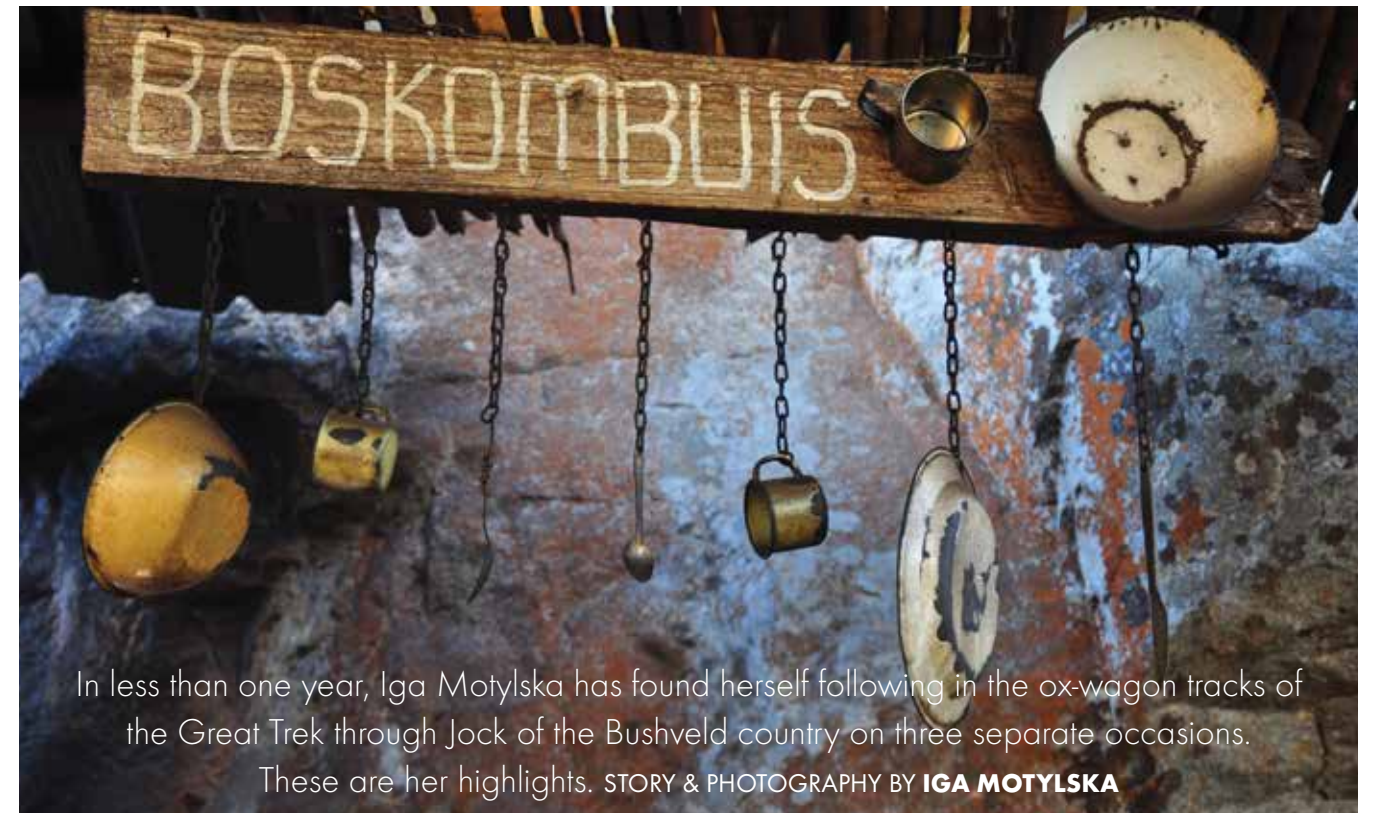


WE TAKE TO SOUTH AFRICA'S FIRST TOBOGGAN RIDE AT MISTY MOUNTAIN, WHICH REACHES SPEEDS OF UP TO 40KM/H AS IT HURTTLES DOWN THE MOUNTAIN OVER A DISTANCE OF 1.7KM.



