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BACK TO THE BUSH

SMALL TOWN TOURING

HEAD INTO HOEDSPRUIT

Text: Paula Rabeling
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If you have ever taken a trip to the Kruger National Park, chances are you either passed Hoedspruit, or landed at Hoedspruit Airport before making your way into the park. This central Lowveld region is mostly known as a stopover before moving on to South Africa's best reserves to see some incredible wildlife, but, if you find yourself here, do not run off too quickly – Hoedspruit is definitely worth a little exploration.

■ MEANING “Hat Creek”, the small town of Hoedspruit is well known for supplying the rest of the country with mangos and citrus fruits. When travelling through town, you will find evidence of this thanks to the many fruit stalls offering refreshments. If you are here in the sweltering months of November to February, you will definitely need them.

Make a Call at the Canyon

On the one side of Hoedspruit is the Kruger National Park, and on the other is the Blyde River Canyon – the third deepest canyon in the world. Part of the Drakensberg escarpment, the river has been dammed at the mouth of the canyon to make Blyde Dam, and is home to a variety of bird life, crocodiles, hippos, and otters.

The canyon offers many vantage points from which to view the incredible scenery. One such viewpoint is God's Window. At an altitude of around 1,800 m high, it boasts magnificent views of the Lowveld, the Kruger National Park, as well as the Lebombo Mountains.

Other natural wonders in the Blyde River Canyon include the Pinnacle, a quartzite column that rises out of the canyon, as well as the Three Sisters (or The Rondavels) – three massive spirals of dolomite (carbonate mineral) rock.

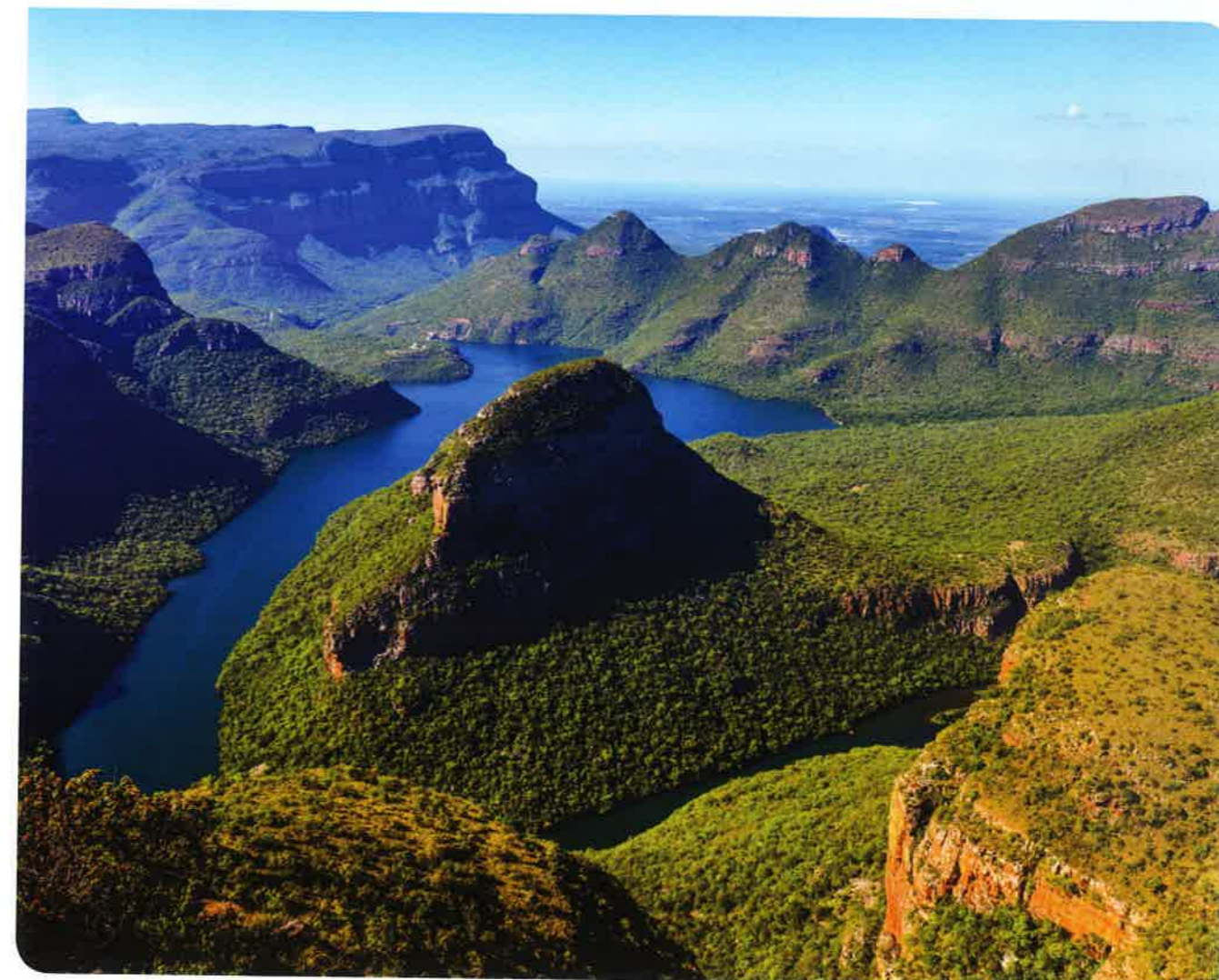
One of the most extraordinary geological marvels in South Africa is the Bourke's Luck Potholes. Water erosion over thousands of years at the meeting point of the Blyde River (meaning the “river of joy”) and the Treur River (meaning the “river of sorrow”) has resulted in fantastical cylindrical sculptures that are well worth a visit.

