

## Out and about

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**Kruger National Park**

Nelspruit is the best place to organise a guided or self-drive tour of the great park, as Kruger's southern Numbi and Malelane gates are both approximately 55 km away. Local operators, including Kruger Flexi Tours ([www.krugerandmore.co.za](http://www.krugerandmore.co.za)) and Nelspruit Backpackers ([www.nelback.co.za/tours](http://www.nelback.co.za/tours)) offer day trips to see the big five, experience the awesome Blyde River Canyon, pop across the border to Swaziland and more, with multi-day adventures also available. Despite the ravages of poaching, Kruger's vital statistics still remain impressive, with more than 1 600 lions, 13 000 elephants, 37 000 buffalo and 1 000 leopards among its 148 mammal species. Hit the bush early for the best sightings; Kruger's gates open at 5:30 am until the end of March, then from 6 am until October. (5:30 am Jan–Mar, 6 am Apr–Sep, 5:30 am Oct–Dec) 013 735 4000, [www.sanparks.org/parks/kruger](http://www.sanparks.org/parks/kruger)

# CAPITAL OF THE VELD

The gateway to the Kruger National Park and Mpumalanga's natural wonders, Nelspruit offers a great selection of sights, activities and restaurants, ensuring an interesting stay in this provincial capital surrounded by the lowveld bush

By JAMES BAINBRIDGE



## Eat and drink

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**The Greek Kouzina**

Bringing Aegean flavours to the lowveld, The Greek Kouzina is handily situated near the Cicada Restaurant (see opposite page), although its view of Madiba Drive (Route 40) is less promising. Ignoring the cars below, and allowing the atmospheric blue decor and taverna songs to transport you to an island in the sun, feast on flavoursome Greek classics such as spanakopita, kleftiko (roasted lamb shank), moussaka, shawarmas, stuffed peppers and seafood. The lengthy menu also features plenty of meze, making the 'Kitchen' great for a light lunch, hearty dinner (Monday to Saturday), or coffee and a snack. Sonpark Centre, Faurie St, 013 741 5371, [www.facebook.com/greekkouzinaNelspruit](http://www.facebook.com/greekkouzinaNelspruit)



## Out and about

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**Chimp Eden**

In the 1 000 ha Umhloti Nature Reserve, 16 km south of town, South Africa's only chimpanzee sanctuary is part of the Jane Goodall Institute, which continues the pioneering British primatologist's research and conservation work. On a misty lowveld morning, seeing these rescued chimpanzees in the semi-wild enclosures is akin to discovering them in the bush of Central Africa. Aiming to provide more than a zoo experience, the sanctuary offers a 45-minute guided tour, stopping at viewpoints to observe and explain the foraging groups' social interactions and behavioural patterns. These chimps were saved from the bush-meat trade or entertainment industry, but the endangered animals could become extinct in the wild within 20 years. Route 40, 079 777 1514, [www.chimpeden.com](http://www.chimpeden.com)

## Out and about

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**Lowveld National Botanical Garden**

In these 165 ha gardens, walk through a rainforest and cross the Crocodile River on a suspension bridge for views of a waterfall and interesting geological formations. The Crocodile and Nels rivers meet in the almost 50-year-old gardens, which protect flora such as clivias, baobabs and one of the largest collections of South African fig trees. They have established a cycad gene bank and introduced species including South African coastal vegetation, and plants from the disappearing tropical forests of West and Central Africa. There's a visitors' centre, restaurant and guided tours available (R300), covering the rainforest, Crocodile River gorge, Cascade Falls, large potholes, Africa's largest cycad collection and more than two-thirds of the country's tree species. Off Madiba Dr (Route 40), 013 752 5531, [www.sanbi.org.za](http://www.sanbi.org.za)



## Eat and drink

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**Cicada Restaurant**

If you ask most young people in Nelspruit where they hang out, they'll mention this 10-year-old institution, with its cool industrial-style interior and large terrace. Pumping music helps the craft beers go down while you take in a soccer game on the TV. The food is great too, ranging from steaks, chicken dishes and recommended burgers to wraps, sushi, and fish and chips. Regular discounts give even more reasons to hit this bar-restaurant at the Sonpark Centre, just off main drag Madiba Drive (Route 40): Come for discounted sushi on Monday, and cocktails on Wednesday and Saturday nights. Sonpark Centre, Faurie St, 071 374 7602, [www.facebook.com/cicadanelnspruit](http://www.facebook.com/cicadanelnspruit)



## Out and about

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**I'langa Mall**

A mall may not be the most countrified sight, but the shiny I'langa adds to Nelspruit's appealing mix of modern conveniences and African bush. The mall has a multi-screen Ster-Kinekor cinema ([www.sterkinekor.co.za](http://www.sterkinekor.co.za)), an ice rink, a games arcade and restaurants, including a branch of Nelspruit's favourite seafood chain, Mediterranean ([www.mediterraneanseafood.co.za](http://www.mediterraneanseafood.co.za)). With pebble mosaics and diner-style booths, the Mediterranean serves piscatorial feasts and daily deals from sushi to fish and chips. Samora Machel Dr (Route 104), 013 742 2293, [ilangamall.co.za](http://ilangamall.co.za)

**AA Quality Assured accommodation in and around Nelspruit**

AAQA

**Vineyard on the Hill Guest House**

(AA Quality Assured Highly Recommended status)

Owned by the friendly Marianna, this modern guest house perches on a koppie south of downtown, with the top of its extensive grounds nudging against the hilltop boulders. The seven comfortable rooms have a rustic feel and mod cons such as minibars. Two have self-catering facilities, and you'll find a pool, braai area and jungle gym outside. Breakfast is quite a spread, with freshly baked croissants and a machine producing frothy cappuccinos as Marianna and manager Hendrik chat to guests. The location is handy for visiting the Sonpark Centre (home of The Greek Kouzina and Cicada restaurants), I'langa Mall and Crossing Shopping Centre.

18 Sheppard Dr, reception@vineyardonthehill.co.za, 082 925 1182, [www.vineyardonthehill.co.za](http://www.vineyardonthehill.co.za)

**Selati 103 Guest Cottages**

(AA Quality Assured Highly Recommended status)

Just three kilometres south of Kruger National Park's Malelane gate, Selati 103 is a great option for mixing a visit to Nelspruit with a stay in the bush. The one-hectare subtropical garden property has nine units, including standard, luxury and family options, as well as a lapa with a pool table and a sweeping lawn with a pool and jungle gym. After a leisurely breakfast, you may feel tempted to stroll through the French windows to the lawn, where an inviting hammock hangs from a tree. Mhlatikop, off Route 570, Malelane, info@selati103.co.za, 013 790 0978, [www.selati103.co.za](http://www.selati103.co.za)

Find more AA Quality Assured accommodation at [www.aatravel.co.za](http://www.aatravel.co.za).