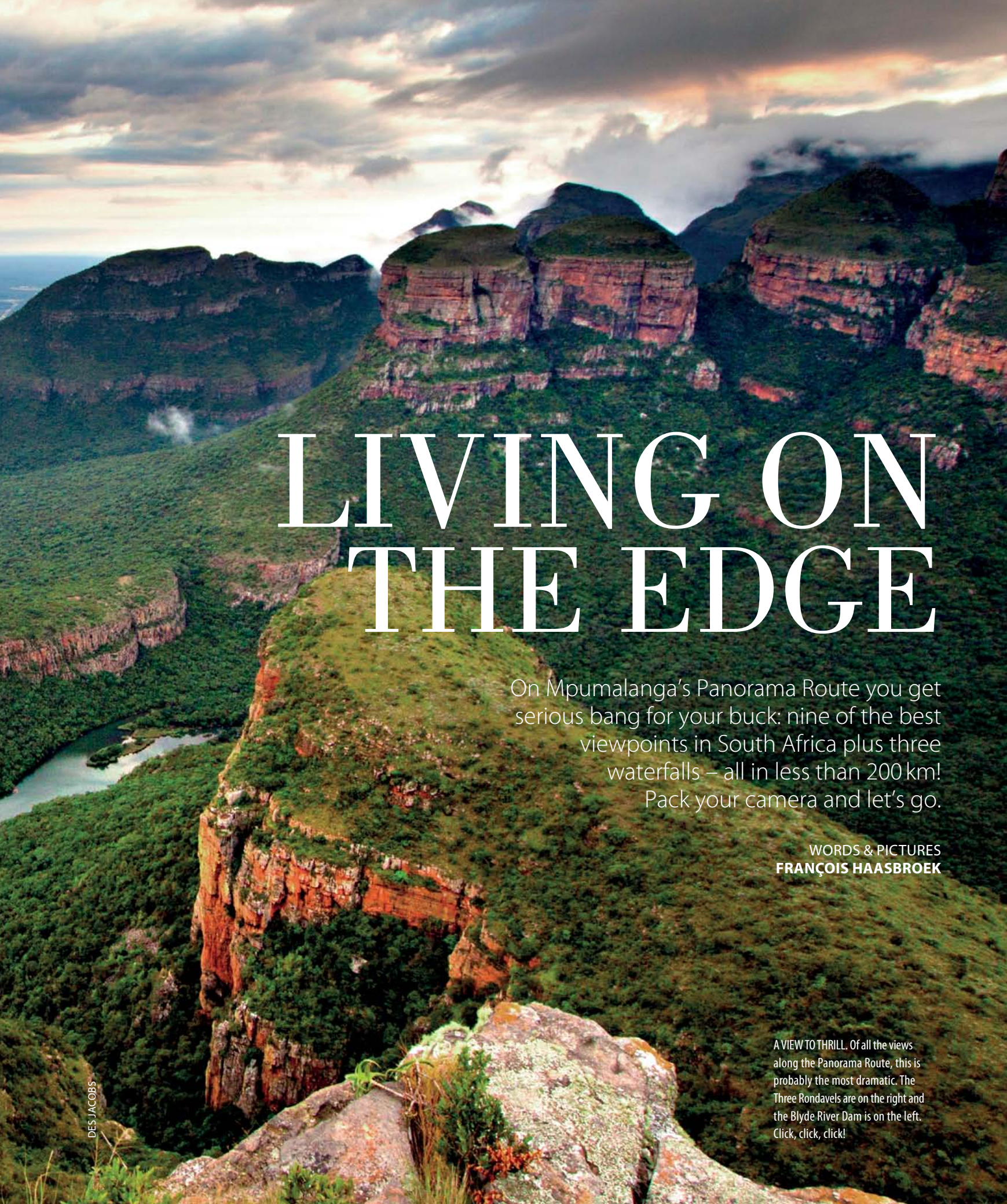






LIVING ON THE EDGE

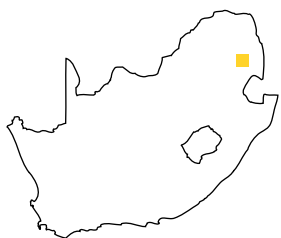
On Mpumalanga's Panorama Route you get serious bang for your buck: nine of the best viewpoints in South Africa plus three waterfalls – all in less than 200 km! Pack your camera and let's go.

