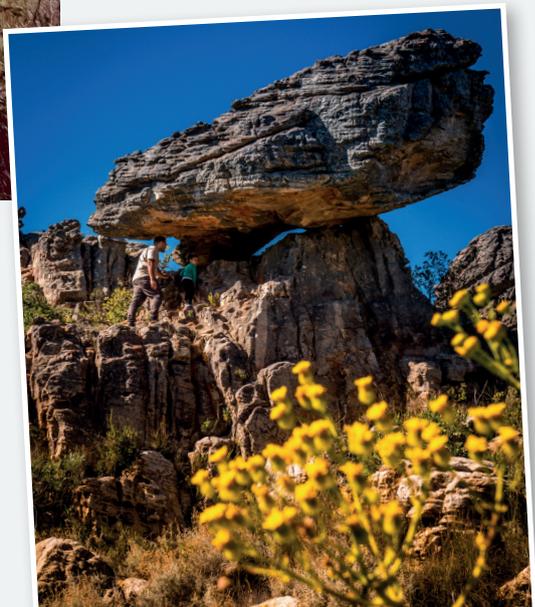
WESTERN CAPE

The Cape Floral Kingdom

Wherever you are in the Western Cape, chances are you're not too far from this UNESCO World Heritage Site. The Cape Floral Kingdom stretches from the Cederberg and Hottentots Holland mountains, through the Langeberg, Outeniqua, Tsitsikamma, Swartberg and Zuurberg mountains and includes Table Mountain and the Kirstenbosch National Botanical Garden in Cape Town. It's home to an estimated 9 000 plant species, of which about 69% are endemic to the area. The Cape Floral Kingdom is so unique that UNESCO described it as one of the richest plant areas in the world, declaring it to be of outstanding universal significance to humanity. And there is so much to do in these protected areas. They are accessible, family friendly and filled with hiking trails, bird-watching opportunities and picnic spots. Cape Nature offers great and affordable accommodation.

Want to learn more about fynbos as you go? Get the iNaturalist app. It helps identify plants and connects you to a community of naturalists and scientists. Sharing photos of the fynbos also helps create quality data for scientists who are trying to save our endangered fynbos.

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EASTERN CAPE

Valley of Desolation

Just a few minutes from Graaff-Reinet, in the Camdeboo National Park, lies the Valley of Desolation. The eerie feeling you get when looking out over the rock formations and valley below is hard to describe. There is a haunting beauty to the vast nothingness beyond the otherworldly rock formations. It gave me goosebumps. The valley was formed by a violent volcanic shift over 100 million years ago. The giant dolomite rocks balance precariously and drop down sharply to the valley floor below, looking a bit like pillars rising out of the earth – some as high as 120 m!

Most people simply take in the beauty of the place. There are loads of lookout spots and endless insta-opportunities. You can also follow the Crag Lizard Trail – a 1.5 km circuit walk along the rim of the Valley of Desolation that takes about 45 minutes to hike. The best time to visit is sunrise and sunset – golden hour here is next level. Chantelle Marais is a local guide who is very passionate about the area. You can book a tour with her on Facebook @ChantelleTheTOURGUIDE

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Pilgrim's Rest

You'll find this historic little town along the Panorama Route in the Lowveld. It's a window into the life and times of an early South African gold mining community. The entire town is a national monument. It's like a living museum of the gold rush that took place in the 1870s. The town's mining past precedes that of Johannesburg, and it placed the then Transvaal's goldfields on the map when many hopeful gold miners raced to the area to seek their fortune.

Pilgrim's Rest went through an economic rough patch a few years ago, but the community came together and restored it to former lustrous and vibey glory. Activities include gold panning for the adventurous, a ghost tour for the brave and a village tour for the history buffs. Entrance is free to all museums on Heritage Day (24 September). A National Gold Panning Championship and the Pilgrim's Rest Revival Festival is being planned (dates to be announced). For more information on these, join the 'I love Pilgrim's Rest' Facebook page.