Due to the extreme climate of the area and the range of different soil conditions, the canyon boasts rich and diverse plant life which is beautiful to see from the many viewpoints the escarpment has to offer, as well as up close. The Blyde River Canyon Nature Reserve is also home to a number of primates: the Samango monkey, the nocturnal Greater and Lesser bushbaby, the Chacma baboon, and the Vervet monkey.

To see the canyon up close, there are guided hikes on offer. If you would prefer a birds-eye view of the area, there are helicopter tours on offer that will take you along the canyon for a truly unforgettable experience.

All About Conservation

Another place to see wildlife is the Hoedspruit Endangered Species Centre, which focuses on the conservation of rare and endangered animals, with a particular focus on the conservation of cheetahs. Some of the



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ways the centre contributes to the preservation of South Africa's vulnerable species is through breeding endangered species, the release and establishment of captive-bred cheetahs into the wild, as well as the treatment and rehabilitation of orphaned and injured animals that are brought into the centre.

Guests are taken around on a safari vehicle to the different enclosures to see the residents, including cheetahs, lions, wild dogs, and wild cats. A truly unmissable experience is heading over to the Vulture Restaurant to see African vultures enjoy a carcass for dinner. Once this has been picked clean – which the vultures do very well – the bones are ground up to be used over the other animals' meat for an added calcium boost. Nothing goes to waste here. For a fascinating insight into South Africa's rare species and the

conservation efforts that help to save them, a visit to Hoedspruit Endangered Species Centre is a must.

Baobab trees are truly a magnificent sight, and South Africa is home to some incredible ones. For some delicious pancakes in the shade of one of these trees, head to the Upside Down Restaurant. With the mountains in the distance, the huge baobab tree to sit under, and indulgent pancakes to enjoy, this is definitely an eatery not to be missed in Hoedspruit.

From hiking trails in one of the largest canyons in the world, awe-inspiring viewpoints, and helicopter rides for a birds-eye view, to getting a close-up experience of the conservation efforts of some of South Africa's most endangered species, Hoedspruit is not just a stop, it is a destination. ■



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