ROADTRIPPING THROUGH TIME



In less than one year, Iga Motylska has found herself following in the ox-wagon tracks of the Great Trek through Jock of the Bushveld country on three separate occasions.

These are her highlights. STORY & PHOTOGRAPHY BY **IGA MOTYLSKA**



Before you head out on a road trip along the high plateau grasslands of Mpumalanga's Panorama Route – which ribbons its way for over 130km from the Graskop region to the Three Rondavels and beyond – make sure you have enough memory space and battery power. Take my word for it, this is no idle reminder...

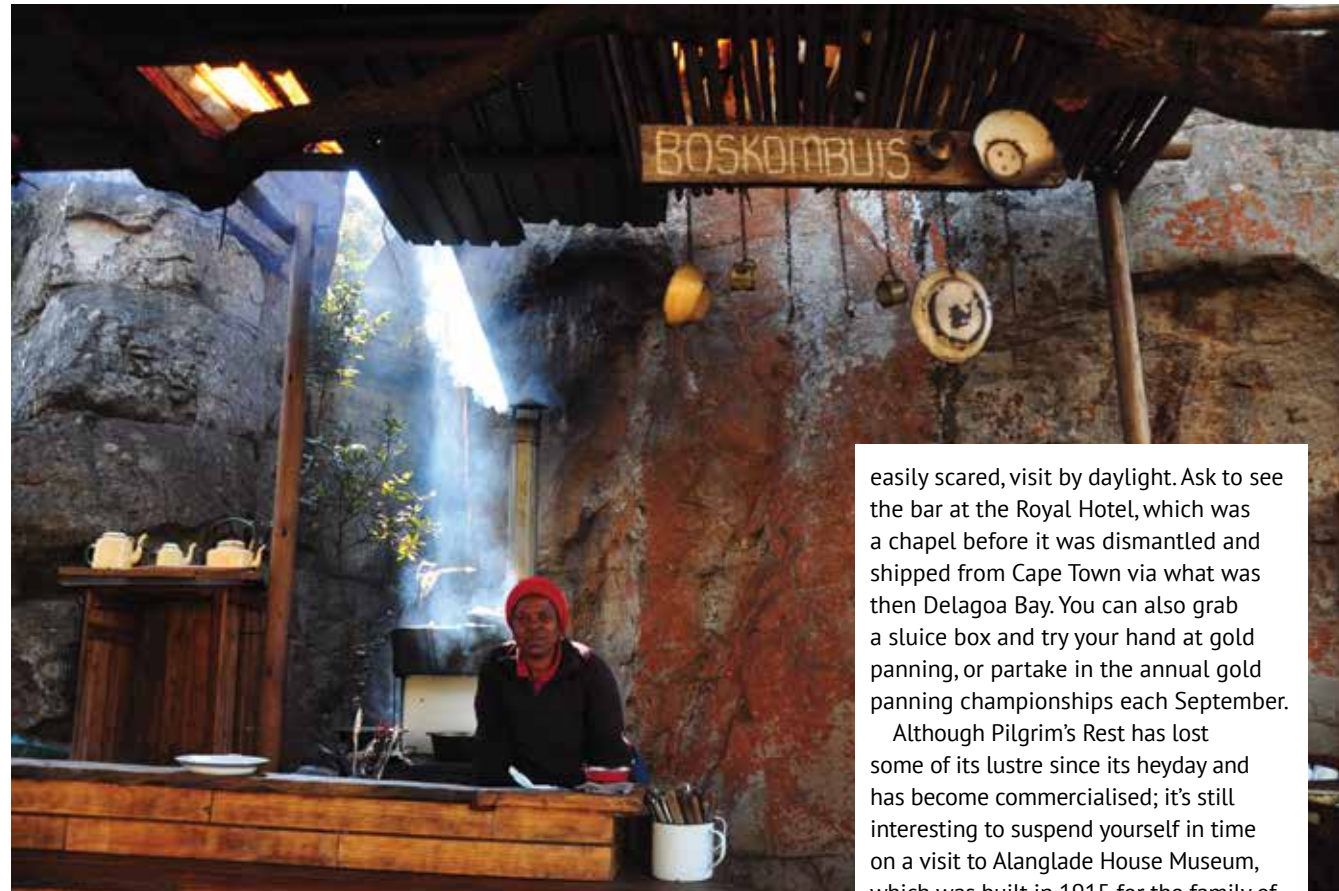
Mpumalanga, which shares borders with Swaziland and Maputo, has much to lay before visitors in terms of natural wonders, age-old stories and cultural sites – it is Jock of the Bushveld and Great Trek country, after all. Yet, the Panorama Route is possibly its greatest attraction. Give yourself at least four days to explore the region at your own pace. Here are a few of my favourite stops along the way, although there are many others.

