

By Leon Marshall

Intermittent blasts of gas-fired burner break the early morning still as our hot air balloon lifts and starts to glide gently on the air currents above hilly grasslands crossed here and there by bushy gullies.

A few times we hear wildebeest grunt, and from behind a rocky outcrop come the unmistakable croaks of blue crane, South Africa's national bird. A jackal calls from the distance.



Photo by Leon Marshall

The light fog from which the hilltops protrude lend the landscape a mystical air, inspiring images of what it might have looked like two million years ago.

This is the area from which paleontologists unearthed skeletal remains they believe offer more clues to the greatest puzzle of all, that of where we humans come from.



Photo by Leon Marshall

The region, on the northwestern outskirts of Johannesburg, is pockmarked by limestone caves and dolomite sinkholes that are a treasure trove of fossils. It was [declared a World Heritage Site in 1999](#) for containing an exceptionally large and scientifically significant group of sites that throw light on the earliest ancestors of humankind and offer a vast reserve of scientific information of enormous potential.

The 116,139-acre (47,000 hectare) stretch of land has been named the [Cradle of Humankind](#).

Some scientists consider this a bit presumptuous, pointing out that East Africa's fossil yields allows it better claim to the designation.

Whatever, the name has contributed considerably to the area's development as a tourist attraction, and to its preservation. Much of the land has been turned into private nature reserves, some of which are well-stocked with wild animals.



Photo by Leon Marshall

Hot air balloon rides are one of many activities offered. Done during the early hours of the day, it makes for enchanting views of the landscape and wildlife. It causes the mind to delve back into the mists of time when, instead of the black-maned lion we saw surveying the landscape regally from a clearing, it might in another time have been a saber-tooth tiger standing there, stretching and sniffing the air.



The rhinoceros on the hillside first looked like large boulders, until the shifting angle from the balloon brought into sight their huge nose horns. Their prehistoric appearance seemed fitting of another era on Earth, one going back to a time when Mrs. Ples, more formally known as *Australopithecus africanus*, might at that time of day have been emerging from her cave, rubbing her eyes as she blinked into the morning sun.

Map courtesy of Wikimedia Commons

Farther away, another of the family, popularly known as Little Foot, might also have emerged from his shelter, scanning the surrounds for possible danger, and for prey that might make a quick breakfast.

And what about newly introduced *Australopithecus sediba*? Would she be standing more upright, scratching an apelike protruding forehead with delicate, humanlike fingers, and wondering what morsel might be suitable to her smaller, hominid-type teeth?



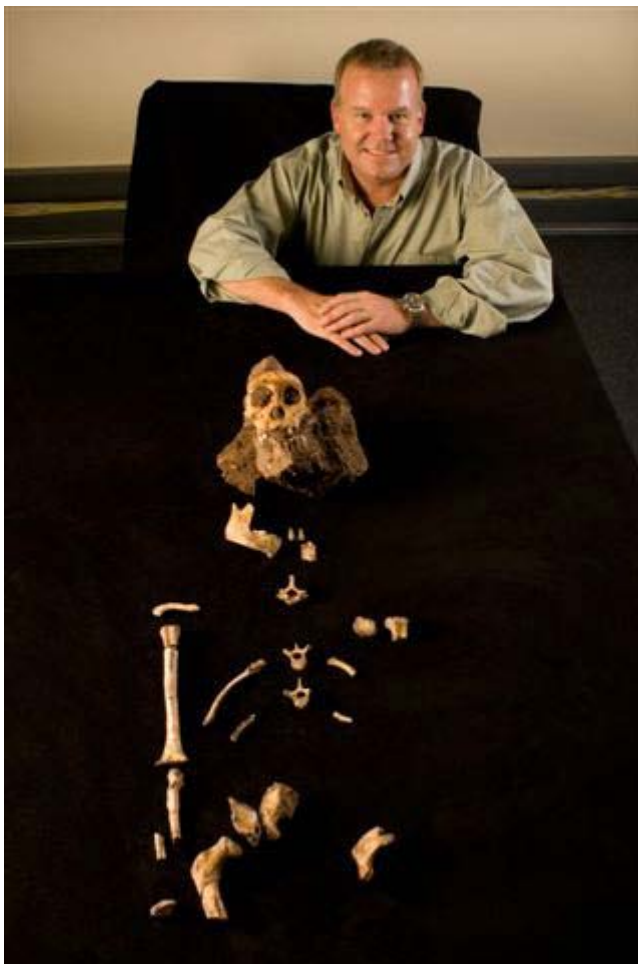
Photo of "Mrs. Ples" by [John Walker/Wikimedia Commons](#)

Remains of Mrs. Ples, from somewhere beyond two million years ago, were retrieved in 1927 by scientists Robert Broom and John Robinson. Little Foot, probably somewhat older, was reassembled in 1997 from a box of bones that had already been collected from Sterkfontein Cave, the area's most famous site, about two decades earlier.

And now, in addition to a rich collection of animal fossils also retrieved from the area over the years, has come along *Australopithecus sediba*, the latter meaning fountain in the indigenous Sotho language. It is called so because it is expected to turn into a font of knowledge about where we come from, or, alternatively, that it might turn out actually to be the source of humankind.

