

## Into the WATERBERG

Lapalala is one of a few reserves in the wider Waterberg region of Limpopo Province – perhaps the most under-appreciated safari destination in South Africa. **Carrie Hampton** paints the scene.

There are few regions with more satisfying alliterative names than the Waterberg. Places like Bela-Bela, Lapalala, Modimolle and Thabazimbi roll off the lips in a bubble of consonants.

But you don't visit the Waterberg for its vocally-pleasing towns and villages. It's big appeal is that it's the easiest and most affordable destination close to Johannesburg for a big game safari or complete immersion in nature. It's a sparsely populated wilderness, and there is considerably less tourist traffic here than Greater Kruger.

To "promote solutions reconciling the conservation of biodiversity with its sustainable use" 6,500 square kilometres of the Waterberg was designated the Waterberg Biosphere Reserve (WBR) in 2001. In practice this means that economic development carefully uses the natural resources and protects biodiversity richness. This includes threatened species like the pretty yellow-orange Waterberg copper

butterfly, re-discovered in 2013 after presumed extinct. Walk in Bateleur Nature Reserve and you might see it.

Implementation of the three pillars determined by UNESCO for a Biosphere Reserve – conservation, development and practical support – are managed and funded locally. Letticia Motshegoa, WBR Programmes Coordinator explains: "Visiting our beautiful bushveld Savannah Biome Biosphere means visitors actively play a part in the protection of this thriving legacy of conservation and sustainable use." She encourages donations as a way to help the dedicated volunteers who manage the Biosphere.

Driving around the Waterberg, admiring the scenery, I understand why people give their all to protect this land. Without the fanfare that better-known safari regions receive, reserves within the Waterberg Biosphere have been quietly achieving spectacular conservation results.

Traditionally, cattle ranches and agriculture accounted for about 90 per cent of the area. Over the last 40 years, a rewilding initiative means that wildlife and tourism now account for about 85 per cent of land use.

It's possibly the best place in South Africa to see black and, more especially, white rhino. However, the threat of poaching is ever-present, and every rhino owner, along with organisations like Waterberg Landscape Alliance and Waterberg Rhino UK, work ceaselessly towards protecting them. Their success is double-edged: there are now enough breeding rhinos to stock other reserves, but the cost of protecting them is considerable.

Other special sightings to hope for on a Waterberg safari could be cheetah, wild dog, roan or sable and, if very lucky, armadillo or even pangolin, some of which have been rescued from the illegal wildlife trade and released in Lapalala Wilderness.

SHUTTERSTOCK.COM

The best-kept secret for independent travellers in the Waterberg is Marakele National Park, open for day or overnight visitors. Proficient 4x4 enthusiasts can test themselves on the three-day guided Marakele 4x4 Eco Trail. Safari-goers can choose from one of the all-inclusive lodges in private game reserves like Welgevonden, Lapalala and Ant Africa Safaris. Significantly, the Waterberg is both affordable and malaria-free – an important consideration for overseas tourists.

One cannot ignore the scenery that characterises the Waterberg. Driving around Thabazimbi, I imagined myself in a spaghetti western, with dramatic peaks, cliffs and plateaus of the Kransberg mountains providing perfect rocky-mountain cowboy hideouts. I might have detoured via Bakkers Pass had I driven a 4x4 or had the courage to descend from its 1464m summit down some hairy 1:8 gradients.

I'd rather have my feet on the ground

and hike the hills with nature's own soundtrack for company. The hiking and mountain-bike trails of Bateleur Nature Reserve are particularly appealing. The ethos here is: "We offer no additional recreational or entertainment other than what Mother Nature has on offer; unspoiled landscapes, wildlife, boisterous birds, solitude and magnificent sunsets."

Guided walks in Masibe Nature Reserve, Swebeswebe and Taaibos offer the opportunity to see San Bushmen paintings, but it is best to phone ahead rather than turn up unannounced. Similarly at Makapan Valley paleontological site, where fossils date back between 4.5 million and 2.5 million years. It's one of the least visited sections of a UNESCO World Heritage site and least commercialised, such that you must book a compulsory guided tour.

To experience something of present-day culture, try a local Airbnb Experience, like the 'Gear Up for Tswana Culture'

tour. Learn to brew traditional beer, drink enough of it to bring on some vigorous dancing, then eat with the locals. I'll pass on the offer of mopani worms – dried caterpillars of the Emperor moth – which I happen to know tastes like seasoned cardboard. I'll try anything once, but not necessarily a second time!