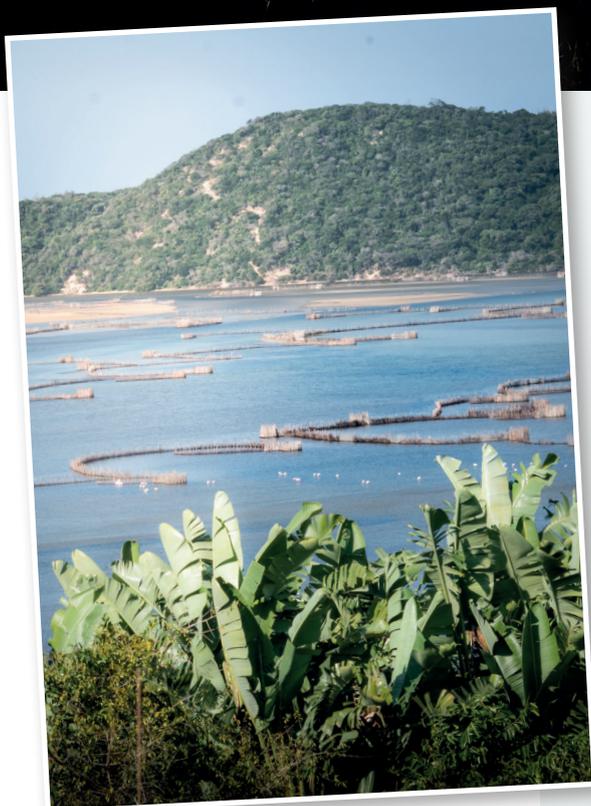
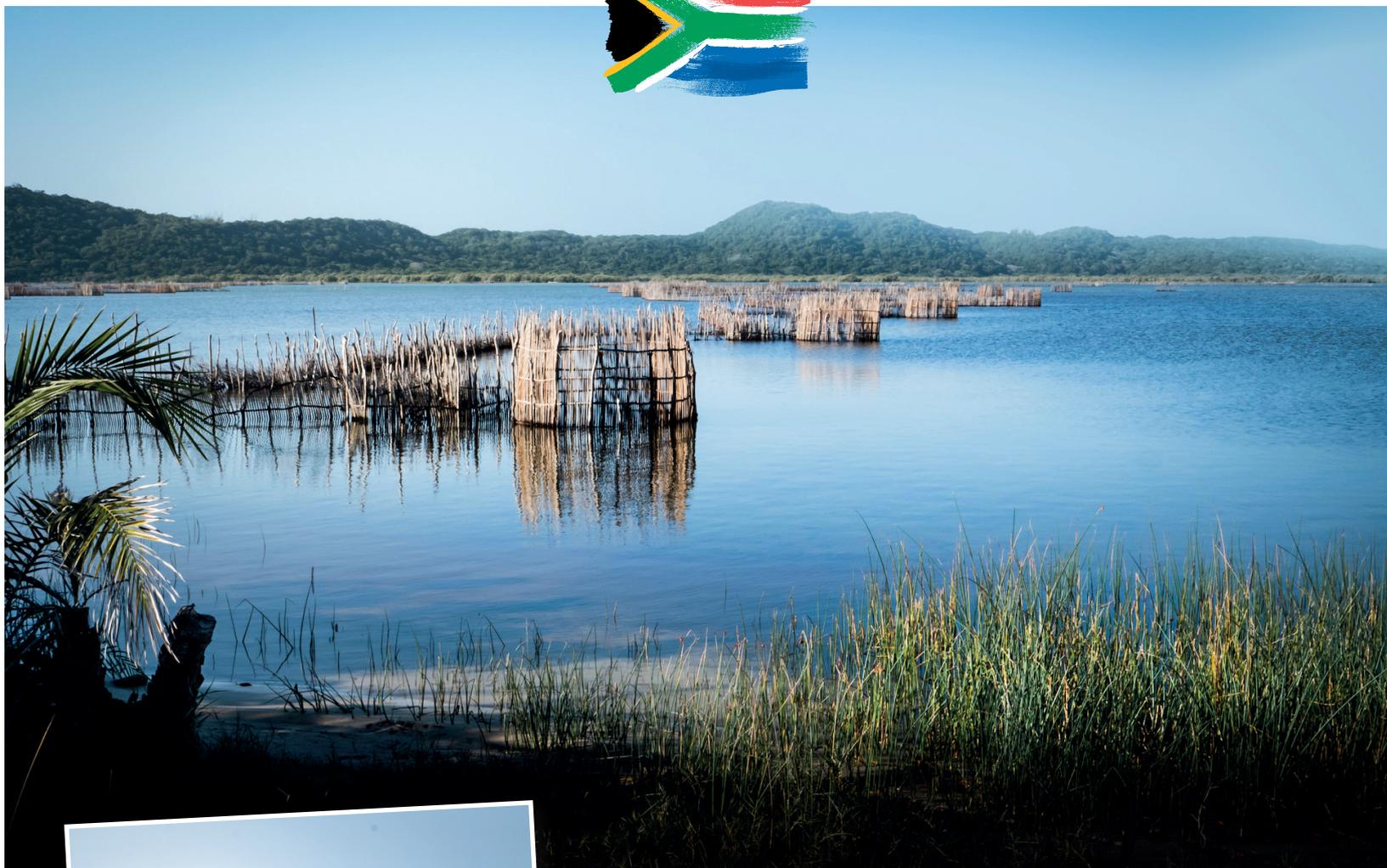
CONTACT: 013 764 3399; info@pilgrims-rest.co.za; pilgrims-rest.co.za.