WORDS & PICTURES
FRANÇOIS HAASBROEK

A VIEW TO THRILL. Of all the views along the Panorama Route, this is probably the most dramatic. The Three Rondavels are on the right and the Blyde River Dam is on the left. Click, click, click!



WATERWORLD. The Pinnacle viewpoint is known for its finger rock formation, but the waterfall is equally dazzling, especially after rain.



Rain isn't good for views. Neither is mist. Unfortunately Graskop has an abundance of both, especially in summer. You might think I'm dumb to come here at the height of the rainy season, but I'm on my way to the Kruger and besides, the landscape in summer is gloriously green and the heavy clouds will hopefully add drama to my photographs.

Over the next few days, I'll be driving the world-famous Panorama Route in Mpumalanga, which runs north from Graskop along the escarpment

and the lip of the Blyde River Canyon, past viewpoints like God's Window, Wonder View, and the Three Rondavels.

Some parts of the escarpment are higher than 1900m above sea level and you mostly look out over the Lowveld, easily 1400m down below. When you're dealing with this kind of topography it's hard not to revert to clichés, but it must be said: The views go on forever.

After about 64 km – near Forever Resorts Blyde Canyon – the R532 veers left, to the interior. This is where the views end and most people turn back.



But I'll continue for another 100 km and drive back to Graskop via Ohrigstad and Pilgrim's Rest.

If you last went to God's Window as a child, or if you've never had the pleasure of picking your jaw up off the floor at the Three Rondavels, here's how to make the most of a drive along the Panorama Route.

Is that Mozambique?

Dawn in Graskop and the town is cloaked in a syrupy mist. Visibility zero. Apparently it's always misty in the mornings here – caused by humid air

from the Indian Ocean cooling when it hits the escarpment. I'm hoping the sun will burn it off.

Sure enough, by the time I've devoured my fourth breakfast pancake, the mist has disappeared. (Graskop is pancake central – make the most of it.)

An hour later I'm standing at God's Window. And it's clear! The foothills of the northern Drakensberg fade into pine plantations towards Hazyview. I might be imagining it, but I think I can see into Mozambique.

Wonder View is a few kilometres north and slightly higher, but the view is about the same. If you're pressed for time, go to God's Window rather because the viewpoints look east *and* south. There are also more footpaths. Sorry to say, but the more steps you climb, the better the views get. The path to the highest viewpoint cuts through a pretty forest.

On weekends and during school holidays, you won't be able to ponder life in solitude while taking in the view because tourists are dropped off here by the busload. Bear that in mind.

Before God's Window and Wonder View, I stopped at The Pinnacle – the first viewpoint on the Panorama Route. The giant finger of rock is worth a photo, even if the views are average.

There are two official viewpoints at The Pinnacle – one at the finger rock itself and one at a waterfall – but you'll find the best view at the end of the “unofficial” footpath. (There were no signs to say it was off-limits, and I was curious.) This path takes you to the top of a hill to the right of the waterfall. Standing up there, you get a good sense of the scale of the torrent. A rainbow shimmered in the spray and I felt like David Livingstone discovering Vic Falls.

The high cliffs and frequent rain means there's a waterfall around almost every corner. Two of the better known ones are the Berlin Falls and the Lisbon Falls. Both waterfalls are a short drive north of Graskop. Berlin is 25 m high; Lisbon is slimmer and higher at 94 m. Neither will dethrone Augrabies, but they're both worth a visit.

