

The Lowveld Escarpment



Michael Pierre de Villiers

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Title page: Blyde River Canyon, Sudwalla Dinosaur Park, Pilgrim's Rest, Tzaneen Magoebaskloof Forestry Walk, Accommodation scene near Nelspruit,

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Michael Pierre de Villiers was born in Durban, South Africa. He was trained to World Meteorological Organization class one meteorologist and multi-discipline weather forecaster in the South African Weather Service where he reached the rank of Director. He served on a weather ship in the South Atlantic. He served on World Meteorological Organization expert teams and was World Meteorological Organization rapporteur for the Africa region. He was also a commercial pilot and flying instructor. More recently he was a weather forecaster in the United Arab Emirates, then in England. Now retired.

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2026-08-07

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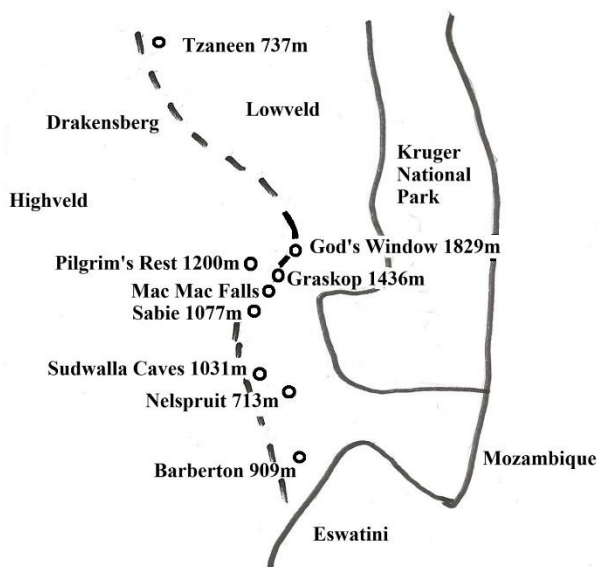
INTRODUCTION

This is a companion article to Visits to South African game and nature reserves 1960-2020 including Rhodesia 1972. It focuses on places visited in the vicinity of the Lowveld, more accurately places along the escarpment between the Lowveld and the higher inland plateau that rises to the Highveld.

Inescapably, the introduction will review information in the companion article. One cannot assume that the reader has read the other article, nor remembers the information therein. One should never assume. To ass-u-me, one makes an ass out of u and me.

Living in Pretoria everyone that could, wanted to get away during holidays, either from the summer heat, or the winter cold. Before and after school holidays it was normal to hear people ask are you going away, or did you go away? The Laeveld (Afrikaans for Lowveld) to the east, or Bosveld (bushveld) to the north were favoured destinations. Mostly the Lowveld.

The Lowveld, between 150 and 600 metres (500 and 2000 feet) above sea level, form the eastern part of Mpumalanga Province bordering Mozambique, arguably it extends further north to the Northern Province. The escarpment rises to around 2000 metres (6500 feet). A rather rural area, the Lowveld has a sub-tropical climate consisting of a mainly green grass and bush clad plain. However, in the dry winter months the grass turns a russet colour and the trees lose a lot of their leaves. The thorn trees look particularly stark. Winters are most definitely mild, particularly when compared with the Highveld while summers are hot and humid, nearly as humid as the KwaZulu-Natal coast. Although, more like the Highveld at the higher locations along the escarpment.



Sketch of places visited. Approximate altitudes and approximate locations and boundaries (including the Drakensberg Mountain range).

Popular destinations in the lowveld include the Sudwala Caves, Barberton, Pilgrim's Rest, Sabie, Nelspruit and northward to Graskop and Tzaneen along the marked escarpment between the Hoëveld (Highveld) and Laeveld (stunning scenery).

For trips to the Lowveld, we would usually book at one of the smallish self-catering places in the countryside near to Nelspruit. Usually, small cabin style quite rustic accommodation, sometimes classier, with the basic necessary facilities. If one was prepared to leave Pretoria very early and return very late, some places to visit were possible in a single day. One could stock the car with all the provisions needed for the trip and top up locally for items such as milk, bread and of course petrol. Or eat main meals at local restaurants.

