

ON TRACK

TRIPPING

SOUTHERN AFRICAN ROUTES WORTH TAKING

There's something primeval about wandering among the towering, ancient cycads, lush ferns and moss covered rocks of Modjadji Nature Reserve.



Best-ever

ROAD TRIP FOR HIKES

Gauteng's surrounds are filled with wonderful weekend hiking destinations. But if you have a week or more, writes Fiona McIntosh, this circular route into Limpopo and Mpumalanga is the ultimate hiking road trip. Photos by Shaen Adey and Teagan Cunniffe

TOTAL DISTANCE
1 131 KILOMETRES

TOTAL DRIVING TIME
± 16 HOURS

BEST TIME OF YEAR
OCTOBER – MAY

1 Best for biodiversity

BATELEUR NATURE RESERVE

Negotiating the busy N1 on Friday afternoon was not a relaxing start but by the time we'd turned off to Bela Bela I'd shaken off the work blues. Once out of town on the Alma Road, tar gave way to gravel, forcing us to slow down and appreciate the sour bushveld, abundant game and rocky krantzes of the Waterberg Biosphere Reserve.

Less than two hours (140 kilometres) from Pretoria, we crested the final rise on the farm road. Ahead of us was a natural basin incised by vegetated kloofs and surrounded by low hills. A 90-kilometre network of interlinked paths, the Stamvrug hiking trails lead through indigenous forests alive with birds and geckos and across acacia-studded grassy plains on which we encountered zebra, kudu and giraffe

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP RIGHT Walking among giants on the Umsenge Forest Walk at Kurisa Moya Nature Lodge; hikers gaze out at the granite peak of Thabaphaswa from The Lookout; Bateleur Nature Reserve, home to the Stamvrug hiking trails, nestles in a crater-like basin surrounded by low hills.



as well as (to our surprise and delight) the critically endangered Waterberg Copper butterfly (*Erikssonia edgei*) which, until its rediscovery here in 2013, was thought to have become extinct.

If you do just one hike make it the six-kilometre Zebra Trail which starts at the Stamvrug hut, climbs to the escarpment then meanders down a stunning kloof resplendent with ferns and a couple of inviting swimming holes. A big attraction is that hikers of all ages and fitness levels are accommodated: those wanting long, challenging hikes can take the 'high' road while the slower walkers amble along more gentle low-level paths to the same end point.

2 Best for mountain scenery

THABAPHASWA MOUNTAIN SANCTUARY

From Bateleur we journeyed on the R101 via Mookgopong – a much more interesting drive than the parallel N1, and, at two hours for the 138-kilometre journey, no slower.

The great granite dome of Thabaphaswa, which dominates the view as you approach Mokopane, acts as a beacon for walkers and climbers. At its base, some 18 kilometres from town, is Thabapashwa Mountain Sanctuary, a working cattle farm and family- and pet-friendly mountain retreat. A well-marked system of rugged trails – which can be combined to create full-day and overnight routes – rewards hikers with amazing mountain vistas reminiscent of Zimbabwe's Matopos Hills, plenty of dams in which to swim and wonderful trees and birds. Look out for Verreaux's eagles on the stiff five-kilometre, four-hour hike from Dome Rock Camp to the top of Mhahlare Mountain and on to Kanniedood Camp. The Molokwane Trail up the mountain stream is easy and can be extended to a challenging 16-kilometre hike by picking up the mountain bike trail at Teffo's Dam then climbing to The Lookout and back – preferably pre-dawn or at sunset to see Thabaphaswa bathed in golden light.

3 Best for birding

KURISA MOYA NATURE LODGE

The 125-kilometre drive on the N1, then the R71 (which skirts the sprawling provincial capital of Polokwane) was uninspiring. But within two hours of leaving Thabaphaswa we were deep in the magical, misty mountains of the Magoebaskloof. Kurisa Moya Nature Lodge, acknowledged as one of South Africa's top birding spots, nestles in Woodbush indigenous forest in Magoebaskloof. The five habitats provide great hiking: the 45-minute River Ramble is easy; the three-hour, 12-kilometre Majestic Mountain Trail will test even fit hikers but the Umsenge Forest Walk, about an hour of meandering under the canopy of towering yellowwoods and past a magnificent 2000-year-old cabbage tree (*Cussonia spicata*), tops my list.