With place names tripping happily off your tongue and map in hand – useful when cell signal disappears in the mountains – set off and explore the Waterberg. Go with an open mind to grasp the complexities of wildlife use and management, environmental protection, farming, mining and human settlements, all living in harmony.

**Left: Imposing.** Marakele is relatively young, established in 1994 as Kransberg National Park, changing its name shortly thereafter

**Below: A flutter for details.** The African Monarch, one of 206 species of butterfly found in the Waterberg, including the Waterberg copper, rediscovered in 2013



WATERBERG TOURISM

# Highlights of the WATERBERG

The Waterberg is a region of agricultural farms, cattle ranches, game farms and reserves, dotted with towns and villages. **Carrie Hampton** notes some of its key attractions

**T**he Waterberg's escarpment of massive sandstone buttresses and outcrops is scenery on a grand scale, presenting a dominating massif in all its red, orange and purple oxide glory. Seven biomes, including savannah and wooded grasslands, support wild and farmed animals. Pockets of igneous rock contain rich deposits of platinum, iron ore, coal, palladium and other metals, and mines litter the edges of the plateau.

In Welgevonden Game Reserve, staring up at a vertical cliff some half a kilometre tall and glistening with moisture, I notice fissures spurring mini waterfalls from the sheer volume of water coming off the mountains. The Waterberg's aquifers are a major source of underground water storage, and while the landscape is green, there's little surface water.

Whether you hike it, bike it, 4x4 it, ride a horse or game drive your way around the Waterberg, you will appreciate being surrounded by such imposing landscapes. And wherever you find yourself at the end of each day, look up to marvel at a Milky Way unadulterated by light pollution.

**1 Marakele National Park**  
Hiding in plain sight, self-drivers should include this underrated yet glorious National Park. It offers good accommodation, all the sought-after animals, a huge colony of Cape vultures and other raptors riding the cliff thermals. Drive to the Lenong Lookout Point for sensational views.

**2 Welgevonden Game Reserve**  
There are three good reasons why South Africans love to go on safari here: it's only 2.5-3 hours' drive from Johannesburg; it's malaria-free; and there is a lot of wildlife, albeit it in thick bushy habitat.

My reason for loving Welgevonden is to admire the rock-hopping klipspringers statuesquely perched on boulders seemingly around every corner. The reserve is something of an unsung conservation success story, taking a long-term approach to biodiversity and

wildlife management. It boasts 65 mammal species, including the Big Five, usual species such as cheetah, brown hyena, caracal and aardwolf, as well as 300 bird species.

**3 Bateleur Nature Reserve**  
Aimed at outdoor enthusiasts, this private reserve is particularly appealing to mountain bikers and hikers drawn to its Stamvrug Hiking Trails and perennial mountain streams and dams. Self-catering accommodation and campsites are available.

**4 Nylsvley Nature Reserve**  
Birdwatchers alert! This RAMSAR site boasts 102 species of waterfowl (eight of which are red-listed), a shimmering floodplain and 1000+ large mammals. Hides, walkways, a lookout tower, well-priced accommodation, campsite and a restaurant make this very appealing to nature lovers.

