

Mpumalanga



For the most part, Mpumalanga (Place of the Rising Sun; pronounced M-poo-ma-lan-ga) barely registers on the radar for foreign visitors. Enticed by the primal lure of Kruger National Park, the majority shoot straight up the highway from Johannesburg in search of bush walks and wildlife drives; all the while ignoring the province's many charms.

Mpumalanga's major draw is the massive Blyde River Canyon, which carves its way spectacularly through the Drakensberg Escarpment. Surrounding it are mountains, rivers, waterfalls and thick tracts of pine forest. The region's natural assets make it a prime target for outdoor enthusiasts, who head here to abseil down waterfalls, throw themselves off cliffs, negotiate rivers by raft, inner tube or canoe, and hike or bike numerous wilderness trails.

Those not into death-defying pursuits can indulge in the quieter sport of trout fishing in the cool highlands surrounding the small town of Dullstroom. Or soak up the region's history in the gold-mining village turned living museum of Pilgrim's Rest or the fascinating former gold-rush town of Barberton.

The dry, hot lowveld surrounding Kruger National Park is home to the laid-back towns of White River and Hazyview, close enough to Kruger's park gates to taste the big game, but far enough away to have their own excellent selection of lodges and wilderness activities. From Nelspruit, Mpumalanga's answer to the big smoke, Kruger is within easy reach, as is the Mozambique border. Also close is Swaziland. To the far south of the province is Piet Retief, a convenient transit point if you're en route to KwaZulu-Natal.

Towns in this chapter are organised roughly clockwise west to east, and north to south.

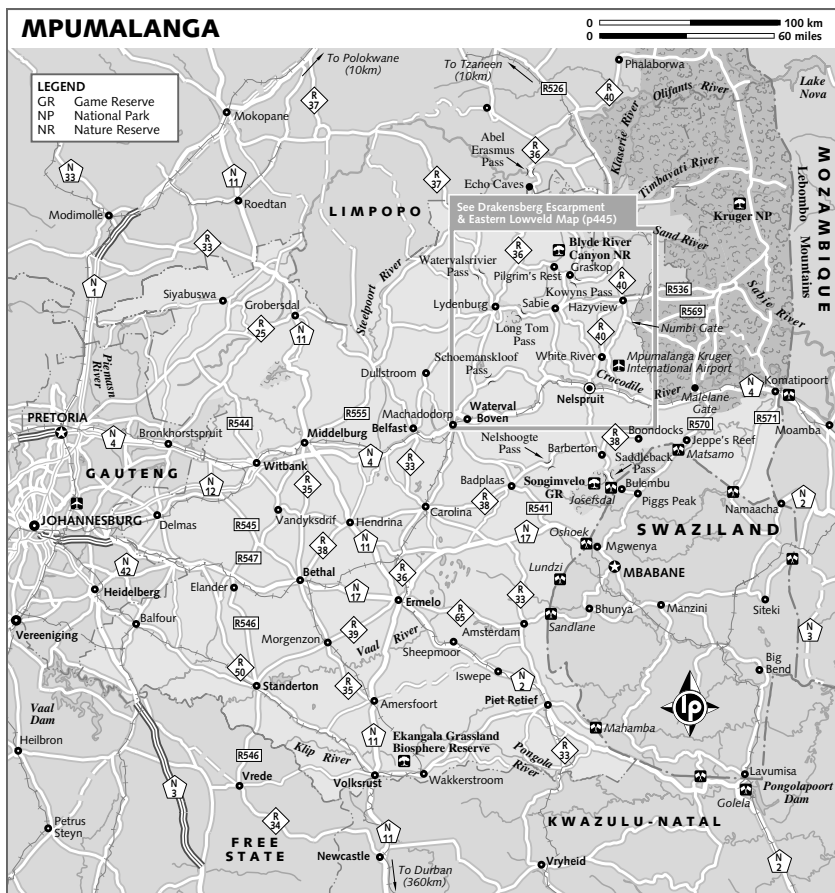
HIGHLIGHTS

- Indulging in one of many adventure activities, or simply taking in the misty mountain views around **Sabie** (p447)
- Leaping into a gorge with the aid of the Big Swing just outside **Graskop** (p450)
- Working up a sweat on one of the **Blyde River Canyon** (p451) hiking trails
- Walking with the elephants at one of Hazyview's **elephant sanctuaries** (p453)
- Exploring the perfectly preserved mining village of **Pilgrim's Rest** (p449)



■ POPULATION: 3.1 MILLION

■ AREA: 79,490 SQ KM



HISTORY

It was near Barberton, Mpumalanga, that scientists believe the first stones on the earth's surface cooled, some 4.5 billion years ago, when much of the planet was still ablaze with gas and lava.

A few billion years on, proto-man was making a home in caves on the Drakensberg Escarpment and in the Blyde River Canyon. The tribal groups that inhabit the province today are descended from the Venda people and the Pedi, who broke away from the main migration route that headed south from Zimbabwe.

During the *difaqane* (forced migration) of the early 19th century, groups of Shangaan, Swazi and Ndebele entered the area, escaping

turbulent times in Zululand. The Ndebele also threw their weight around, terrorising rival tribes and taking young men and women hostage.

Voortrekkers first arrived on the scene in the late 1830s and had established the Transvaal as a republic within 10 years. The British were none too pleased about this, especially when gold was discovered near the town of Sabie in 1873, and they succeeded in annexing the whole of the Transvaal in 1877.

When word of gold spread, miners arrived from all around the world, only to be disappointed when the strike wasn't as large as predicted. Soon the large mining camps near Sabie and Pilgrim's Rest were dismantled and moved elsewhere.