Informative pamphlets brief you on the history, trees and wildlife that you might spy in the afromontane and riverine forest but it's worth taking a Kurisa Moya guide to elaborate, and to point out the special birds.

If you have time stride out on the nearby Magoebaskloof Hiking Trail through the Woodbush Forest, the second biggest indigenous forest after Knysna. A good short hike is from the Woodbush Hut to the Saligna gums – the tallest trees in Africa.

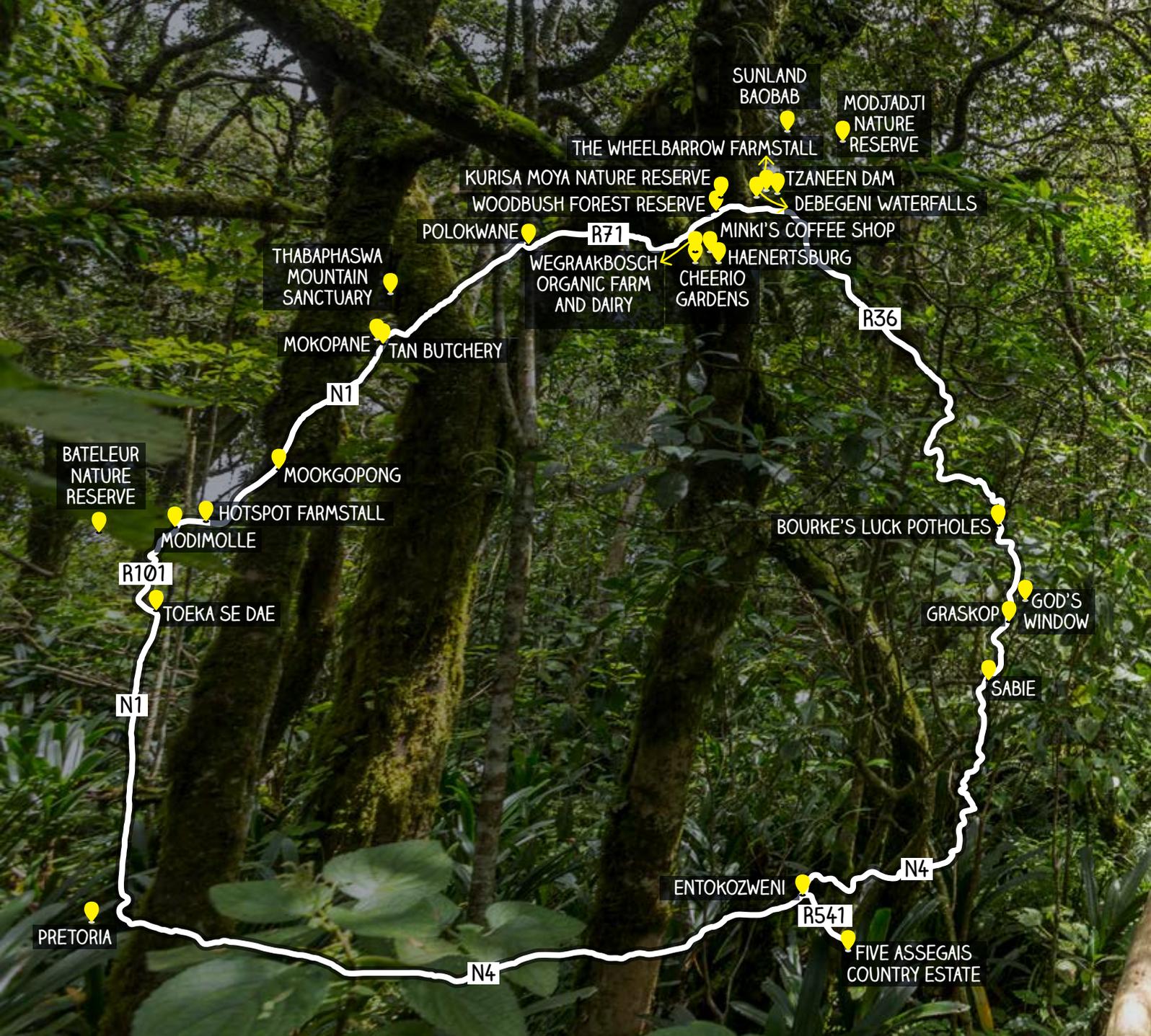


4 Best for wacky plants

MODJADJI NATURE RESERVE

Heading east on the winding dirt road (the 'J' road) through the forest and past the Debegeni Falls, we rejoined the R71 near the top of the Magoebaskloof Pass. From here the road snaked down through tall pines before popping us out at tea plantations and orchards. North of Tzaneen Dam, on the R36, we entered the domain of the legendary Rain Queen, the matriarchal leader of the Lobedu dynasty, and bumbled up the potholed road to the Modjadji Nature >





Reserve – a two-hour, 90-kilometre drive from Kurisa Moya.

