

Sterkfontein Caves

Magaliesburg, Gauteng, South Africa

It is at Sterkfontein (within the Cradle of Humankind World Heritage Site) that the famous Mrs Ples (*Plesianthropus transvaalensis*) was discovered - well-preserved skull of a species of early man who lived there about two million years ago.

The Sterkfontein Caves are one of the richest and most productive palaeo-anthropological sites in the world and form part of the Cradle of Humankind World Heritage Site.

Amongst the most remarkable findings to have been made by numerous world famous scientists within the Cradle of Humankind is the famous Mrs. Ples, the first complete *Australopithecus* skull to be discovered and more recently, "Little Foot", a 4.17 million-year-old almost complete ape-man skeleton was also discovered in the same caves.

The first fossils at Sterkfontein came to light as early as 1936 and were the first adult *Australopithecines* or more specifically *Australopithecus*. *Australopithecus africanus* existed only in South Africa between 3.2 to 2.6 million years ago and was a very early hominid (i.e. a species that belongs in our family the Hominidae).

It was the adult ape-men fossils from Sterkfontein that helped prove to the world that Africa was the cradle of humankind. Sterkfontein has fossil deposits dating back to almost 3.5 million years ago all the way up to 1.5 million years ago, providing a wealth of information about the different hominid species that existed in this 2 million year interval.

An hour's drive from Johannesburg and Pretoria, facilities include a top restaurant, conferencing facilities, access into the caves, walkways and a boardwalk past the excavation site where world-acclaimed fossils have been discovered

The scientific exhibition centre show-cases a reconstruction of a mined versus a pristine cave, cave formations and geologies, early-life forms, mammals and homo-fossils, specific finds such as Mrs Ples, the Taung child and Little Foot as well as details of fossilisation, paleobotany and landscapes.

Prior to the detail design of the exhibition content of the Sterkfontein Caves exhibition, an expert committee of scientists from the University of Witwatersrand, copy writers and exhibition and attraction designers spent gruelling months reaching consensus on the most widely accepted theories and facts on human development. This well researched storyline forms the basis of the Sterkfontein Caves experience.

World-acclaimed and award winning artist, John Gurche, has produced all the lifelike hominid illustrations, from the Toumai through to modern humans.

The Sterkfontein Caves are owned by the University of the Witwatersrand whose scientists have been responsible for the main excavations of the World Heritage Site. Sterkfontein has been excavated for more than 62 years in total, but it is amazingly still yielding up its secrets. The discovery just recently of the almost complete skeleton of 'Little Foot' bears ample testament to the wealth of information which is still to be gained from the cave deposits at Sterkfontein.