At 1 493 metres, Graskop is the starting point of our road trip. If you're driving west along the R533, half an hour from Graskop is the historic gold mining town of Pilgrim's Rest, which was declared a gold field on 22 September 1873 as gold fever gripped the region. By the end of the year it had attracted around 1 500 gold prospectors with their sluice boxes, in search of alluvial gold in the

waters and along the banks of the creek. By 1880, R2 million worth of gold was rumoured to have been found and around 300 000 tonnes of ore were mined annually between 1930 and 1950. But by 1972 gold fever loosened its hold as mining activities ceased and attention turned to discoveries of gold reserves elsewhere.

As I walk up the main street flanked by Jacarandas, I imagine what life may have been like in the early days of the nineteenth century, when the Gold News was at its printing prime and barmaids served drinks at the local pub, until the town's last 'golden' jacaranda bloom fell. As there is no ATM here – there are card machines though – it seems that gold would be an appropriate legal form of tender.

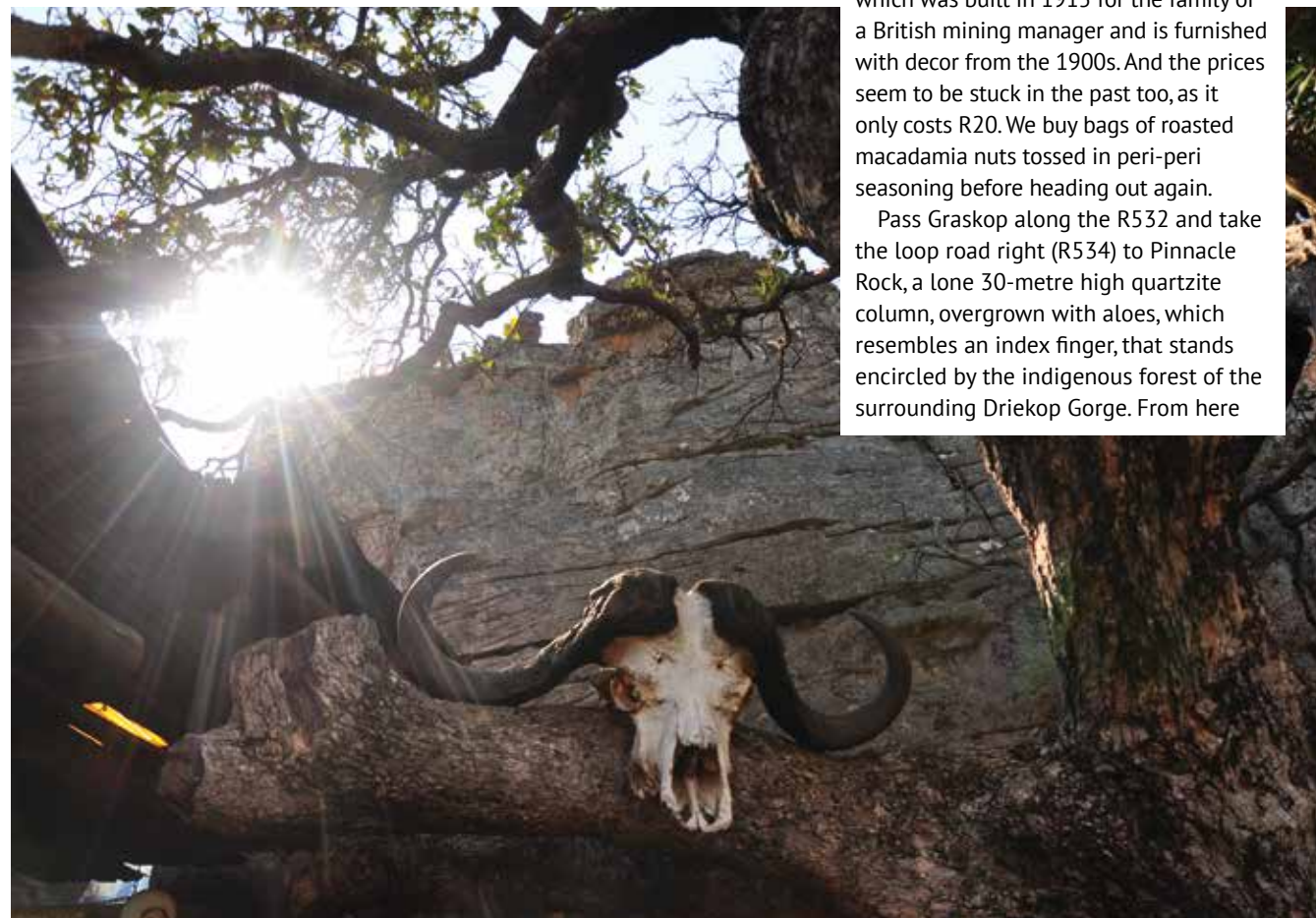
Today, Pilgrim's Rest is a protected provincial heritage site and living museum that caters to tourists wanting a window into the past. Many of the heritage buildings have been converted into restaurants, coffee shops and curio stores that sell trinkets related to the region. Just about everyone has heard of the Robber's Grave at the cemetery, near the Methodist Church – if you're



