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The next morning I wandered out for an early morning walk and discovered our hotel was only about 400m from the Maropeng Visitor Centre, the main visitor centre for the Cradle of Humankind World Heritage Site. I knew it was close to the hotel, but not that close. For breakfast, we dined on a large plate of cheese, ham and fruit, plus a plate of yoghurt and cereal and were about to stand up from the table when the waiter came to take our cooked breakfast order. Those two courses were just for starters! We each had a three egg omelette and lumbered off to the visitor centre. It needed to be lot further away to walk that breakfast off.



The Tumulus building: Maropeng Visitor Centre



Excellent directional and interpretative signage at the Maropeng Visitor Centre



The foyer of Maropeng Visitor Centre



Evolution on display. My friend Julian and Australopithecus.

Raw statistics on “The Cradle”, as it is called locally, are impressive. They claim 387 tourism establishments, including 175 places to stay and 113 restaurants. The area also has 70 conference venues and 44 wedding and event venues, in all employing 7,000 permanent and 2,200 casual employees. Approximately R189M (about \$20M in Australian currency) has been invested in developing the site. This is a major tourism site built on impressive long running research and its World Heritage status.

The Maropeng Visitor Centre is astounding. It is named the Tumulus building, and looks like a giant burial mound or hill, which is why we hadn't seen it in the dark the night before. Tickets are purchased at the market place, which is sunken, so



Robert Broom's name appeared at every fossil site I visited in South Africa. Broom is well known to the Wombeyan Caves' staff for describing Mountain Pygmy Possums from a breccia he excavated there, before moving to South Africa.

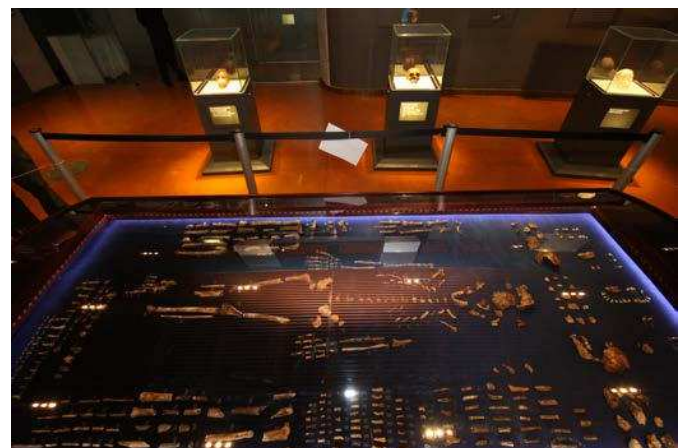


Lots of excellent material helps to tell the evolution story.

looking across the landscape you don't even notice it. A grassed amphitheatre holds 10,000 people. The exhibition is designed as a journey of discovery, from the beginning of the world through the history of humankind and looking forward into the future. As you would expect for a fossil human site, evolution is front and centre in all exhibits and very well done.

The experience is difficult to describe. The entrance hall is a clean space, almost stark, with a large water feature. Being the first people through the door for the day we almost had the entire building to ourselves- for a short time. We had certainly timed our visit well, albeit completely by accident. The previous day, a Sunday, was the opening of a new fossil discovery, of a newly described hominid named *Homo naledi*. The fossils were on display at the very end of the building. Julian and I raced to the end and had the viewing room to ourselves, in sharp contrast to the previous day when there was several hours wait and 60 people allowed 15 minutes at a time. The *Homo naledi* story was big news at the time in South Africa and generated some interesting media. Some politicians were very vocal about these fossils being ancient humans and forerunners to modern humans, clearly ascribing to a more biblical view of the world. I find it really interesting, that despite the great human evolution story, that the World Heritage status is very actively promoted, and the irrefutable collection of fossils, that some of the country's leaders happily speak against what science is discovering and is celebrated at a global level. Once we had absorbed the *Homo naledi* display, we went back to the start of the interpretative displays.