There are no marked trails or maps of the reserve but don't let that put you off. Home to the biggest concentration of the rare endemic cycad *Encephalartos transvenosus* in the world, it's an extraordinary place with towering ancient cycads covering the hilltop like bristles. A steep cliff is visible from the trailhead. A 20-minute walk up here will take you to the top of Execution Hill, so named because in the 19th century the local Balobedu people took intruders to the cliff edge, tied stones to them and rolled them down. You can continue all the

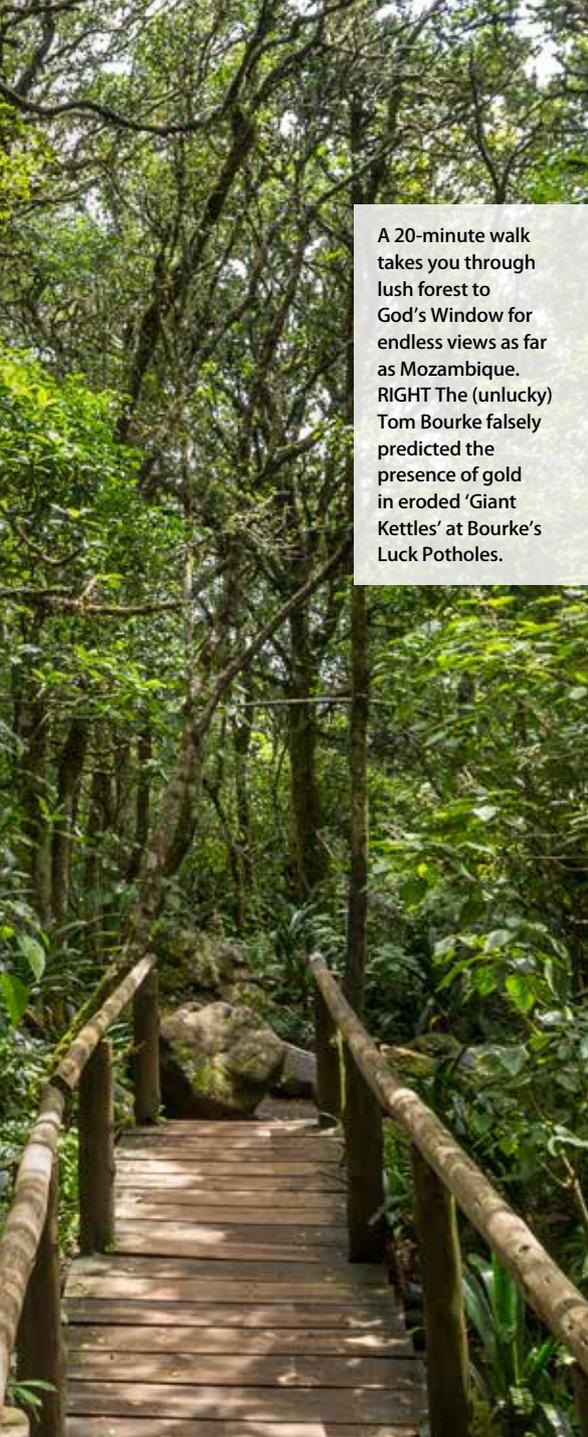
way over the mountain to African Ivory Route's Cultural Camp – a distance of around five kilometres. Otherwise inspect the intertwined caterpillar-like limbs and bright orange cones of the oldest specimens of cycads near the reception, then take the path down to the dam – a 12-kilometre round trip.