Braai on tin plates

Never underestimate insider information. At God's Window, on the way back to my car, I chat to local Alana Woods and her friends. The sun is beating down and Alana knows a great swimming spot: Park near the bridge over the Berlin River on the R532 (9 km north of God's Window) and walk down to a deep pool between the rocks. I float on my back in the cool water while other tourists speed over the bridge. Thanks, Alana.

Refreshed, I get back on the R532. The speed limit is 120 km/h but drive slower: Cattle roam near towns like Morelema and Lerero. About 25 km from Graskop I pull over at a stone wagon



TO INFINITY & BEYOND. Panorama View Chalets near Graskop has one of the most dramatically situated swimming pools in the country.

ON A HIGH. A tourist peers into the chasm at The Pinnacle viewpoint.





COOL IT. The locals know best: This swimming spot in the Berlin River next to the R532 is not on any tourist map but it's a great place to have a dip. The bridge is just out of frame to the right.

VERTIGO. Believe it or not, the Blyde River Canyon is part of the Drakensberg escarpment, which extends all the way to Tzaneen in Limpopo.



wheel – the Trichardt/Potgieter memorial. This is the spot where the Voortrekkers left their women and children when they scouted a route down the steep cliffs on their way to Delagoa Bay (now Maputo). When word got out that their leader Andries Potgieter had died, the Voortrekkers named the river running next to this road the Treurrivier (river of sorrow).

Die Boskombuis, about 3 km further along, is a less sombre place. Kids shout and laugh as they play in the river while their parents watch from the shade, sipping cooldrinks. The smell of braaivleis hangs in the air. The menu is straightforward: steak and salad or wors and pap. You eat outside next to the river, from a tin plate. Fanie Steyn is the braai master and his wife Rita prepares the salad. "This place was meant to be a hobby after we retired, but now it's a full-time job," Rita tells me.

But back to the Voortrekkers: It turns out that Potgieter's death was just a rumour. When he rocked up back at the laager one day, the Voortrekkers named another river in his honour: the Blyde River.

Our own pyramids

The Treur and Blyde rivers join up a few kilometres north of Die Boskombuis and their confluence marks the official starting point of the Blyde River Canyon. It's also where you can see some of the funkiest rock formations in the country – Bourke's Luck Potholes.

Tom Bourke believed there was gold at the confluence of the two rivers and he spent many fruitless years trying to find it. Although he did find gold elsewhere at a later stage, it's funny that the potholes that tormented him ended up bearing his name. (Gold was later found at Bourke's Luck, but by other prospectors.) You can walk along three bridges over the potholes – it looks like someone spooned out balls of rock with an ice-cream scoop. The water shimmers with coins that people toss down to make a wish.

The Three Rondavels viewpoint is about 10 km further on from Bourke's Luck. They're like our own pyramids of Giza – these three peaks in the Blyde River Canyon feature on almost every tourism brochure and postcard in the area. They are the definition of "spectacular" – except when it's raining.

As far as canyons go (and there's much debate about what exactly constitutes a canyon, a gorge or just a donga), the Blyde is considered special because it's lush and green. Most canyons, like the Fish River Canyon in Namibia, are in the desert.

"I can see our house from here!" an excited boy shouts from one of the viewpoints.

Tourists love this spot and the viewing decks aren't big enough to accommodate everyone. Walk away from the crowds and find your own private spot. The foreign accents fade away until all you can hear is the wind.

Time to take your own postcard pictures.

Meaningful stalactites

If you want to visit the Three Rondavels viewpoint again, maybe for photos at dawn or dusk, spend a night at Forever Resorts Blyde Canyon. If you stay there, you also get access to other viewpoints overlooking the peaks and the Blyde River Dam from another angle. Walk to the higher viewpoint – it's worth it.

The resort is at the northern end of the Panorama Route. The border between Mpumalanga and Limpopo is about 10 km from here and it's as if the landscape changes to respect the border – the escarpment turns into farms and viewpoints become fruit stalls.