Interpretation starts with a boat ride, not quite what I expected inside the building. This boat ride takes visitors through the



The Homo naledi fossils on display.

stages of Earth's formation (the physical not biblical version) and is a total sensory experience. Heat (volcanoes complete with very loud sound, freezing cold, tectonic movement and snow and rain. Initially I thought the ride was a gimmick, a cheap way to entertain children, but it is very good and really sets the scene for the interpretation on the formation of Earth. A further series of displays take visitors through human evolution with excellent graphic and sculptured displays. The Maropeng Centre is a good 2-3 hour experience.

After Maropeng, Julian and I headed to Sterkfontein Cave, home to the oldest and most continuous palaeontological dig in the world, so they claim. I can't think of one that has been going longer so perhaps this is correct. Sterkfontein is where "Mrs Ples", an *Australopithecus africanus* specimen dated to 2.3M years, was discovered, although Mrs Ples is now identified as a male. Our tour guide cleverly put to the group that this was the first human to undergo a sex change. An almost complete



This is part of the regular show cave tour, quite a small tunnel.



Sterkfontein Visitor Centre.

hominid skeleton called "Little Foot", dated to 4.17M years was also found here.

The Sterkfontein Caves visitor centre is somewhat dated, but clearly branded at the entrance like other parts of the World Heritage Site. Several large groups of school children were on site on educational tours and quickly realised Julian and I were not locals. We become part of the educational experience but not sure how useful it would have been for them! All visitors are required to wear a helmet with a hair net provided to wear underneath. Julian has less hair than me so we had a bit of fun

with the guide and group with wearing these. The tour started brilliantly. Interpretation from the guide utilised the landscape and displays on the walk to the cave. Then we got to the cave and it all changed, unfortunately. Sterkfontein is one of the world's great palaeo/archaeological caves, and the "interpretation" became almost totally fantasy once we were inside the cave. The guide did point out the main scientific site, which is protected by heavy infrastructure, but great opportunities around the cave structure and fossil accumulations were largely overlooked. This sounds negative, but the tour was still a great experience but I would have enjoyed about twice as long in the cave. Although Julian and I wanted more, it seems the majority of the group enjoyed the tour and had their expectations met. We decided we were perhaps a little more demanding than the average visitor.

The cave is quite robust with poorly developed pathways and a couple of tunnels that are far smaller than your average show cave passage (much smaller than Buchan Caves in Australia for comparison). The cave breaches the aquifer, which extends to a great (unknown) depth. In 1984, diver Pieter Verhulst and two others attempted to discover the depth of the lake in the cave. Verhulst got lost, with his body found in an air chamber and retrieved three weeks later by rescue teams. It is alleged Pieter died just before the team arrived. During the retrieval, the teams surveyed 892m of passages. Due to this accident, diving is not permitted and the cave depth and extent remain unknown, surely tempting to experienced cave divers.

The walk back from the cave tour, which was completed without the guide, was the best part of the tour for me. We could view



Entering Sterkfontein Cave.



I know a few cave divers who would love to explore this area and solve the mystery of how deep it is.



Above. The palaeo/archaeo excavations above Sterkfontein Cave.



Left. Excellent signage brands the Cradle of Humankind throughout the World Heritage Area.

the surface excavations and the extensive supporting infrastructure, and surrounding landscape, which were well complemented with signage. The displays at Sterkfontein are also excellent and we spent quite some time viewing these.

We went to the Wonder Cave site, which was unfortunately closed on Mondays. Hein did tell us to avoid it, so maybe we didn't miss too much. We completed our day touring The Cradle looking at the supporting tourism experiences. It is well set up, very welcoming for visitors and Julian and I had no issues at all, apart from some navigation challenges.

We completed the day with a large cheese platter and cold beer overlooking the Witwaterberg and Magaliesberg Ranges, enjoying the wildlife and taking many more photos. Another extravagant dinner, alone as we once again the only visitors, followed by an equally extravagant breakfast again the next morning, before we checked out to head back to Johannesburg and fly to Bloemfontein to meet Hein and Andia. The bill for two people for two nights, two breakfasts, two dinners, and a substantial amount of beer and wine - R3,600 or about \$200 each. The hotel is too expensive for most South Africans but is good value for travellers from Australia and the United Kingdom. If you ever have the chance to travel to this part of the world, make sure The Cradle is on your list and book into the Maropeng Boutique Hotel.