The Mapungubwe Cultural Landscape

Depending on who you ask, Mapungubwe (another UNESCO World Heritage Site) either means "place of wisdom" or "hill of the jackal". Visit the golden hill, and you'll catch a glimpse of an ancient African civilisation that called the area home. Before it was abandoned in the 14th century, Mapungubwe was one of the earliest civilisations in sub-Saharan Africa, and it was very advanced for its time: It traded in gold and ivory with China, India and Egypt; made iron weapons; had a thriving agricultural sector and a class and justice system. Gold jewellery and objects have also been found on site – the most famous being a small gold rhinoceros. Our wonderful guide, Johannes Masalesa, led us up the 147 steps to the top of Mapungubwe Hill. He is from the area and has a personal history with the "hill of the jackal". The site's historic richness isn't its only drawcard – the location is stunning. Situated on the banks of the great, green Limpopo River, it borders Botswana and Zimbabwe, which also gives the whole place a slightly exotic feel.

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KWAZULU-NATAL

iSimangaliso Wetland Park

In the north-eastern corner of South Africa, past the province's pineapple and sugarcane plantations, you'll find iSimangaliso Wetland Park – South Africa's first natural UNESCO World Heritage Site. For those not from KwaZulu-Natal, it may be hard to believe that this kind of tropical paradise exists in South Africa. It has turquoise waters, white sandy beaches, giant palm forests, unique wetlands and crocodile-infested swamps.

Outdoor adventurers are in for a treat – activities in the park include scuba diving, snorkelling, estuary tours, horseback riding, kayaking, whale watching and more. It's a fantastic bird-watching spot. Themba Mtembu's bird tour is extraordinary. He knows all the little brown jobs and can imitate over 250 bird calls (book a tour at thembabirdingtour@gmail.com). The area is also rich in culture and history. Check out the unique fish kraals at Kosi Bay. The Thonga have fished using these kraals for more than 700 years. The kraals curve in, so fish can easily enter. Bigger fish get stuck, while little ones get out easily, minimising the impact on the fish population.

CONTACT: 035 590 1633; info@isimangaliso.com; isimangaliso.com.





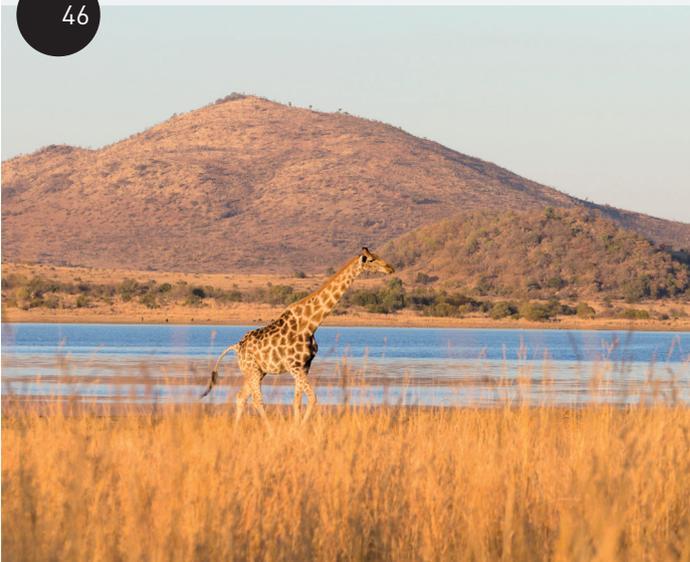
NORTH WEST

Pilanesberg

Set within the crater of an ancient volcano that was formed 1.2 billion years ago, the big five roam this park's plains and platinum sits beneath its soil. Pilanesberg is the product of Project Genesis – a ground-breaking wildlife relocation effort that started in 1979 when more than 6 000 animals were resettled onto the overworked farmland. This was the largest game resettlement programme in the history of South Africa. As a result of the ambitious project, the park has more than 10 000 animals today. Activities include safaris, game drives, quad bike adventures, village tours, mountain biking and hot air balloon rides. It is also a great place to go camping, especially if you don't want to pitch your own tent! Tented Adventures in Pilanesberg (076 146 1468; bookings@tentedadventures.com; tentedadventures.com) will do that for you while you sip your gin and tonic and get ready to go on one of their game drives.