But just when you think you've left all the touristy things behind, the turn-off to the Echo Caves appears on the right. The caves aren't as impressive as Sudwala or Congo, but they're not a waste of money either. When you walk down the steps into the belly of the earth, it's like



ROGER DE LA HARPE

RINSE CYCLE. The Bourke's Luck Potholes were formed by whirlpools at the confluence of the Treur and Blyde rivers, which carved holes out of rock over millennia.

entering a musty closet that hasn't been opened in years. The cave walls are like ancient elephant hide, moist to the touch.

How did the caves get their name? Apparently, during skirmishes between the Swazi and Pedi people, the Pedis often hid out in the caves and they used the stalagmites and stalactites to communicate in the dark. When you strike a certain formation with a stone, it echoes. Each formation makes a different sound and each sound had a different meaning.

I've just turned onto the R36 to Ohrigstad, when I hit the brakes. There's a shoe next to the road. And it's huge! Sculptor Ron van Zyl and his family live next to this shoe-shaped house, which doubles as an art gallery. While you're there, also visit the Alpha Omega Cave – the walls of which have been decorated with scenes from the Bible. You can even get married in the little chapel underground.

People in Graskop told me not to waste my time at the Ohrigstad Dam Nature Reserve (about 28 km south of the town), but I go check it out anyway. And I like it! The only other people here are Shaun Scott and his family, who are fishing in the dam while hippos blow bubbles nearby. I ask Shaun whether the fish are biting. "Not yet," he says. "But it doesn't matter. We come here for the peace and quiet."

Shaun and I are on the same page then because after all the tour buses on the Panorama Route, I feel like I can breathe again.

Problems in paradise

The next morning I find myself at the top of Robber's Pass (1 778 m), staring out over the valley towards Pilgrim's Rest, about 10 km away. This area was once our own version of the Wild West. The gold rush brought out the worst in people and attracted riff-raff from all over.

Robber's Pass owes its name to Thomas Dennison, who robbed a mail coach between Lydenburg and Pilgrim's Rest of about 130 pounds in silver coins in 1912. He was caught and spent five years in jail.

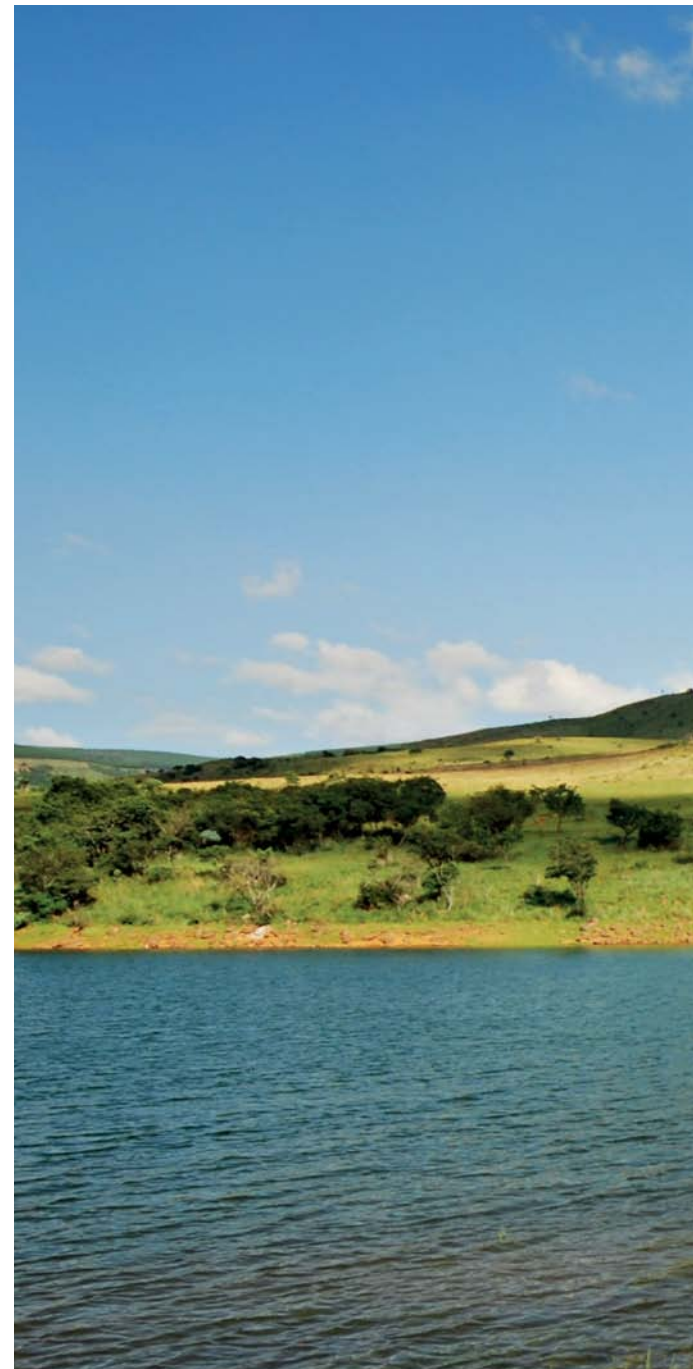
Pilgrim's Rest, an old mining town from the gold rush in the 19th century, has made the news for all the wrong reasons over the past few years. Tenders were awarded for the leasing of business premises and "political interference" was whispered in certain circles. As a result, 10 businesses have already closed their doors. You're probably going to ask if the town is still worth a visit. Depends: You still get the time-capsule feeling, but everyone wants to wash your car and the curio sellers will pester you.

