



WELCOME HOME, EVERYONE

ORIGINS TOURISM HAD A ROCKY START IN SOUTH AFRICA. FIRST THE APARTHEID GOVERNMENT IGNORED EXCAVATIONS PROVING WE ALL HAD A COMMON ANCESTOR. NOW, THE HISTORY OF THE APE-MEN IS SEEN AS TOO HIGH-BROW. GENEVIEVE SWART TALKED TO THOSE BRINGING PALAEO TOURISM TO THE PEOPLE

We are different colours, we speak different languages, worship different gods and cheer for different sports teams. But humans have one thing in common: we can all call Africa home. Science has come a long way since Darwin outraged Christian Victorian England by concluding humans and apes had probably shared a common ancestor in Africa. '[Scientists] have firmly established Africa as the birthplace not only of humankind but also of modern humans,' writes historian Martin Meredith in his latest epic, *Born in Africa: The Quest for the Origins of Human Life*. 'They have revealed how early technology, language ability and artistic endeavour all originated in Africa...'

Hominids – aka the ape-men, our zoological family since we separated from the lineage going to chimpanzees – have been found all over Africa, with the earliest in Chad dating about seven million years old. South Africa's most recent find – *Australopithecus sediba* – was at Malapa Cave in 2008, stumbled upon by a boy called Matthew, the nine-year-old son of Wits palaeo-anthropologist Professor Lee Berger. It made world headlines again in September after papers published in the US journal *Science* argued *Sediba* was a direct ancestor of *Homo sapiens*.

So never mind tracing your family tree to a village in Scotland, the Netherlands or India. South Africa – home to the Cradle of Humankind and an impressive array of other invaluable fossil sites – offers the ultimate in 'roots tourism'.

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BACK TO YOUR ROOTS

'The whole of South Africa is a remarkable opportunity for palaeo tourists in itself,' says Andrea Leenen, head of the Palaeontological Scientific Trust (PAST), a Johannesburg-based NGO that champions Africa's ancient past.

'What makes South Africa spectacular is not just the Sterkfontein human origins fossils. The Karoo has simply some of the most remarkable fossils coming from a pre-dinosaur era. We've got dinosaurs that are far more spectacular than things you can find in North America. We've got rock art, and the oldest plants and rocks in the world. South Africa has this extraordinary record and I think if people are interested in prehistory, they should see all of that.'

Currently, origins tourism is underrated, Leenen says. 'It is a bit of a high-brow thing, unfortunately.' But if the business, tourism and scientific communities make a united effort, she predicts 'a huge market'.

'We just have such an extraordinary resource here ... if you can't embed this concept of our ancient roots, popularly, in the world community, we are not going to be able to preserve what we've got. And I see it very much as fossils as a resource. We've got coal and diamonds ... but fossils of our human ancestors are rarer than anything else on Earth. And they come exclusively from Africa. So we have this huge marketing opportunity.'

One option, she says, is to blend 'roots' tourism with an already successful sector. 'Palaeo tourism can expose tourists to a whole new wildlife experience because, after all, our human ancestors, they were part of the

environment and the landscape.' Safari guides have mixed animals and fossils with great success: 'Because you can only see so many animals and then people go, well, what do we do on our next game drive? Well, what you do is you start looking at the bones that are left behind on the surface, you start looking at fossils, you start exploring where we come from. And it's a whole new aspect for people.'

PAST, PRESENT & FUTURE

PAST was founded in 1994, the year of South Africa's first democratic elections. 'It was at a stage when the Sterkfontein excavation, which is the longest-running archaeological excavation in the world, was about to shut down due to lack of funding,' says Leenen. 'It's bizarre to think of it now, with all these amazing discoveries that have come from there, but they were in a crisis. Predominantly, of course, that was due to the fact that the apartheid government could not really openly support origin sciences, for obvious reasons. And then evolution was not part of the school curriculum because we couldn't be telling kids that we all come from the same roots.'

