

TEXT AND
PICTURES LEON
MARSHALL

YOU CANNOT CONTROL WHICH WAY AIR currents will flow, but they will usually carry your hot-air balloon over some part of the Cradle of Humankind. There, in the still of the early morning, you can look down on the hilly grasslands and wonder what they might have looked like two million years ago when our early ancestors still roamed the area.

Much of the land inside the 47 000-hectare Cradle has been converted into wildlife reserves, like the Lion and Rhino Park from which we launched. The sweeping views of the hills and valleys, and of the animals below, are beautiful.

Our party sometimes talk quietly among ourselves, and every now and then our captain, Adam Fillmore, identifies the animals we spot far below. Otherwise all that interrupts the silence as we glide along are the intermittent blasts of the balloon's gas burner.

Yes, Adam can be called 'captain'. He bears stripes on his shoulders and has received training as arduous as that of an airline pilot. In fact, he needs to be even more attuned to the elements, as it is these that determine which direction and how fast his craft travels. He can exercise some control by changing altitude, and here and there catching

a draught coming round a koppie. But his tentative 'captain speak' tells it all. "We hope to continue in this direction... We should get there by... We are aiming to land at that spot you see in the distance..."

There can be no better way of surveying the countryside where two million years ago Mrs Ples, more formally known as *Australopithecus africanus*, might have emerged from her cave at a similar time, blinking into the rising sun and perhaps wondering in her own primordial way what the day would bring.

Little Foot might already have been on the prowl for breakfast. And looking down from a hill could have been the more urbane Ms *Australopithecus sediba*, standing quite upright, scratching her protruding forehead with delicate, human-like fingers, and wondering what morsel might be suitable to her smaller, hominid-type teeth.

What on earth was the lady thinking when she and that young boy ventured so close to the sinkhole, plunging to their death



□ Trish Flanagan stares across the mist-covered landscape from which grassy hills protrude.

BALLOON'S EYE VIEW

and becoming entombed by silt? This is what Wits palaeo-anthropologist Lee Berger thinks happened to those two beings, whose newly-discovered skeletons he believes might hold the fount (or sediba in Sotho) from which better knowledge about the origins of humankind might spring.

The two white rhinos grazing on a hillside might have fitted into that prehistoric landscape, but in the clearing where we see a black-maned lion surveying his surrounds, it might well have been a sabre-tooth tiger on the prowl.

Balloon rides are just one of this region's attractions. New roads, interspersed by attractive bricked traffic circles, criss-cross the area. The wider ones have become some of Johannesburg's favourite cycling routes, and groups of cyclists in brightly-coloured gear are a common sight.

The roads lead to fancy lodges set in scenic surrounds inside sizeable reserves, at least one of which offers the unlikely sight of gemsbok, well outside the animal's desert and semi-desert habitat. Some of the roads lead to hamlets like Kromdraai, where more and more eateries are drawing tourists and weekend city escapees alike.

But it is the old bones that have been mainly

responsible for instilling new life into the region. The architecturally impressive Maropeng Centre has interactive exhibitions taking visitors through the passage of time. It has a boutique hotel, a conference centre and a stylish restaurant that has become a favourite wedding venue.

The nearby Sterkfontein Caves allow visitors deep into their passages and caverns, where a long time ago our ancestors began to look and behave rather much like us. □

**Map reference C6
see inside back cover**

**Hot-air balloon companies
operating in the area:**

**Airventures 083 356 2435, 011 793 5782,
www.air-ventures.co.za,
info@air-ventures.co.za**

Riding the early-morning breeze above the Cradle of Humankind conjures up images of what could have greeted our ancestors at dawn, millions of years ago

GAUTENG

Cradle of Humankind

JOHANNESBURG

