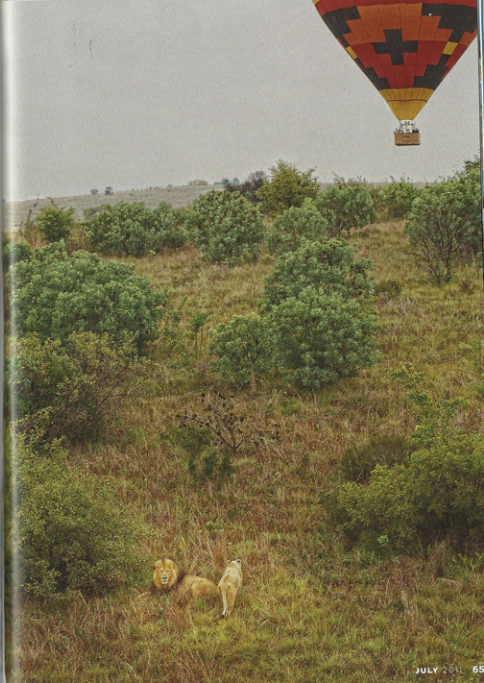


rock THE CRADLE

text GISELA KIRSTEN, images SUPPLIED

Escapism doesn't always mean travelling somewhere distant by jet. Discover absolute serenity as you float across The Cradle of Humankind, a mere one-hour drive away from central Johannesburg...





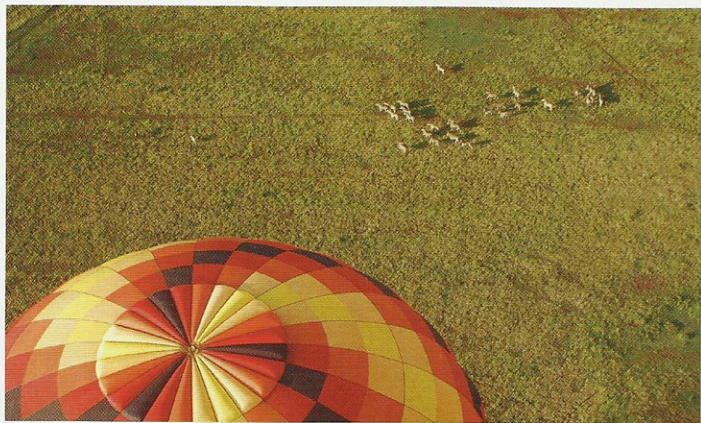
The Cradle of Humankind is often misunderstood and underrated. Most people tend to think of it as a dusty, fossilised area where visits to Mrs. Ples and foreboding dark caves are intended for school field trips and the paleontologists among us. In Gauteng, locals spend weekends indoors in restaurants or browsing unaffordables in shopping centres, but rarely do they venture into the realms of the unexposed.

Nestled in the grasslands of the

Magaliesberg mountains, North of Johannesburg and West of Pretoria, is the Cradle of Humankind. The Muldersdrift 'wedding meander' may ring a bell. This area is well known for its serene and spectacular wedding venues, but lodges, hotels, restaurants, accommodation, game reserves and abundant wildlife within the Cradle may also be explored with equal fascination.

The thought of seeing four of Africa's Big Five has always excited me, but even more exciting and unique is the concept of





seeing the animals from the air, aboard a hot air balloon. There are many ballooning opportunities in the area, but Air Ventures' Safari Balloon Flight takes game viewing to a whole new level. I experienced the once in a lifetime trip recently and will never forget it and how Johannesburg's wintery fog slowly melted into the grass as the sun rose and spread its rays into the crevices of the majestic Magaliesberg mountains...

The experience commences at Kloofzicht Lodge, a five star 12 000 hectare estate with an awe-inducing view. I got over my grumpiness at the 6am start as soon as I spotted the beautiful rainbow-coloured hot air balloon poised for the pilot's pre-flight preparations. A white linen table offered me coffee, tea, biscuits and a splash of Amarula liqueur as I watched the majestic balloon slowly inflate with propane gas.

Adam Fillmore, the founder of Air Ventures, presented himself as our pilot and proceeded to take us through a safety briefing, and then we clambered into the basket, and one by one offered our weight to the ambitious balloon. I anticipated the sensation of rising steeply, swirling in the wind and feeling the iciness of being elevated, but this was unlike anything I could imagine. A burst of flame followed by absolute silence creates a warm and calming moment where you float ever so slightly higher as the sun begins to rise. There is only the feeling of absolute peace, which resonates with the sound of yawning lions and buffalo moving slowly towards watering holes.

The sky, a rosy, marshmallow-pink hue, provided a stunning backdrop to taking snapshots of the balloon's shadow - big and drifting over fields and rolling hills. Adam