Also included were anti-malaria tablets. The sub-tropical and humid Lowveld is home to 9 or more *Anopheles* mosquito species. The females transmit malaria. When Europeans first came to the area there was still ignorance as to what caused malaria. It was believed that it was caused by the fever tree, so named because it was found in damp and moist areas where people were infected by malaria. Oblivious to the fact that this was ideal mosquito habitat. The malaria parasite was discovered in 1880. In 1894 it was suggested that malaria was caused by mosquito bites and finally proven in 1898.

SUDWALA

Having descended to the Lowveld on the N4 from Pretoria, still about 35 kilometres west from Nelspruit, are the Sudwala Caves and Sudwala Dinosaur Park. The truly amazing caves (of which for some reason photographs have been lost), are reputed to be the oldest known caves in the world. The dominant roughly circular chamber, or amphitheatre has is 70 metres diameter and 37 metres height. Also known as the amphitheatre because of its acoustics. Only 600 metres of there in excess of 30 kilometres in length are accessible. Although, one can progress 2000 metres into the cave that necessitates crawling through tunnels, some with water, to reach the crystal chamber with aragonite crystals.

Their formation began around 240 million years ago when natural acid in groundwater seeped through the faults and joints in Precambrian dolomite rock. Precambrian dolomite rock first formed about 2800 million years ago, when Africa was still part of Gondwana. There is evidence that early humans may have sheltered in the caves from the early Stone Age around 2.5 million years ago to late stone age a few thousand years BC. An added bonus was a constant supply of fresh air from an unknown source in the caves.

The Sudwala Dinosaur Park is situated next to the caves. It depicts life size models of pre-historic animals realistically sculpted by Jan van Zijl set in a sub-tropical forest garden. When a small child, my youngest son was very keen on dinosaurs. He had a collection that I bought from the Transvaal Museum in Pretoria. These were close representations of dinosaurs known to science at the time. He knew the names of all of them, such as diplodocus, triceratops, plesiosaurus, stegosaurus, tyrannosaurus and brontosaurus. As far as I could tell the examples in the park were close replicas. He would happily run from one to the next. We had to visit the place on two different occasions. To date, I am informed there have been additions and added attractions to the park since it opened in 1977.



Two dinosaur examples, believed to be a Parasaurolophus and a Triceratops.

NELSPRUIT



Very basic self-catering accommodation near Nelspruit.

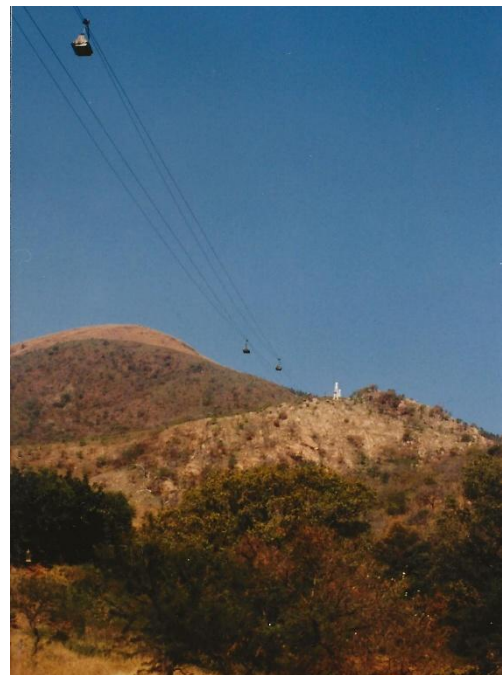
Nelspruit city, now known as the City of Mbombela, located on the Crocodile River, is the capital of Mpumalanga province. While it is interesting and I am sure there are people who are proud of the place, the title city immediately indicated it was a place for us to avoid. It was founded by Nel family brothers in 1895. During the Second Boer War (1899 to 1902), it was briefly the government headquarters of the independent Boer South African Republic after fleeing from Pretoria. The discovery of gold in the area, such as at Barberton and Pilgrim's Rest encouraged further development of the then town.

BARBERTON



An example of an old-style building.