I decide to give Pilgrim's Rest a chance and stroll into The Vine restaurant, where I'm greeted



MUTTLEY. This pooch at The Vine in Pilgrim's Rest might not have the looks for the Westminster Dog Show, but it's not short on personality.

HERE LIES A THIEF. The grave of an unnamed criminal in the cemetery at Pilgrim's Rest. The grave lies north to south, not east to west like the other graves.



by the ugliest dog I've ever seen: a wire-haired mutt with bowlegs and a severe underbite. He watches me intently as I tuck into beef stew served in a traditional gold digger's pan.

The mutt fits in with the eclectic decor: Texaco billboards, banknotes, T-shirts, even underwear left behind by previous patrons. Johnny Reinders and his son JT man the bar. JT pours me one of his own creations – a Pegasus. It tastes like mampoer mixed with Brasso and it's served in a small potjie with a straw. I think JT's Pegasus is the reason for all the underwear...



There are four museums in Pilgrim's Rest where you can see photos of the gold rush and the equipment the prospectors used. And in the cemetery in the "downtown" part, you'll find the graves of people who flocked here from as far afield as Sweden and Scotland.

Most came looking for gold, but there were some who came looking for trouble. In the Robber's Grave lies a thief who tried to break into a gold digger's tent. He was banished, but tried to sneak back into town. When he was spotted on a hill, he was shot and killed. This grave (and a few others) faces north

to south instead of east to west, to indicate that the man buried was an outlaw.

The last part of the R533 winds through pine plantations back to Graskop. As I drive, I reflect on what I've seen. The views along the Panorama Route are so vast, you feel like you're looking into the future. And, in places like Pilgrim's Rest, the past is brought back to life more vividly than any book or film. Somewhere in the middle, between the vistas, waterfalls and tour groups, you feel ready to tackle the present again.

Just hope the rain stays away.

GREEN GRASS, STILL WATERS. During school holidays, visitors flock to the viewpoints on the Panorama Route but the Ohrigstad Dam Nature Reserve is always quiet. Kick off your shoes and fish from the banks.

KNOW BEFORE YOU GO

GENERAL STUFF

Maps? For R10 you can buy a Big 5 Country map of the area at any tourism office. If you want something more comprehensive, get the Mpumalanga Travel Map (R87) by GEOMaps, available at most filling stations in the area.