easily scared, visit by daylight. Ask to see the bar at the Royal Hotel, which was a chapel before it was dismantled and shipped from Cape Town via what was then Delagoa Bay. You can also grab a sluice box and try your hand at gold panning, or partake in the annual gold panning championships each September.

Although Pilgrim's Rest has lost some of its lustre since its heyday and has become commercialised; it's still interesting to suspend yourself in time on a visit to Alanglade House Museum, which was built in 1915 for the family of a British mining manager and is furnished with decor from the 1900s. And the prices seem to be stuck in the past too, as it only costs R20. We buy bags of roasted macadamia nuts tossed in peri-peri seasoning before heading out again.

Pass Graskop along the R532 and take the loop road right (R534) to Pinnacle Rock, a lone 30-metre high quartzite column, overgrown with aloes, which resembles an index finger, that stands encircled by the indigenous forest of the surrounding Driekop Gorge. From here



the Ngwaritsana River crashes down into the unseen.

God's Window further along offers panoramic views of the Lowveld valley below, the Kruger National Park in the distance and the Lebombo Mountain range on the horizon. Its natural beauty and high elevation (900m) is imagined to have found favour with God, who given the choice would have settled here. If you arrive in the early hours of the day, you may be able to walk among the clouds along a wooden walkway on the escarpment's edge, through a forested area that leads to the look out point. Next up is Wonder View – the highest viewpoint along the Panorama Route at 1 730m – there's no walking required here as the 360 degree panoramic views of the surrounding peaks and plateaus can be seen from the roadside.

Back on the R532, Lisbon Falls is on your left. This treble waterfall cascades for 95m into the pools below. Further up the road (also on the left) is the smaller though no less intriguing Berlin Falls, where the Watervalspruit plunges down a 80-metre high cliff. Don't miss the view from the viewing deck and if you're



hungry, there are picnic sites too. I buy an ornamental hippo pool that's carved from stone and completed with a bonsai tree.

