

Construction of adventure centre at Graskop Gorge drawing much attention

In 2012, the G20 heads of state recognised tourism as a catalyst for growth and development. According to the Department of Tourism, the sector directly supported more than 700,000 jobs in 2016, with over 10 million foreign visitors coming to South Africa, surpassing the global growth average.



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It is little wonder that the construction so visibly unfolding at the Graskop Gorge in Mpumalanga is drawing much attention. Motorists on the R533 towards Hazyview have for months been watching the constant activity on the side of the gorge opposite to the Big Swing.

A private entity, the Graskop Gorge Lift Co, is developing the site at a cost of R40m. When completed, the adventure centre will include a glass elevator that will transport visitors 51m to the bottom of the gorge, where they will explore the diverse forest below via a series of elevated walkways and suspension bridges. Back top-side, they will be able to enjoy a meal at the restaurant or drink at the bar – both of which will boast breath-taking views. There will be shops for some retail therapy, viewing decks and a children's play area.

While all this spells excitement and anticipation for those people eager to experience this new offering on the Panorama Route, others cannot wait for the opening in December 2017 because of the impact the development will have on the community.



Mpumalanga tourism gets a lift

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Tourism equals job creation

A development of this magnitude, which is expected to draw domestic and international visitors, has spin-off benefits for the region, including the preservation of cultural heritage, improved infrastructure and more visitors to surrounding tourism establishments.

Mpumalanga's scenic beauty, wildlife, sunny climate, outdoor activities, foodie options and relatively close proximity to Johannesburg and Pretoria, make it a prime tourist destination. In the first quarter of 2016, Africa's only rail toboggan opened at Misty Mountain amid much fanfare – it was something new and exciting for the tourism sector to attract more visitors to the Kruger Lowveld, South Africa's inland tourism destination, but aware of the 'been-there-done-that' challenge.

The Graskop Glass Lift Co has generated much attention from international quarters after being introduced at Indaba and World Travel Market 2017. Local tour operators too will be glad to have another attraction to add to their books, alongside old favourites like the Skyway Aerial Trail, especially when one considers that tourism today is all about the experience. Once tourists find what they want to do, they then book accommodation.

James Sheard, Campbell Scott, and Oupa Pilane – three local businessmen with vast experience in the tourism sector – owns the Graskop Gorge Lift Co. They have a long-term lease with the Thaba Chweu Municipality, which owns the land, and obtained funding through the [National Empowerment Fund \(NEF\)](#), which is a 26.1% shareholder in the project. The rest of the shares are privately held.

"The project is providing much-needed innovation in the majestic Panorama route," says Xolisile Ntanzu, a senior investment associate within the Strategic Projects Fund of the NEF. She adds that the NEF was attracted by the uniqueness of the product, the calibre of the entrepreneurs and the support from Thaba Chweu Municipality through its local economic development agency Thaleda.

"The business case is strong, with good profit generation potential backed by a strong indication of a booming market!" she Ntanzu.

"Our investment shows the level of confidence we have in the area. The Lowveld is a place of immense natural beauty that has always been a popular destination," affirms Pilane.

He says that while it thus made sense to invest in the region, his involvement and that of Sheard and Scott go beyond business and underpins the "special attachment we have for the province."

"We want to see the region thrive," he adds.

Already, 120 temporary jobs have been created, while it is expected that 44 people will eventually secure full-time employment. BEE opportunities have been structured into the procurement of services and where possible, procurement is done locally. "One of the requirements we insisted on is that every company we appoint as suppliers or contractors must have a minimum BEE level 4 rating," says Pilane. Locals are being trained to assist with the less technical construction jobs and are consequently gaining skills that they can use in future to earn an income.

Local benefit for traders

Mpumalanga has a rich cultural heritage, evident in many of the curio items on sale in all tourist spots, including at the Graskop Gorge. The developers' plan to incorporate the 14 veteran Graskop Gorge traders into the new venture, has seen

them refurbish the existing trade area, registering the group as a cooperative. “We will help them with skills and product diversification,” says Pilane.



Sindiswa Mathebula, Thaba Chweu Local Municipality's newly-appointed Director: Local Economic Development and Planning (seated, in yellow jacket) with traders Chrissie Mann, Grace Mashego, Christina Maila and Allen Mashigo. The traders are among 14 who will benefit from the lift development.

Trader Allen Mashigo says he is relieved that they will be better protected from the elements and safeguarded against criminals. Mainly, he says, they are excited that they will reach more people.

Sindiswa Mathebula, Thaba Chweu local municipality's director: local economic development and planning, says that registering the traders as a cooperative was the first step towards meeting the criteria for government funding, a process that the traders are being assisted with. Another project that will empower crafters from across South Africa is the establishment of a shop on site that will cut out the middleman and sell crafters' handiwork directly to the public.

[Art Aid Africa](#), which specialises in the facilitation and development of visual art in local communities, is collaborating in this project.

“It is going to be 100% South Africa,” says Art Aid's John Anthony Boerma. He and Art Aid partner, Jan Bhuda believe the shop will create a great platform for South Africa's top crafters. Art Aid holds workshops around the country for crafters and Boerma says they hope to identify a crafter in each area who can be guided to develop items specifically for the shop.

Addressing infrastructure challenges

Another tangible benefit of the lift project is the commitment by the municipality to address infrastructure challenges in and around Graskop. “A world-class facility needs proper supporting infrastructure. Already, the municipality has budgeted money to fix the town's water pumps and assessments are being done to existing infrastructure to determine priority areas,” says Pilane.

Mathebula says the local authority is glad that what was previously an unused piece of land is now going to be a catalyst for growth and development. She explains that in 2013, they did a hotel development feasibility study but found that the occupancy rate at hotels and lodges in the area was only 46%. “We realised we needed activity-based developments first, to increase the number of visitors.”

She confirms that infrastructure upgrades will be needed to support the development of this tourism node, most specifically the state of the access road.

Apart from the rates and taxes payable to the local council by the Graskop Gorge Lift Co, she says SMME opportunities

have already been created and the expected influx of people will have a great social impact on the area.

“I hope the lift development spurs the rejuvenation of other tourism sites, likes Pilgrim’s Rest,” she says.

Earlier in the year, Mpumalanga MEC of finance, economic development, and tourism, Eric Kholwane said his department would be focusing on tourism infrastructure and tourist attractions.

Pilane explains that once the loan is repaid to the NEF, the Graskop Gorge Lift Co would be given first right to buy back NEF’s shares. “Our thought is that we should create a community trust that is able to participate in the buyback. It is our thinking that this would create a long-term legacy for the project.”

The second phase of the project will include a 40-bed boutique hotel.

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