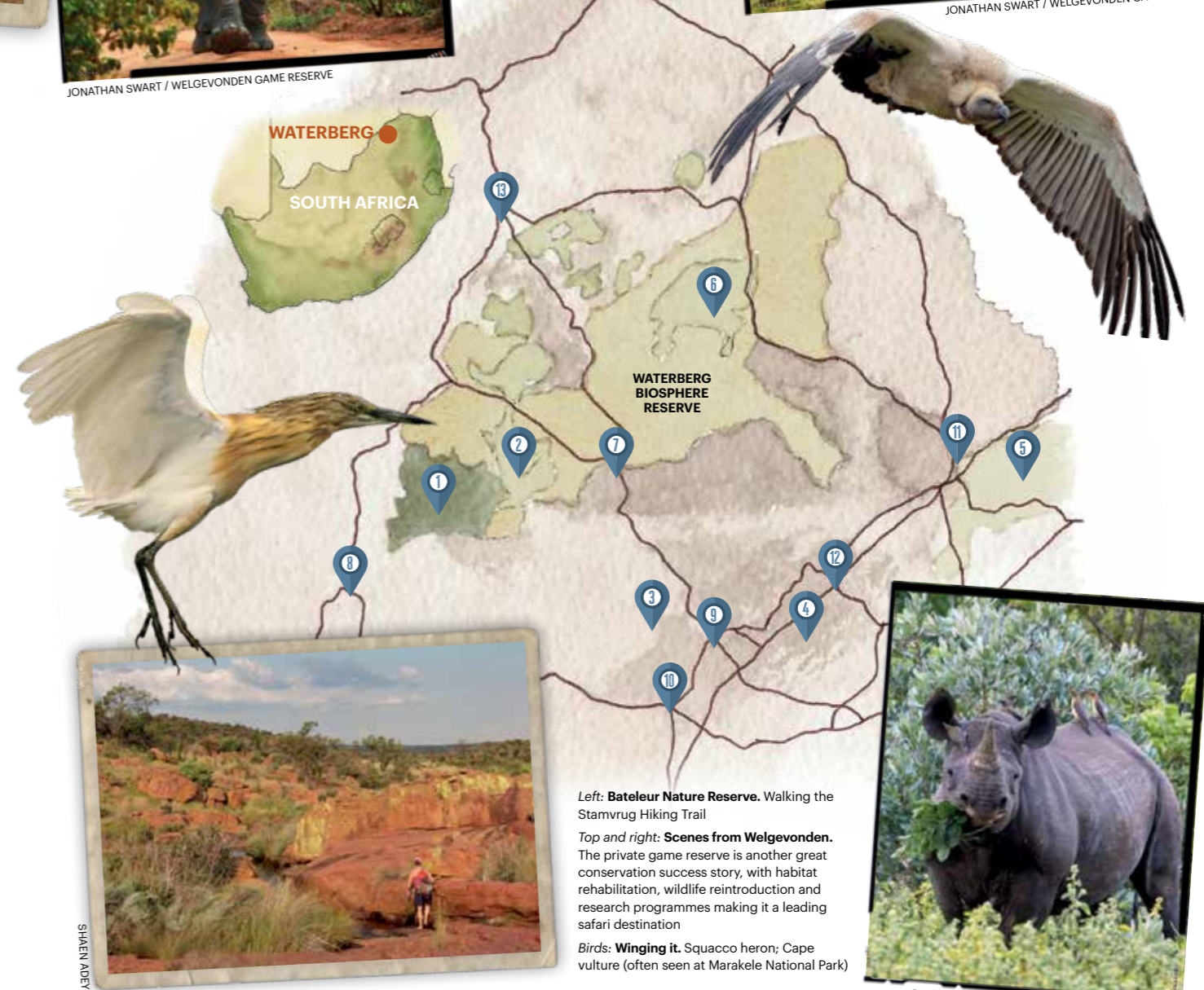
**5 Makapan Valley**  
One of the world's most important paleontological sites, with caves yielding fossil

evidence from the dawn of humanity to the Iron Age. Guided walks help to unravel the history, but organising one requires patience and perseverance.

**6 Lapalala Wilderness**  
It's gratifying to know that my visit to Lapalala contributes to the continued success of conservation and environmental education in this private reserve. Africa's iconic species — including black and white rhino — roam these 48,000+ hectares.

## Towns of the Waterberg

**7 Vaalwater** A haven for meat-eaters. It's the best place to buy venison and biltong. Carpaccio of springbok is said by chefs to be the best, often featuring on lodge menus. **8 Thabazimbi** Located at the foot of the lofty Kranskop mountains and very scenic. If you are the type to hike, run or mountain bike, these green hills will call your name. **9 Modimolle** The commercial centre of the Waterberg, Modimolle has cattle ranches, game farms and even vineyards and soft fruit orchards, exporting grapes, peaches and watermelons. **10 Bela-Bela** Formerly called Warmbaths, for the reason that its 53°C geothermic hot springs are the biggest attraction, although only accessible for guests of the Forever Resort. **11 Mokopane** The town services the agricultural farms of the area, which include wheat, tobacco, cotton, beef, maize, peanuts and one of the biggest citrus farms in the southern hemisphere. **12 Mookgophong** It's the well-watered surroundings near this mining town, like Nylsvley Nature Reserve, that are of interest. **13 Lephallale** A major coal-mining area on the northern boundary of the Biosphere. Nearby Mokolo Dam provides excellent fishing.



## Waterberg weather

The Waterberg's altitude ranges from 830m to 2,084m, with annual precipitation from 500mm to 700mm falling in summer (November to March) as soft rain or heavy thunderstorms. Summer temperatures can be around 30°C, with some humidity. The dry winter months (June to August) are still warm with days in the mid-or high-20s°C, but cooler evenings.