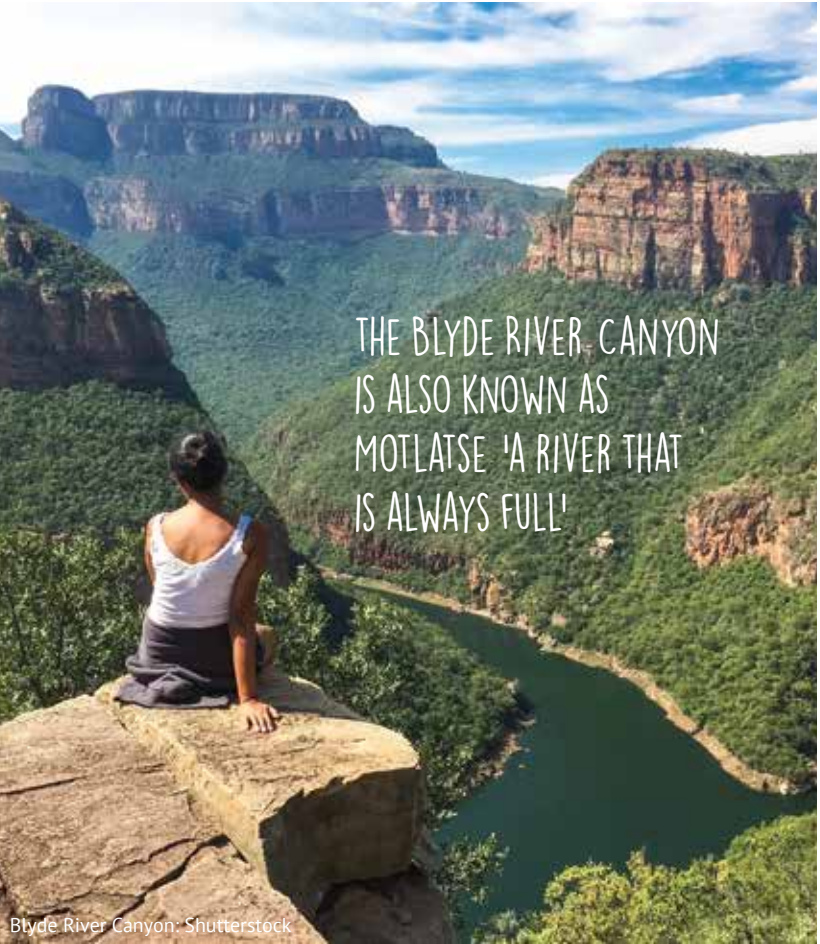
After a long stretch of open road along the R532, lunch at Potluck Boskombuis. Keep a look out for the sign on your right hand side en route to the potholes. Now, you won't hear me wax lyrical about food often, but if every Trip Advisor review of this place contains the word 'best' in the title, you know I'm not far off. This is the

place for a real taste of local cuisine – they serve boerewors, T-bone steak, chicken kebabs, potjiekos, mieliepap, sheba, as well as a vegetarian bake. All meals come with a side dish of unsurpassable views. We sit on tree stumps at wooden tables as our food is served on tin plates to the views of the babbling Treur River and surrounding bushveld.

Nearby are the giant cylindrical potholes at Bourke's Luck Potholes that have been carved out over millions of years by sand and rocks swirling around and grinding away at the rock pools where the Blyde (meaning 'joy' in Afrikaans) and Treur (meaning 'sorrow' in Afrikaans) rivers meet. This geological phenomenon marks the beginning of the Blyde River Canyon. Bridges and lookout points stretch over the expanse of the rivers.

The potholes are said to be named after Tom Burke, who realised the gold potential in the region; however, there's an element of irony in its name, as the main gold reserve was not found on his property, but on the opposite side of the river.

To conquer the heat, we buy ice-cream from the cafe. Adrenaline junkies can obtain a hiking permit and map from the



Blyde River Canyon: Shutterstock



office. The trail starts and finishes at the Bourke's Luck Visitors Centre. The route follows the Yellowwood Trail, passes the Potholes and then descends into the Blyde River Canyon to the Power Station. Because of the steep slopes one should be fairly fit to tackle this trail.

And now for the main reason we've come all this way – the Blyde River Canyon, also known as Motlatse (meaning 'a river that is always full' in the Pulane dialect of Northern Sotho that's closely related to Pedi). It's found within Motlatse Provincial Nature Reserve and with its lush subtropical foliage it is the world's greenest canyon. The crags of the canyon stretch for over 26 kilometres and its 800 metres deep, making it the world's third largest canyon and Africa's second largest, after Namibia's Fish River Canyon. This is South Africa's fourth most-visited tourist attraction as around one million visitors make their way here each year.