5 Best for views

FIVE ASSEGAIS COUNTRY ESTATE

From Modjadji we headed for Mpumalanga over the Abel Erasmus

Pass then left onto the Panorama Route. The short walks at Bourke's Luck Potholes and on the Rainforest Trail from God's Window were good leg stretches as well as showing the fascinating geology of the area. Then we continued south through Graskop and Sabie to the N4. After a short stint in the company of thundering 18-wheelers on the toll road we turned off at eNtokozweni (Machadodorp) onto the R541 towards eManzana (Badplaas) and Five Assegais Estate (a 400-kilometre drive that took over five hours). Home to the Num-Num Trail, one of the best multi-day hikes in



A 20-minute walk takes you through lush forest to God's Window for endless views as far as Mozambique. **RIGHT** The (unlucky) Tom Bourke falsely predicted the presence of gold in eroded 'Giant Kettles' at Bourke's Luck Potholes.



the country, the private estate has some 50 kilometres of trails. None of them is easy, though if you're short of time or fitness you can have fun exploring the sandstone mazes on the plateau.

The best day hike is the strenuous 14-kilometre Escarpment Trail from Aloe Kaya camp. It has virtually everything a hiker could hope for: a dramatic waterfall, some game viewing, a stiff ascent and sense of exposure, rock pools for bathing and spectacular rock formations – the perfect finale before the three-hour drive back to Gauteng. **G**

HIKER'S DIRECTORY

➔ ADDITIONAL ACTIVITIES

Visit both Cheerio Gardens and Sequoia Gardens in Magoebaskloof. The autumn colours are gorgeous, while the azaleas are dazzling in spring. Entrance is free unless it is festival time. Phone to check. 083-355-0835, 083-659-1227

Soar above tumbling waterfalls and indigenous forest with Magoebaskloof Canopy Tours. R495 pp. 083-442-7429, magoebaskloofcanopytour.co.za

Call at Wegraakbosch Organic Farm and Dairy for delicious produce. 082-853-8754

Check out The Pennefather complex in the village of Haenertsburg where there is a small museum, second-hand bookshop and oldie-worldie sweet shop. thepennefather.co.za

Stop at Bourke's Luck Potholes to gaze down at the deep, multi-coloured potholes hewn out of the bedrock by eons of swirling water at this point where the rivers of joy (Blyde) and sorrow (Treur) meet. 082-879-3945, graskop.co.za

➔ PLACES TO STAY

Bateleur Nature Reserve

There are two hikers' huts (R125 pp, minimum four people) and various cottages and houses (from R150 pp). 014-013-0099, bateleurnaturereserve.co.za

Thabaphaswa Mountain Sanctuary

Accommodation includes campsites (R120 pp), The Pump House thatched cottage (R650 with bedding, R500 without, sleeps two), and three bush camps. My favourite is Dome Rock Camp, which consists of stone and glass units among massive granite boulders. R295 pp with bedding, crockery and cutlery, R195 pp without, half price for kids (4–12). Dogs are welcome. 082-389-6631, thabaphaswa.co.za

Kurisa Moya Nature Lodge

There's eco-friendly, self-catering accommodation in two forest cabins, a secluded mountain cottage and a restored farmhouse. From R450 pp, meals on request. 071-658-6980, krm.co.za

Modjadji Nature Reserve

The community-owned Modjadji Cultural Camp has self-catering accommodation in rondavels. Bring your bedding, meals can be booked in advance otherwise buy supplies and wood in Haenertsburg or Tzaneen. R230 pp. 015-781-0690, africanivoryroute.co.za

Five Assegais Country Estate

Aloe Kaya camp is sensitively built into the sandstone gullies on the escarpment edge (R313,50 pp). The four-star Five Assegais Country Lodge, which overlooks a trout dam, is tranquil and luxurious. Self-catering from R684 pp; catering on request. 082-889-6757, fiveassegais.co.za

➔ FOOD

Toeka se Dae padstal, Bela Bela

A one-stop shop and restaurant on the R516. 082-570-7923

TAN Butchery, Mokopane

Makers of some of the best biltong in Limpopo. 015-491-2241

Hotspot Farmstall, Modimolle

Stop for a pie and ginger beer, and to buy hot-chilli sauces. 072-392-1792

Minki's Coffee Shop, Haenertsburg

Serves great coffee, fresh bread and cakes as well as superb oxtail. 015-276-4781

The Wheelbarrow Farmstall, Tzaneen

Pick up fresh, subtropical produce at this farmstall on the R71. 082-739-4424

Sunland Baobab, Tzaneen

Just off Modjadji Road is a bar inside a hollowed-out baobab trunk. 082-413-2228

**Prices correct at the time of going to print*