

**PANORAMIC:** Taken from the Three Rondavels Lookout, this photograph shows the Blyde River Dam, with the Three Rondavels on the right. These eroded outcrops are named for their similarity to the conical, thatched-roofed huts, traditional in southern Africa

# IS THIS SOUTH AFRICA'S MOST SCENIC DRIVE?

Determined to find out, **Hlengiwe Magagula** sets off on a road trip along the Panorama Route, taking in the Blyde River Canyon, Bourke's Luck Potholes, Pilgrim's Rest and some of the other highlights of this magnificent region





## Picture an empty road following the gorge edge, with enticing side tracks leading to lookouts and waterfalls. Located in the Drakensberg, the Panorama Route is one of the most beautiful drives not only in Africa but the whole world

Imagine the Grand Canyon with forests and waterfalls. This is Blyde River Canyon, a spectacular chasm at the northern end of South Africa's Drakensberg escarpment in Mpumalanga Province. Now, picture a winding, empty road following the gorge edge, with enticing side tracks leading to lookouts and waterfalls...

On the edge of the town of Sabie, the road rises, lined with flowering jacaranda trees. But my eyes are fixed on a brown road sign: 'THE PANORAMA'. I have a frisson of anticipation. I'm finally on the Panorama Route.

Located in the northern Drakensberg, about four hours from Johannesburg, it ranks as one of the most beautiful drives not only in Africa but in the whole world. Here, the highveld falls away into a jumble of deep valleys and eroded peaks to the lowveld of Kruger and Mozambique. Apart from the magnificent scenery, the area is a wildlife haven with a rich history, as well as being home to some of the country's finest places to stay and enticing craft shops.

Above all, the region begs for a road trip. There is nothing South Africans love more than loading up the *bakkie* to explore their country, but international visitors are also finding how easy it is to adopt this travel style. Rent a car, get a cooler box, stop at PicknPay, grab some charcoal — you're ready. The area is perfect to combine with a visit to Kruger National Park.

Confusingly, the Panorama is not one road but a network of choices. For folks coming from Johannesburg, the approach is via

Lydenburg, over the Long Tom Pass to Sabie, or alternatively over Robbers Pass to the old mining town of Pilgrim's Rest. The heart of the route is the R532, which negotiates the escarpment above Blyde River Canyon, a verdant void teeming with wildlife.

For me, coming from home in Swaziland, I stocked up in Nelspruit, skirted White River, and was now leaving Sabie, a functional town serving the area's huge plantations of pine and eucalypt. The road was well surfaced and empty and soon the forests gave way to unfenced grasslands and views to a hazy horizon.

A sign for Mac Mac Falls tempted me onto a side road to a shady car park. A short walk later, I came to understand the meaning of the word 'escarpment': the grasslands stopped at a sudden cliff and a stunning waterfall cascaded 65m over fern and rock to a dark plunge pool. Over the coming days, it became an experience that I never tired of — each waterfall an excuse to take a break in the sharp mountain air.

By mid-morning, I'd reached Pilgrim's Rest, which feels like an outdoor museum, frozen in its 19th-century glory days. It was busy with visitors, and after picking up a ticket at the Information Centre, I joined them to explore the village and its treasured pioneer buildings of corrugated iron. I'm now an expert on gold mining by hand.

I pushed on, keen to get back to the canyon views. Next was a quick stop for a filling lunch at Harrie's Pancakes in Graskop,



SOUTH AFRICAN TOURISM

another one-horse town that lives for tourism. Across the road, I replenished my supply of biltong, the perfect protein snack for the bushwalks ahead.

From here, the attractions came fast, and choices had to be made. The road divides, with a loop to some lookout points: 'The Pinnacle', a photogenic slender rock formation; then 'God's Window' and 'Wonder View', where wispy clouds born on the lowveld were swept up onto the plateau.

By now, the sun was low — I skipped Bourke's Luck Potholes, promising to come back in the morning. I wanted to reach the famous Three Rondavels before the gate closed at 5pm. My timing was perfect — the buses were gone, and I was alone with the splendour. Almost alone — a solitary martial eagle rode the wind below. The setting sun cast the perfect light for photographs of the three formations that resemble grass-roofed huts.

Although Pilgrim's Rest and Graskop have a good selection of B&Bs, I wanted to stay in the heart of the scenery, so a few minutes later I pulled in for the night at Blyde Canyon Resort. I picked this place not just for its comfortable chalets and superb location, but for its access to several walking trails.

If the first day offered a taste of the Panorama, day two was the main course. I was up early to tackle one of the walks that hug the canyon wall. Shaded by wind-twisted trees, the Leopard Trail starts at the resort's upper lookout and drops towards Blyde Dam. The →

**TOP:** The most scenic section of the R532, as it approaches the Three Rondavels, which are visible in the distance. **ABOVE:** Bourke's Luck Potholes, a spectacular series of eroded pools where the Treur and Blyde rivers meet, are a highlight of the Panorama Route



### IN CASE OF A BREAKDOWN

CHRIS FORTESCUE AFRICA COLLECTION

"We recommend using the bigger car rental companies, as they have more depots if you break down. We also suggest phoning your hotel if something goes wrong; South Africans adhere to a great saying 'n boer maak 'n plan' — 'a farmer makes a plan' — and South Africans generally do."



### SAFETY

WOUTER VERGEER SAFARI BOOKINGS

"Close windows and lock the doors in the evening if you are staying in accommodation overlooking Blyde River Canyon. For security? Well, kind of. Baboons patrol the area and go to extraordinary lengths to prise open windows and even turn door handles with their dexterous fingers!"