Now PAST is the country's chief promoter of the origin sciences – archaeology, palaeontology and palaeo-anthropology. Its latest project is Scatterlings of Africa ('Johnny Clegg is a huge supporter'), integrating science education, research and public outreach.

Scatterlings of Africa expands PAST's work into the rest of Africa. For example, now children in Tanzania – home of the famous Olduvai Gorge, which has yielded important

WHO LIVED WHEN

The Palaeontological Scientific Trust's chief scientific strategist is Professor Robert Blumenshine, an American anthropologist from Rutgers University, who has been running Tanzania's Olduvai excavations for 25 years after taking over from the Leakey family. Here he lists seven major steps in human evolution

6–8 million years ago

Last common ancestor between chimpanzees and humans.

6–7 million years ago

Sahelanthropus tchadensis, the earliest known bipedal hominid, found in Chad. 'Bipedalism – walking on two legs – is the fundamental trait that distinguishes humans and their direct ancestors.'

4.4 million years ago

Ardipithecus ramidus, Ethiopia

2–4 million years ago

Australopithecus africanus, South Africa

2.5 million years ago

Homo habilis, the first species of our genus. 'This is also when the first stone tools appeared.'

1.5 million years ago

Homo erectus.

From 200 000 years ago

Homo sapiens. 'Significantly, by the time you have early *Homo sapiens* emerging you have complex Stone Age technology already in evidence. Fire has been invented. You also have evidence of symbolic behaviour, of art.'



The Tumulus building, which resembles a massive burial mound, marks the entrance to the Maropeng Visitor Centre at The Cradle of Humankind

hominid fossils and early stone tools – will get to see PAST's Walking Tall educational theatre project. The show is based on the origin sciences and has educated and entertained a million South African schoolchildren since it began 10 years ago.

An adults show is new. 'We've now developed a theatre programme called ReVerse,' says Leenen, 'taking that kids concept and making it accessible to adults in an exciting, artistic way. We hope to take that not only to the fossil sites here, but to an overseas community. And we hope that that is our contribution to the roots tourism as such.' (Learn more at past.co.za)

FUN WITH FOSSILS

Maropeng – 'returning to the place of origin' in Setswana – is the official visitor centre for the Cradle of Humankind. In 1999 the area was declared a World Heritage Site, forever protecting the scene of such remarkable finds as the Taung skull. The Taung child – of the species *Australopithecus africanus* ('southern ape of Africa') – was the first hominid fossil discovered here, and it ultimately led the rest of the world to realise that Africa was, in fact, the birthplace of humankind.

Today at Maropeng, enterprising staff have made a complicated subject so appealing that parents book tours for children's parties. 'We do a walking tour, including a picnic, to

Cooper's Cave,' says Maropeng MD Tony Rubin. 'It's a wonderful interactive experience for adults and children.' Tours are led by Christine Steininger, a scientist with a passion for palaeo-anthropology and the only woman with a permit to dig in the Cradle area. 'Christine takes people into Cooper's Cave, and shows them how fossils can be identified in situ. It allows them the opportunity to get involved in the dig, then she sits with them and shows how stone tools are made.'

The Cradle of Humankind is vast, stretching over 47 000 hectares, including fossil sites at Sterkfontein, Swartkrans and Kromdraai. It needed an accessible entry point for tourists and Maropeng Visitor Centre finally provided this when it opened in 2005. In its short lifespan, it's been a big hit.

'Our visitor numbers have grown quite dramatically,' says Rubin. 'We've been growing at about 10 percent per annum over the past six years. We do about 270 000 visitors a year here. I would say of [that] about 35 or 40 percent are schoolchildren that are here on school tours; of the remaining 60 percent, I'd say 80 percent are South African families, so 20 percent is international.'

Johannesburg's reputation – which spurs fearful tourists to take the first flight out to Kruger or Cape Town – is partly to blame for lower numbers of international visitors, Rubin

believes. 'We do a lot of groups from the East – Japanese, Chinese – they come through here because they have a specific interest in origins. But the Western tourists, I'm afraid, tend to arrive and fly out again as quickly as possible. Which is sad, because this is such a magnificent area for people to see.'