CONTACT: 082 082 6715; sales@pilanesbergnationalpark.org; pilanesbergnationalparks.com.

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FREE STATE

The Vredefort Dome

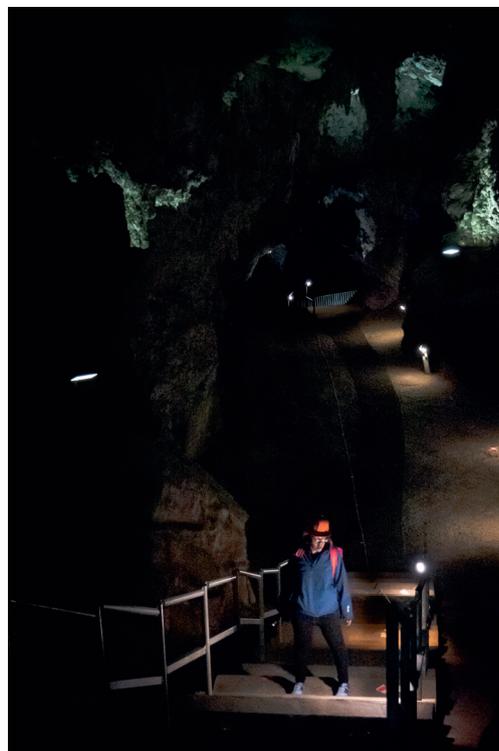
Thousands of meteorite impact sites have been found around the world, but the Vredefort Dome is something special. With a radius of 190 km, it's the biggest known impact site on earth. It's also one of the oldest – 2 million years! The impact was so massive and the speed of the meteorite so high that the heat of the explosion melted rock and pushed gold out of the earth's crust to the edge of the impact site, creating the Witwatersrand and many of the gold mines in the area around Parys and Vredefort. This fascinating UNESCO World Heritage Site is massive, so you'll need a whole day to explore it properly. And I highly recommend booking a tour guide. We wouldn't have been able to find anything on our own.

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Images: Chantelle Marais, Leona Oosthuizen, Konrad Raubenheimer, Getty Images/Deito Images and supplied

GAUTENG



The Fossil Hominid Sites of South Africa at Sterkfontein and the Maropeng Visitors Centre

This paleoanthropological wonder (and UNESCO World Heritage Site) is made up of 12 hominid and fossil sites throughout Gauteng and North West. Collectively known as The Cradle of Humankind, these sites are home to some of the most important discoveries of human evolution in the world, including several famous skeletons that help explain the mysteries of our origin as a species. The best-known site is probably Sterkfontein. An hour south of Johannesburg, it has an underground lake, complex formations, and they're still finding fossils there today. About 10 minutes away is the Maropeng Visitors Centre. Colourful, informative, fun and filled with famous skeletons – it's an outstanding exhibition space.

CONTACT: 014 577 9000; info@maropeng.co.za; maropeng.co.za. 



Quality Assured

THE AA RECOMMENDS



Cape Paradise (Cape Town)

Highly Recommended

Located on the slopes of Table Mountain, this lodge offers B&B rooms and self-catering apartments. Use Cape Paradise to explore the City of Cape Town, including Table Mountain and the Kirstenbosch Nation Garden, which form part of the Cape Floral Kingdom.



Melrose Guest Farm (Graaff-Reinet)

Highly recommended

This 4-star establishment has two family suites with two bedrooms each, and the self-catering unit also has two bedrooms. There are numerous activities and sights in the area, including the Valley of Desolation in the Camdeboo National Park.



Tambuti Lodge (Pilansberg)

Superior

Set in the north-western part of the greater Pilanesberg National Park, this lodge consists of five luxury chalets. All suites offer spectacular views, have air con and en-suite bathrooms. Guests can also go on game drives or walks.



Afrikhaya Guesthouse (St Lucia)

Superior

This 4-star property is situated in the heart of the iSimangaliso Wetland Park. It offers five luxury en-suite bedrooms. Eco activities in the area range from self-guided walking trails to snorkelling along the reefs at Cape Vidal and even taking an open vehicle game drive in the iSimangaliso Wetland Park (or drive your own vehicle).

To book, visit qa.aatravel.co.za.