Most enthused of all is Professor Lee Berger, a palaeo-anthropologist at Johannesburg's University of the Witwatersrand, whose now 11-year-old son, Matthew, stumbled on the bone-bearing rocks while on a fossil search of the area with his father. That happened nearly two years ago. The announcement was delayed until now for the fossils to be properly scanned and analysed.

([Read the National Geographic News story: "Key" Human Ancestor Found](#))



Lee Berger with partial remains of *Australopithecus sediba*. ([See more pictures of *Australopithecus sediba* fossils.](#))

Photo by Brett Eloff, courtesy of Wits University

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What made Berger think the new fossils fit into the family tree was the mosaic of characteristics shared by earlier ape-men like *Australopithecus africanus* and more recent ancestors of man. Calling it a "Rosetta stone into the past", he believes they could represent the "muddle in the middle" in the hominid family tree, or a transitional species.



Maropeng Visitor Center

Photos by Robert Marshall

The discovery was announced with fanfare last week at what is known as the Maropeng Visitor Centre inside the Cradle of Humankind. None has been more delighted by it than the South African government, which, for marketing and, to an extent, political purposes, has been making much of Africa as the origin of humanity, and of South Africa as a prominent stomping ground of early man.

National Science and Technology Minister Naledi Pandor applauded the university's researchers for contributing to the growing stature of Africa in the unfolding story of our origins, adding: "The fossils are of immense value in

assisting South Africa to appreciate our scientists and their abilities, and the fact that Africa has made a significant contribution to the evolution of humanity."

Ironically, it might have been the destructive practices of mining of the fossil-bearing rock that caused the skeletal remains to end up where they were discovered. Miners a hundred years ago blasted the caves for lime, used in cement to build the gold-mining city of Johannesburg. It is thought the rocks bearing the bones might have dropped from their wagon as they carted off their spoils.

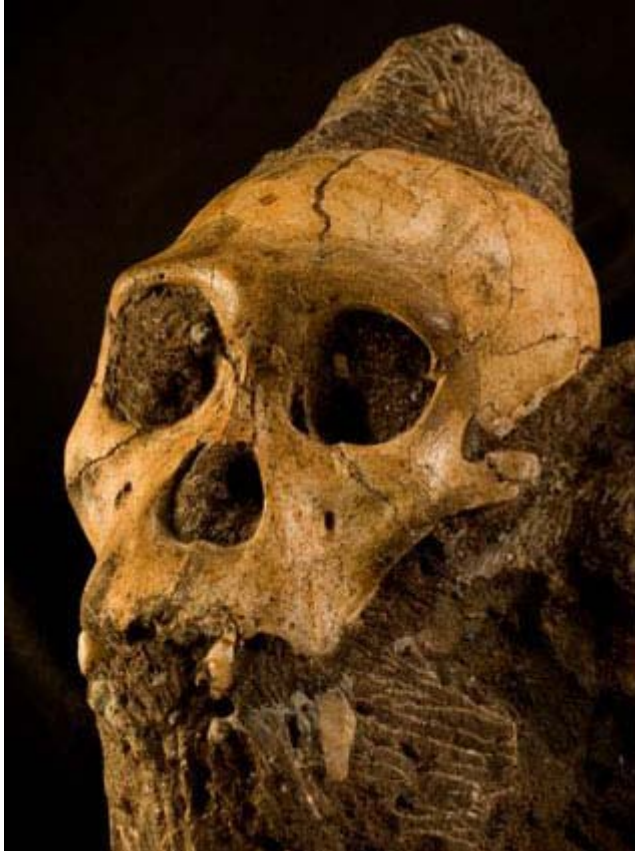


Photo of *Australopithecus sediba* by Brett Eloff, courtesy of Wits University

([See more pictures of *Australopithecus sediba* fossils.](#))

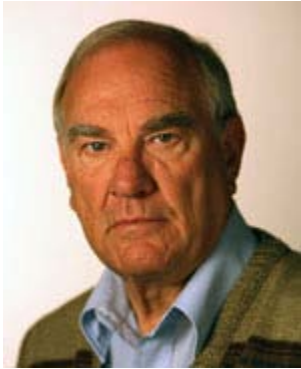
The old bones have instilled new life into the region. The architecturally catching Maropeng Centre has interactive exhibitions taking visitors through the passage of time. It has a boutique hotel, a conference centre and a stylish restaurant that has turned into a favourite wedding venue.

The nearby Sterkfontein Caves allow visitors deep into their passages and caverns where a long time ago beings lived that looked and started to behave rather much like us.

Wide new roads lead to the area, and game reserves with fancy lodges have become a favourite retreat for city folk and a popular tourist destination.

About two decades ago the site nearly shut down due to lack of money and interest from the authorities of the time. Aversion to the theories of evolution might have had something to do with it. But intervention by business interests helped the University of the Witwatersrand to continue with the digging and the research.

South Africans have since come to take enormous pride in their distant, distant ancestors.



Nat Geo News Watch contributing editor **Leon Marshall** is an environmental writer in South Africa. A leading political journalist and executive editor for Africa's largest newspaper group for years, he has won numerous awards, including a 2004 Reuters-IUCN Media Award for Excellence in Environmental Reporting. Leon has covered climate change from a global and African perspective, having attended conferences on the issue in many parts of the world. He has written extensively on the ambitious transfrontier-parks program of the sub-continent and is now writing a book on the subject.

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