Barberton is at a higher altitude (about 909 metres/3000 feet) than Nelspruit (about 713 metres/2340 feet) being closer to the higher ground in adjacent Swaziland (now called Eswatini, or The Kingdom of Eswatini). Summers are less hot, winters mild. Barberton started as a mining town during the 1880s gold rush in the region after the discovery of gold in 1883. Until then the area, along with most of the Lowveld was avoided due to hot weather and rife with malaria. A lot of the buildings date from the 1880s to 1890s, so the place has a different old world feel to it.



The cableway climbing from Barberton.

Around the same time that gold was discovered in the Barberton area, gold and asbestos was discovered at a place called Havelock (now called Bulembu) in the mountains just inside the north-west border of Eswatini (previously Swaziland). It was not until the 1930s that asbestos mining began on a large scale at the Havelock mine. It was extremely difficult getting asbestos to the Barberton railway station (opened in 1896) and supplies to the mine, including coke to fire the power station at the mine. The construction of a cableway from Barberton to Bulembu

began in 1937, completed in 1939, it rose 730 metres over the Makhonjwa Mountains, crossed the border into Eswatini then descended 620 metres to Bulembu. At the time, the over 20 kilometres cableway was the longest one-section cableway in the world. The longest span was 1207 metres, the height above ground 190 metres. The mine closed in 2001 due to the slump in asbestos sales and the cableway abandoned, but not dismantled. A colleague who grew up in the area in the late 1940s early 1950s told me of a few incidents when someone would attempt illegally entering South Africa by hopping into one of cable cars and becoming stuck suspended in the middle of nowhere when the operation closed for the weekend. At about 190 metres above ground, one could not jump out. It was certain death. He told me that on a few occasions they retrieved a dead body. Probably dead from hypothermia.

SABIE



A well-maintained old ex Blue Train railway restaurant carriage at Sabie. Still there in 2025, believed permanently closed in 2026.



Burnt remains of a roadside tourist market.



The Mac Mac Falls mentioned on the next page.

Sabie situated on the banks of the Sabie River in Mpumalanga, is in the centre of a large man-made forestry area. Sabie is an Afrikaans corruption of the Tsonga word Ulusaba meaning fearful river from the time when the river teemed with crocodile. Located at about 1000 metres (approximately 3300 feet) above sea level on the southern end of the rather precipitous escarpment in the area that extends about 250 kilometres northward, it is a popular tourist base from which to make daily trips to view the scenery and numerous impressive waterfalls, such as the Lone Creek Falls, Horseshoe Falls, Forest Falls, the Bridal Veil and the Mac Mac Falls. Sabie is also only about 65 kilometres west of the Kruger National Park, near enough for day visits.

Situated in a summer rainfall area it is very dry in winter and prone to forest fires, as we saw when driving toward Barberton where we saw burnt tourist stalls, still smouldering after a veld fire. Same as in Kwa-Zulu-Natal, it is compulsory for farmers and forestry areas to burn fire breaks prior to the beginning of the dry winter season.

MAC MAC FALLS

North of Sabie, nearing Graskop, is the Mac Mac waterfall. There are more waterfalls in the Sabie/Graskop area than anywhere else in South Africa. Mac Mac is considered the most stunning of them all. It has twin 70 metre falls to the gorge below. Originally it had a single fall. During the gold rush the original single stream was blasted into two to try and reach the gold-bearing reef. In the dry season it often reverts to one fall. Best time to see the falls, is during the summer rainfall season when the is at its fullest.

PILGRIM'S REST



Pilgrim's Rest in winter landscape.

Travelling north from Nelspruit, past Sabie, the Mac Mac falls and turning to the west from Graskop, is Pilgrim's Rest or, in Afrikaans, Pilgrimsrus.

It was a mining town in the second of the old Transvaal gold fields declared in 1873 (after the Witwatersrand where Johannesburg is located). It attracted a rush of alluvial gold prospectors. Alluvial panning dwindled in the 1880s and changed to deeper ore mining when prospectors were attracted to the newly

discovered Barberton gold deposits.

