

## South Africa: A Modern Explorers Voyage to the Human Past

Catherine Hermanson

*Writing Sample - Blog*

*I've found that the best way to find oneself, is to go back to the very beginning of it all...*

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Our minivan of eager university students drove out of the city of Johannesburg and into South Africa's green northern plains. Here, amongst what seems like endless rolling hills, you'll find an award-winning interactive heritage exhibit, the remains of one of the world's most famous archaeology sites, a four-star hotel and restaurant, and an underground cave river ride. None of these excursions feel like they quite belong in the same sentence, let alone within a two-mile radius of one another, yet each unique element wove together seamlessly to tell a beautiful story.

We began our day in the visitor center, *The Cradle of Humankind*, an official World Heritage Site established in 1999. Etched on the walls of the building and across the fronts of pamphlets handed out by tour guides was the word **Maropeng**. It wasn't until our day came to a close that I truly understood what it meant.

**MAROPENG**, (*m-ah-row-pan*) (*tswana*)  
*to return to our place of origin*

Arriving at the first stop on our tour, the interactive museum showcase, was a journey in and of itself. After traversing down several flights of stairs and departing in a small raft, we floated through an underground river system in a vibrant display of light projections. In retrospect, I'd argue it was one of the most fascinating transportation methods I've ever tried!

Once back on solid ground, we entered the exhibit which took us through the very story of our beginnings; the creation of the planet, the origin of hominids, the elements that continue to make us "human" today, and a plea for sustainability as an evolving society. I thought to myself about the endless days I could have spent studying each of the fascinating infographics, playing the interactive games, and examining the archaeology displays. After observing the amount of wisdom our ancestors had left behind, I realized how learning their story can make all humans better stewards of the world in our modern time.

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The highlight of the *Maropeng* experience was our trek through the *Sterkfontein Caves*. After ducking through passageways of exposed stalagmites and crawling down tunnels coated in groundwater, we made our way underground with the help of our guide. The underground limestone systems housed several active archaeological dig sites where over 1,000 hominid fossils have previously been discovered. Famously, our friend "Little Foot" (one of the oldest *Australopithecus* skeleton remains ever found) was uncovered and officially recognized in 1994. The chilly cave air stood still as if Little Foot still had so many more things to tell us about her life 3.67 million years later, her stories still captivating us in modern times as we work to understand the past.

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As we emerged out of the darkness and back into the sun, an electricity erupted amongst the group. There was a unanimous feeling shared between us: that *Maropeng* was unlike anything else. More than an exciting travel destination, the *Cradle of Humankind* was an experience that had the power to shape how we saw ourselves and each other through the historical lens of where we all came from.

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