

Tourism is key to the 'Great' North

Besides the Big Five, Limpopo's rich cultural history is also a drawcard for visitors

Sharon van Wyk

As a tourist destination, Limpopo has long been regarded as one of South Africa's best-kept secrets. An unsung hero, particularly in the domestic and local Southern African market, the province is making its mark on the country's tourism map with steady increases in the number of visitors year on year.

Its attractions are many and varied — the province boasts three of the country's top national parks, a transfrontier conservation area and several leading private game and nature reserves, making it a top spot for game-viewing and bird-watching. But there's much more to the province than the Big Five, as Robert Tooley, the newly incumbent chief executive of Limpopo Tourism and Parks (LTP), is at pains to point out.

"It's doing the province a disservice to market it solely as a Big Five game-viewing destination," says Tooley. "Yes, we have the Big Five — lion, leopard, rhino, buffalo and elephant — and have three major national parks in Marakele, Mapungubwe and the Kruger National Park, more than half of which is in Limpopo," he says. "And we have some top private reserves such as Welgevonden in the Waterberg. But we also have some of the most fascinating cultural tourism destinations in the country and a rich heritage of ancient civilisations and tribal traditions going back thousands of years."

Tooley, who took over the reins of LTP in March this year, is a former member of the provincial legislature and Limpopo's standing committee on public accounts as well as the former head of department for the provincial treasury. He is of the opinion that the province's strength and true tourism potential lie in its colourful past.

"We are planning to focus our tourism marketing strategy much more on our indigenous cultures and traditions," says Tooley.

"Our cultural history is interwoven with some fascinating characters, like our warrior chiefs Makgoba and Sekhukhune, and our rain queen Modjadji."

Makgoba was the king of the Tlou who led his people in a revolt against the South African Republic in the late 1800s over paying taxes. He took refuge in the dense forests and mountain passes near Tzaneen that now bear his name — Magoebaskloof — and was eventually tracked down and killed.

Sekhukhune ruled the Marota, or BaPedi, people in the latter half of the 19th century and is famed for his military incursions against first the Boers and then the English, which led to his being jailed in Pretoria from December 1879 to August 1881.

It was Modjadji whom author Sir

Henry Rider Haggard immortalised in his epic novel *She*. Reigning queen Mmakobo Modjadji VI is a direct descendant of the rulers of Monomotapa, an ancient kingdom that ruled over the Karanga people in Zimbabwe during the 15th century, and is revered far and wide for her rain-making powers.

"These are wonderful stories from our province's vibrant history, which we want to share with visitors and which we hope will attract fresh interest in the cultures of the Venda, Shangaan and BaPedi people," says Tooley.

Top of Tooley's "to do" list is improving facilities and services at the 14 resorts that are the province's responsibility.

"Destinations like Rust de Winter are in desperate need of upgrading. This is just one of a handful of Limpopo provincial resorts that are based around dams, which offer great fishing, and we recognise that a large portion of our local market is families getting away for weekends to fish and relax by the water. As such, we are planning a major overhaul of these properties and to package them effectively to the local market," says Tooley.

He adds that golf is another huge drawcard for Limpopo.

'We ran some familiarisation trips for the American market last year, bringing United States agents and tour operators over to show them the highlights of what Limpopo can offer the overseas tourist. The majority were not interested in game reserves or wildlife, but the uptake for our golfing and leisure facilities was incredible," says Tooley.

"We want to expand on this and attract more people to our golf courses and leisure resorts, many of which are based around natural hot springs."

A prime concern for Tooley is making sure that tourism remains relevant for the people of Limpopo.

"Tourism is a wonderful tool for empowerment when it is developed in a sustainable manner," he says. "We need to use tourism and protected areas in Limpopo to help transform our society. And in this regard the issue of responsible tourism is paramount."

Limpopo is home to some leading lights of the responsible tourism movement, such as Leshiba Wilderness and Shiluvuvaru Lakeside Lodge being certified by Fair Trade in Tourism South Africa, which has adapted the principles of Fair Trade for the tourism industry and, in doing so, has helped to establish South Africa as one of the world's leading responsible tourism destinations.

To continue this transformation process we need to establish and maintain a close relationship with the tourism industry and its stakeholders in the province," says Tooley, adding that there are some serious



Leshiba Wilderness aims to offer ecologically sustainable and responsible tourism

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challenges ahead.

"In spite of these challenges, I feel that if the tourism industry and LTP work together in a constructive and collective manner we can overcome all obstacles. The industry needs more feet through the province, and we as LTP need to make Limpopo a much more 'sexy' proposition for both local and international tourists. One of the ways we can do this is to improve the airlift strategy for Limpopo, getting more airlines to fly into Polokwane, which has a full international licence."

Because of its location close to South African Development Com-

munity (SADC) neighbours Zimbabwe and Botswana, the Limpopo capital is ideally positioned to offer fresh business-tourism opportunities such as conference and meetings venues.

"We would like to pursue a SADC airlift strategy with other SADC cities like Harare, Lusaka and Gaborone because we feel we have huge potential here to grow the business, tourism and corporate markets from our immediate neighbours and other SADC states," says Tooley. "Then we really will become the 'Great' North."