Skip this. The Museum of Man next to the dirt road to the Echo Caves isn't in great shape.

Buy this. Macadamia nuts are sold at almost every viewpoint for about R20 a packet. There are also lots of stalls selling crafts.

If you have more time... Drive to the bottom tip of the Blyde River Dam for another perspective on the canyon. It's only 5 km from Forever Resorts Blyde Canyon as the crow flies, but 87 km along the road.

More info: 📞 graskop.co.za;
📞 pilgrims-rest.co.za; 📞 graskop.com

THINGS TO DO

• Viewpoints

You pay an entrance fee at each of the viewpoints and waterfalls on the Panorama Route – usually R5 – R10 per vehicle. Entrance to Bourke's Luck



costs R30 per vehicle. You can't watch the sunset from any of the viewpoints because the gates close at 5 pm. (They open again at 7 am.) If possible, avoid these viewpoints and picnic sites on public holidays – too many people, too little space.

• The Big Swing

Near Graskop you can swing off a 68 m-high cliff or glide down a 135 m zipline.
Cost: R320 per person to swing.
Contact: 📞 013 767 1621;
📞 bigswing.co.za

• Echo Caves

Entrance fee: R60 per person for a 45-minute tour.
Contact: 📞 013 238 0015;
📞 echocaves.co.za
GPS: S24.56016 E30.60335

• Another waterfall

At Mac-Mac Falls, about 20 km south of Graskop, you can picnic next to the pools downstream. ZAR President Thomas Burgers gave the waterfall its name because so many Scottish prospectors moved to the area during the gold rush. Entrance fee R5 per vehicle.



• Go for a drive

Turn north on the R36 to see the Abel Erasmus Pass before you go south to the Echo Caves. After 15 km you can turn around at the JG Strijdom Tunnel.

WE STAYED HERE

• Summit Lodge, Graskop

8 Mark Street

Rates: Camping from R70 per person; rondavels R350 per person.

Contact: ☎ 013 767 1058;

📧 summitlodge.co.za

GPS: S24.92847 E30.83731

• Forever Resorts Blyde Canyon

41km north of Graskop on the R532.

Rates: Camping from R90 per person; self-catering accommodation R640 per night, depending on the season.

Contact: ☎ 086 122 6966;

📧 foreverblydecanyon.co.za

GPS: S24.57983 E30.77301

• The Shoe Guesthouse, Ohrigstad

On the R36, 15 km north of Ohrigstad.

Rate: Self-catering from R200 per person per night.

Contact: ☎ 013 238 0304;

📧 theshoe.org

GPS: S24.58558 E30.63339

• Royal Hotel, Pilgrim's Rest

Main Road

Rates: From R395 per person sharing,



breakfast included.

Contact: ☎ 013 768 1100;

📧 royal-hotel.co.za

GPS: S24.90856 E30.75699

• Ohrigstad Dam Nature Reserve

About 45 km west of Graskop.

Rates: Camping R60 per tent per night; entrance fee R25 per person. (The campsite is on an incline but it's close to the water.)

Contact: ☎ 013 238 0302;

☎ 082 808 3272

GPS: S24.95501 E30.63089

WHERE TO EAT

• Silver Spoon Pancakes, Graskop

Try the chocolate mousse and Amarula pancake (R48).

Where? Louis Trichardt Avenue

Contact: ☎ 013 767 1366

GPS: S24.93186 E30.84213

• The Vine, Pilgrim's Rest

Try the Digger's Stew (R69), served in a gold digger's pan.

Where? Main Road

Contact: ☎ 013 768 1080

GPS: S24.90015 E30.75140

• Die Boskombuis

The menu is short but sweet. Fanie will braai your steak just how you like it.

Where? On the R532, about 3 km south of Bourke's Luck Potholes.

Contact: ☎ 083 258 1565

GPS: S24.72020 E30.84267



ON THE WEB

Watch a video about the Echo Caves and see more photos from the Panorama Route viewpoints at 📧 gomag.co.za