We precariously sit on the edge and dangle our feet into the depths below. Eagles circle overhead. The view site at the Three Rondavels offers picture-book

views of the famous quartzite and shale peaks that resemble the traditional rondavel houses with domed roofs that are covered, as if with icing sugar, in green. The three peaks are said to be named after three of Chief Maripi Mashile's wives: Magabolle, Mogoladikwe and Maseroto. From here we photograph the Blydepoort Dam.

End off your trip with a stay at Misty Mountain in Sabie in the southern part of the Panorama Route. It overlooks a valley of pine trees shrouded by mist on most mornings. Spend at least two days exploring the area as they offer many excursions and there's much to keep families busy. This is the place to try trout, which the region is famed for.

We ditch torches in favour of candles as we go caving by candle light in the Lonecreek Cave with Kestell from Kestell Adventures. His dog, Wouter, will most likely join you to show you the way through the muddy, underground tunnels. Then we take to South Africa's first toboggan ride at Misty Mountain, which reaches speeds of up to 40km/h

as it hurtles down the mountain over a distance of 1.7km. Next, we keep the adrenaline flowing as we quad bike through the pine forests of Sabie. Finish off your day, with a tour and beer tasting at Sabie Brewing Company in town as you "cheers" to an epic Mpumalanga road trip.

Just south of Sabie is Bridal Veil Falls – the most scenic of the many waterfalls along the Panorama Route. The 15-minute walk through the verdant rainforest is enough to get the blood flowing. I emerge from the thicket of twirling branches and creepers to be faced with a burnt orange sandstone cliff face. The water splashes in all directions as it tumbles 146m over the lip of the cliff into the lake below. Take a few steps back to get the entire length of the waterfall in your viewfinder.

If you're brave enough – rather, if you're wearing your swimming costume or have a spare set of clothes to change into – you can walk along the thin, red-earth path behind the waterfall and watch its waters plunge in front of you. Then sit on a nearby rock as you take it all in. ☺

YOUR HOME IN THE BLYDE RIVER CANYON THABA TSWENI LODGE



Thaba Tsweni Lodge, with its luxury self catering chalets, is situated in the Blyde River Canyon area of the Mpumalanga Drakensberg, Panorama route, close the Kruger National Park.

This family owned and managed lodge on the Farm Berlin, is well situated to many world famous tourist attractions such as The Kruger National Park, Blyde River Canyon, the Three Rondavels, God's Window and Pilgrims Rest.

The Lodge is walking distance from the Berlin Waterfalls, 10km from Graskop and 30km from the town of Sabie, both towns having many restaurants and curio shops.

The Lodge is family orientated having a children's playground, it is also nestled in a natural mountain setting with great views of the surrounding area. The environment offers guests hiking, quad biking, and birding opportunities or scuba diving in a high altitude river near the Lodge.

The luxury self catering chalets have their own gardens with barbeque facilities and secure undercover parking. Each fully equipped chalet includes either one or two bedrooms, a lounge with fireplace and television to get our local network.

Each chalet has either a full dining room or dining area and a fully equipped kitchen. All bathrooms have both shower and bath. The rooms all have their own oil heaters and extra blankets as the mountain air can get cool at night - all you need to bring is your suitcase, food and beach towels - the rest is supplied!

Airport transfers from Hoedspruit and Nelspruit can be arranged.

The Blyde River Canyon area of Mpumalanga has great opportunities for adventure activities. There are many organizations in the immediate area that provide services for River Rafting, Rock Climbing, Hot Air Ballooning, Horse Riding, Quad Biking, and 4x4 trails. These activities can be arranged for you from the Lodge. There is also a great river to swim in within walking distance from the Lodge.

RATES: From R425pp sharing per day

Thaba Tsweni Safaris (located at the lodge) also conducts various conducted tours, hikes and offroad trails at an additional cost. These include:

Full Day Kruger National Park Tours. - R1450

Full and Half Day Panorama Tours. - R1450

Full and Half Day Hikes into the Blyde River Canyon: R750

All tours are conducted by our qualified guide (Wendel Hough)

Let Thaba Tsweni Lodge and Safaris be your home away from home...



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