



hot-air magic

They say few Londoners have ever visited the Tower of London. Likewise, many Gautengers know little about the attractions around the Cradle of Humankind, the big tourism drawcard in the ancient, aloe-dotted hills northwest of Johannesburg. Angus Begg set out to remedy his ignorance.

I came up with the idea of a hot-air balloon ride over the beautiful hills near the Cradle of Humankind while looking for a 13th special birthday treat for my nephew. The launch site is not far from Muldersdrift, in undulating landscape known as the Kromdraai Conservancy.

As with all balloon trips, the day starts early, with passengers

booked on the flight expected to be at the launch site in the Rhino and Lion Nature Reserve at sunrise. As it's almost an hour from Joburg and friends had told us they had to wake at an ungodly hour to leave Sandton at 04h00, we decided to spend the night at a nearby lodge.

There's a wide choice of accommodation, including some in the nature reserve itself. But weekend



I came up with the idea of a hot-air balloon ride while looking for a birthday treat for my nephew

- Whether the Serengeti or Kromdraai, not much compares with the quiet sensation of soaring over herds of game and their early-morning shadows.

*To the south, another balloon took off,
and there were soon six of us in the sky.
Colourful. Fresh air. Wonderful*

traffic in the reserve tends to be as packed as a Durban beach at Christmas, so we opted for a quieter spot.

N'gomo Safari Lodge offers an escape from the madding crowd. Owners Dean and Jackie Smith have a range of sleep-over options, from a handful of self-catering tents on platforms to luxurious tents with spa baths and tranquil views.

Like many lodge operations, the Smiths talk of being 'at one with nature'. You can do game drives on the 200-hectare property and there are easy walks, with a guide available if needed. This is good Highveld walking country and the hills dotted with karee, suikerbossie and kiepersol trees. The bonus is the plains game and birdlife, with warthogs munching outside your tent.

During the night, a typical Highveld storm thundered around our tent and we didn't expect to be flying in a hot-air balloon the next morning. But the skies cleared, the wind dropped and, after coffee and biscuits, we lifted off silently at sunrise with Adam Filmore, the 28-year-old owner and pilot of our balloon.

From above, the broader landscape comes into its own. We were glad the sun was shining for this birthday treat, as little beats the long shadows thrown by the climbing sun over herds of galloping hartbees, wildebeest and zebra, all spooked by the balloon.

We glided high above koppies, then flew so low over eland and sable that we could've jumped out among them. North was



What To Do

- The Rhino & Lion Nature Reserve has white lions, buffalo, white rhino, cheetah, tigers, wild dogs, hippo and a variety of plains game. Visit the animal crèche and play with the baby cubs. There is also a play centre for kids. Entrance R90 a person. Tel 011-957-0106/9. They also offer night game drives for R170 a person (five or more people). Tel 083-454-6529.
- Hot-air ballooning rides include a game drive and a big breakfast for R1 995 a person. Contact Air-ventures Hot Air Ballooning at tel 011-793-5782 or 083-698-7614.
- Wonder Caves are five- to 10-million years old, with formations up to 15 metres tall, rim pools, cave pearls, stalactites and stalagmites. Conducted tours leave every hour on the hour. R50 an adult, R30 a child. Tel 011-957-0106/9.
- Horse riding on Danielsrus private game farm, R160 a person for one hour (also clay-pigeon shooting and paintball). Tel 082-891-8365 or 082-555-3153.
- Caving and abseiling. Contact Caving Adventures at 082-632- 1718 or web www.wildcaves.co.za.