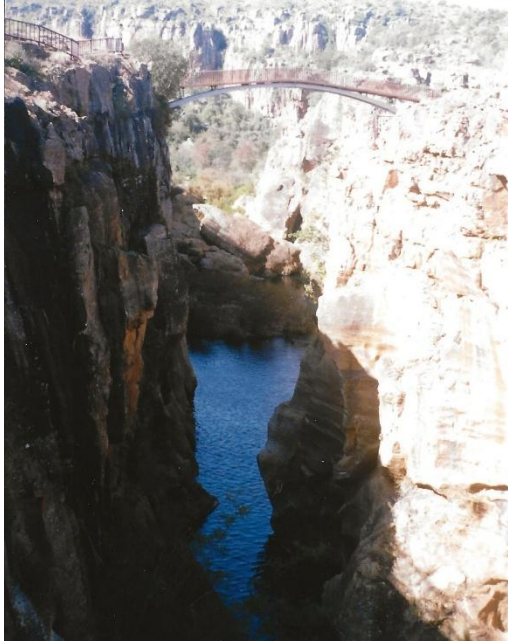
When gold ore volume increased, small local hydro-electric plants were built on the nearby Blyde River to power electric tramways and ore crushers. A bigger hydro-electricity plant was built on the river about 30 kilometres away in 1897, which supplied electricity to Pilgrim's Rest and elsewhere until 1992. It was the second town in South Africa with street lighting after the Kimberley mining town. Mining closed in 1971.



Buildings in Pilgrim's Rest. All of them have corrugated iron roofs. Very noisy in a hailstorm.

The mostly architecturally unchanged village from its early mining days, was sold to the government, becoming a small living museum town, protected as a provincial heritage site. Well worth a visit.

BLYDE RIVER CANYON



The gorge close to the potholes. One of the footbridges at the site is visible in the distance.



Midday lunch break.

The Blyde River Canyon Reserve is now officially known as Motlatse Canyon Provincial Nature Reserve and the Motlatse River.

A hotel near Graskop was the base from which I went on a weekend backpacking and camping trip with a group of friends along the nearby Blyde River Canyon.

Before we left on our trek, the motor cars were driven to the northern destination. All the drivers returned in one car that was then left at the hotel. When we reached our destination our transport home was waiting for us with one driver who was taken to where his car was parked at the hotel.



A pinnacle at God's Window and the distant Lowveld below.

The canyon, with its extraordinary Bourkes' Luck Potholes, is approximately 26 kilometres in length dramatic high cliff sides and deep gorges (obviously) reaching a maximum depth of about 800 metres. One source claims it is 50 kilometres.

Bourke's Luck Potholes are named after a prospector named Tom (Bernard Thomas) Bourke. The potholes, at the meeting of the Blyde and Treur Rivers, formed during millions of years of erosion. High velocity swirling currents similar to a tornado with sand and pebbles in suspension, have scoured deep and round potholes that look like giant pots or cauldrons. Unfortunately, no photographs of the potholes have survived.

GOD'S WINDOW

Not far to the north of Graskop is God's Window, a

popular vantage point along the Drakensberg escarpment. Here, sheer cliffs plunge 700 to 900 metres to the Lowveld. Near to Graskop is God's Window, a view site from which, on the edge of the escarpment, one has wide view of the Lowveld over 900 metres below.

TZANEEN MAGOEBASKLOOF FORESTRY AREA



Through the trees and into the woods.



Setting out in morning fog.



Tea break.

Further north, with the same group of friends, my older son, in his early teens, accompanied me on a long weekend backpacking trip through the forestry area near Tzaneen. These trips meant spending the night in sleeping bags around the fire.

Although, one night on this trip we spent the night in a bare cabin, which was fortunate, because we were soaked walking in heavy rain during the afternoon. The trick of using black plastic rubbish bags to cover our backpacks and sleeping bags, meant they remained dry. However, the clothes we wore and shoes had to be dried before the fire in the fireplace. Especially the shoes, needed for the following day's walk.

It was here that one noticed the distinct rain shadow effect of the escarpment. All lush and green east of and below the escarpment, typical drier bushveld west of the escarpment when driving toward Pietersburg and home.

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