Maropeng focuses on making learning about ancient history fun and interactive, with attractions including an underground boat ride retracing the creation of Earth, back from ice age to fiery ball of molten rock to black hole.

Curator Lindsay Marshall is passionate about the marketing and educational side of the palaeosciences. 'Maropeng is not an academic institution, so my position falls outside of the traditional role of curator,' she explains. 'My role involves marketing to and educating the public about our rich past, and putting the incredible people who do this work into the public eye by providing them with a platform to showcase their work to the world. I want them to become the role models to our next generation of young palaeo-scientists.'

DOWN IN THE CAVE

At Sterkfontein, tours involve descending 60 metres below into a limestone cave, scene of ancient tragedies, several times a day. Guide Reuben Tsime first visited the Sterkfontein ►

Caves at age 13 as a history-mad Krugersdorp schoolboy. He says tourists like to laugh at jokes about a rock shaped like an African elephant but not at 'maximum security' gags about Little Foot, the *Australopithecus* skeleton found three million years after he fell into the cave, and now protected within a fenced-off area.

Little Foot was found embedded in Sterkfontein's breccia in 1997, thanks to some painstaking bone detective work by palaeo-anthropologist Ron Clarke and his technical assistants, Stephen Motsumi and Nkwane Molefe. They searched the Silberberg Grotto with two handheld lamps for the other half of a broken shin bone Clarke had chanced on in an old box at Wits University.

'They are still digging out the actual skeleton. You can imagine using a dental drill to excavate a rock as hard as concrete – it's been years of excavation. They say that by the end of this year, Little Foot will be out of the cave,' says Tsime. For now, tourists can only see the gate leading to the dig and the occasional glimpse of a scientist behind it. 'Tourists find it fascinating – at least they saw Professor Ron Clarke in action.'

Tsime has had a few sneak peeks of the ape-

man: 'That's a very complete skeleton, from head to feet, including 32 teeth. And that's a male adult hominid dating 3.3 million years.'

Tsime, who started at Maropeng as a bartender but seized his chance to apply to become a guide, has won three awards for his outstanding work. 'Last year I became No.1 guide in Gauteng,' he says. He then came second in the tour-guide category at 2010's national tourism Welcome Awards. He does, however, laughingly confess to being glad of the company of tourists on the job since watching the horror film *Descent* ('about creatures eating people in a cave'). But tours are not scary, Tsime adds.

'We have a good lighting system, 90 percent of the cave is quite open, it's huge. It's also got oxygen, with about five sinkholes allowing nice air to circulate into the cave, and we also have a big underground lake.' The smallest space is a metre high and a metre wide and involves some stooping. But it's worth it.

'The caves were first discovered by miners, so they destroyed most of the beautiful stalactites that were hanging on the rooftop, but the cave itself is still covered in beautiful limestone rock,' Tsime says. 'When it comes to geological formation, the Cango Caves is one

of the best caves in the whole of South Africa; when it comes to the history of humankind, Sterkfontein Caves is the best in the world.'

A DUBIOUS ARTICLE

It's tempting – but not true – to claim South Africa as the best place in the world for origins tourism. For this, we can blame a misleading title. 'The' Cradle of Humankind would be more accurately termed 'A' Cradle of Humankind, according to Leenen.

'I think people are a bit embarrassed by that title, because it's simply not scientifically accurate. It's sort of like saying, oh well, lions would only have lived in one particular area 40 minutes outside of Joburg. Our human ancestors lived all over Africa and their remains are found all over Africa.'

Instead of hugging the Cradle to ourselves, Leenen sees origins tourism as a chance to create an African tourist route, starting with Sterkfontein, then heading north to other iconic sites: Afar Rift in Ethiopia, the Olduvai-Serengeti area in Tanzania and Lake Turkana Basin in Kenya. 'It creates tremendous goodwill if you can say ... let's work together as governments and make this continent a place where people come for wildlife and palaeo.' ●

THE TIME TRAVELLER'S MAP OF SOUTH AFRICA: WHERE TO SEE WHICH FOSSILS