### MUST-SEE

SANDY WOOD PULSE AFRICA

"Take the R532, a twisty road with incredible views. You will pass masses of waterfalls; Mac Mac has some lovely pools for cooling off in the summer. A relatively new highlight is the Graskop Gorge Lift, a glass viewing lift that descends 51m down the cliff face."





ABOVE: There are walkways and bridges at Bourke's Luck Potholes, so visitors can view this natural wonder from various angles. LEFT: The Window, a curio shop in Graskop, lies beside Harrie's Pancakes and a superb biltong shop

tropical belt ahead, and as the altitude dropped, the temperature climbed. Instead of rocky cliffs, I found marula trees, fruit farms, and the high fences of private game reserves. At Monsoon gallery, I admired the crafts and picked up mangoes from the farm shop. A little further on, an unusual name by a gate grabbed my attention. '24 Degrees South' is a new complex of accommodation and craft shops, set amid tranquil gardens. I made a note for next time.

Near Hoedspruit, I stopped to venerate one of the country's largest baobabs, having noticed that the tree features on Limpopo licence plates. I decided that this was the point that the Panorama ends, and the lowveld wilderness begins. But I wasn't quite ready to say goodbye to the Blyde. I followed signs for Blyderivierpoort Dam, finding myself on a road that twisted back towards the escarpment, into a densely forested valley. After paying a small fee at the Nature Reserve entrance, and crossing the bridge below the dam, I could not resist the allure of one last waterfall. The reward for the 15-minute walk in the shade of enormous hardwood trees was a refreshing dip in the pool. I continued on a potholed road to the peninsula lookout, where I stood amazed, surrounded by mountain and water. A hippo cough echoed from the cliffs as I set the camera to panoramic mode one more time.

habitat is perfect for these shy cats, but the calmness of the bush residents told me none were nearby — just a tiny klipspringer, some dozy hyrax and a troop of vervets. The walk completed in the early morning, I returned to Bourke's Luck Potholes, an enchanting series of eroded pools, created where two rivers meet, and viewed from elegant bridges. Near the Potholes, I took lunch at Potluck Boskombuis (look out for the flags), a rustic outdoor restaurant serving classic South African food. I then continued north and was able to burrow underground to escape the hottest part of the day at Echo Caves. Here, an excellent guide mixed geology education with local lore, and showed us the roots of fig trees searching for water deep below the surface. The afternoon drive was my favourite part of the entire journey — through the wild Abel Erasmus Pass. Now, on a newly surfaced road, I entered Limpopo Province, the name evocative of the

## SAFARI PLANNER

■ **Getting there** British Airways, Virgin Atlantic and South African Airways all serve Johannesburg, from where it's a three-hour drive to Lydenburg. However, most of this drive is not especially interesting and can be avoided by hopping on an SAA connection to Kruger Airport at Nelspruit or Hoedspruit. ■ **Car rental** All the big brands are represented at Johannesburg and Nelspruit airports, with fewer at Hoedspruit. Prices at Nelspruit are a bit higher. You can find good deals on broker site aroundaboutcars.com. ■ **Vehicle** You don't need to rent a 4WD. A normal car is fine, even on untarred side roads. Air-conditioning is essential in summer months.

■ **Finding your way** The best map of the route is available from mapstudio.co.za. Economy rentals don't have in-car navigation as standard. At Johannesburg airport, MTN rents a mobile Wi-Fi device with a data bundle to access maps online via your wireless devices. ■ **Rules of the road** South Africa drives on the left. Watch for changing speed limits in this area; police radar traps are common. In towns, observe the four-way stops: stop completely, even if there is no other vehicle at the junction.

■ **Road hazards** In general, road surfaces on the Panorama Route are good, but some sections have nasty potholes, including the R536 from Hazyview to Sabie and the R532 north of Graskop. You'll meet farm animals crossing — and wildlife too. Unfortunately, the accident rate in South Africa is high, so

be very aware of other drivers and what they may do. Avoid driving at night. Park at the supervised parking areas, where there is a small fee. ■ **Where to stay** At the southern end of the route, Hazyview and Graskop have a good range of lodges set in bushland, such as Timamoon. In the north, Hoedspruit is surrounded by private wildlife reserves, and is the ideal area for a night between the Panorama and Kruger. Bang in the middle of the Panorama, Blyde Canyon, a Forever resort, has splendid views, a swimming pool and marked trails.

■ **Self-catering** South African brands can vary from the ones you are used to back home. To save shopping time, browse supermarket sites in advance and create a list. Pick up a cooler box, and at the meat counter, ask the staff to vacuum-pack your meat. The Riverside Superspar in Nelspruit is a great place to stock up, as are the PicknPay stores in Lydenburg or Hazyview, and Spar in Sabie. It is easy to find fresh fruit for sale at stalls and farm shops. ■ **Fuel and cash** International payment cards are generally accepted, including at the tolls

on the N4. There are ATMs in towns, and if you find yourself short in the middle of the route, there is fuel and an ATM at Blyde Canyon Resort. ■ **When to go** The winter months from May to August offer the best chance for cool, sunny days. ■ **Health** The Panorama Route is above 1200m and is a malaria-free zone. But once you descend to the lowveld, there's a risk, so check with your GP or travel clinic. ■ **Further reading** *Rough Guide to South Africa* (8th edition) and *Lonely Planet's South Africa* (10th edition).