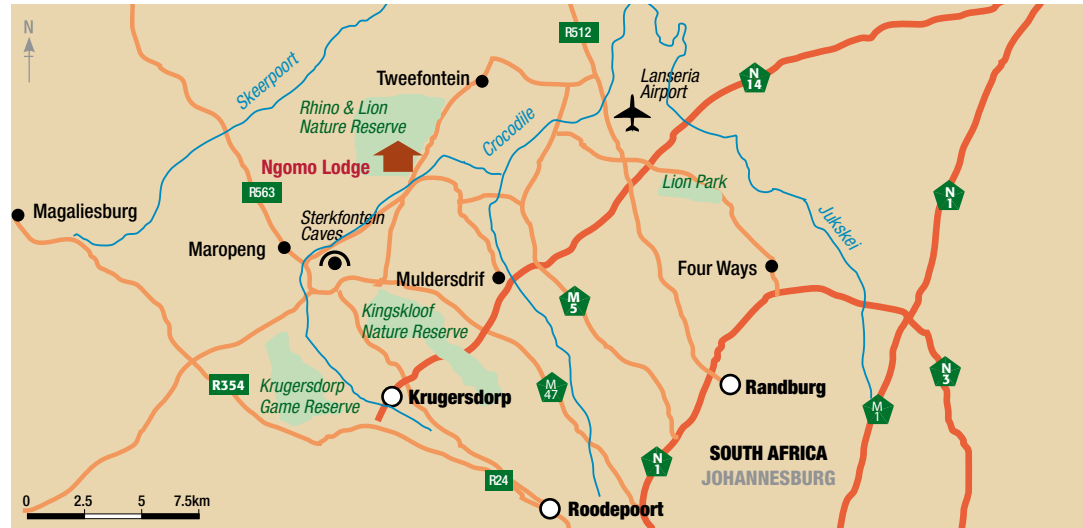
the Magaliesberg range and Hartbeespoort dam, where two other balloons soon made their appearance, the size of tennis balls in the distance. To the south, another balloon took off, and there were soon six of us in the sky.

Colourful. Fresh air. Wonderful.
Adam's occasional commentary filled in our knowledge gaps, such

- We flew high and low. One minute we
- were looking out to Hartbeespoort dam;
- the next, pilot Adam Filmore took us so
- low we could've hopped out of the basket.



The horses at Danielsrust Game Farm will get you a lot closer to game than you would on foot. At the trees in the distance we came across a herd of wildebeest.



Before we headed home, we wanted to visit the fossil site on the N'gomo property. Known as Drimolen, it's an active dig in one of a number of sinkholes in the area

as who owned which property and what game was to be found on it. Suddenly we were over flower farms and chicken batteries full of caged fowls that could only dream of the freedom we were enjoying.

Groups of motorcyclists headed west on breakfast runs as we glided in to land over the R563. Suddenly our basket was bouncing gently over earth and wild grass, and we all held on tightly as we were dragged over an overgrown field.

'Don't stand up,' shouted Adam, reminding us of the landing procedure. It was my fifth trip in a balloon, so crouching in the bottom of a basket while being dragged over the ground was nothing new to me.

The flight was followed by a game drive that is part of the ballooning package. Afterwards, we made our way back to N'gomo for breakfast, then still had the best part of a morning to fill.

We opted to go for a ride on Danielsrust, a neighbouring game

farm of a few thousand hectares. In the paddock next to the 19th century stone farmhouse, 10 horses were saddled up, waiting for their riders. Owner Michelle van der Merwe took us out into beautiful savannah grasslands. Occasionally we rode with wildebeest and always in sight of Spioenkop, a koppie from where the boers spied on English troops in the Anglo Boer War.

Danielsrust is rich in history. In the old graveyard beyond the stables lie the ancestors of Michelle's husband, Darryl. Alongside them are the remains of British and Boer soldiers, as well as child victims of a smallpox epidemic.

After two hours in the saddle, Michelle made a vain attempt to interest us in paintball or clay-pigeon

shooting. But before we headed home, we wanted to visit the fossil site on the N'gomo property.

Known as Drimolen, it's an active dig in one of a number of sinkholes in the area, with staked pegs and strings denoting the areas being worked by retired paleo-anthropologist Dr Andre Keyser. Having long specialised in the Cradle of Humankind, he reckons it's the richest site in the area.

A table in the sinkhole has moulds of all the pieces found at the dig. Under nearby acacias, piles of earth wait to be sent back to Wits University for analysis. There's a sense that the good doctor will one day announce an astounding discovery.

All this in just one morning. ■

footnotes

Getting there

Drive to the Rhino and Lion Nature Reserve (about 15 minutes from Lanseria Airport on the R512), entering via the gate on the D540 (Tweefontein Rd). N'gomo is six kilometres inside the reserve.

Where to stay

\$\$\$ to \$\$\$\$ N'gomo Safari Lodge offers self-catering and luxury tents. A two-sleeper tent is R595 a night; the four-sleeper R710 a night. You can book a full English breakfast (R70 a person) and

dinner (R120 each). DB&B in the luxury VIP camp is R695 a person sharing. Game drives are R90 a person. Tel 082-300-2906 or 082-652-3815, e-mail N'gomo@mweb.co.za, web www.N'gomolodge.co.za.

Where To Eat

The Cradle Restaurant, Lanseria, tel 011-659-1622. The Fat Olive, Muldersdrift, tel 011-659-0443. Roots Restaurant at Forum Homini, Muldersdrift, tel 011-668-7000. ■