



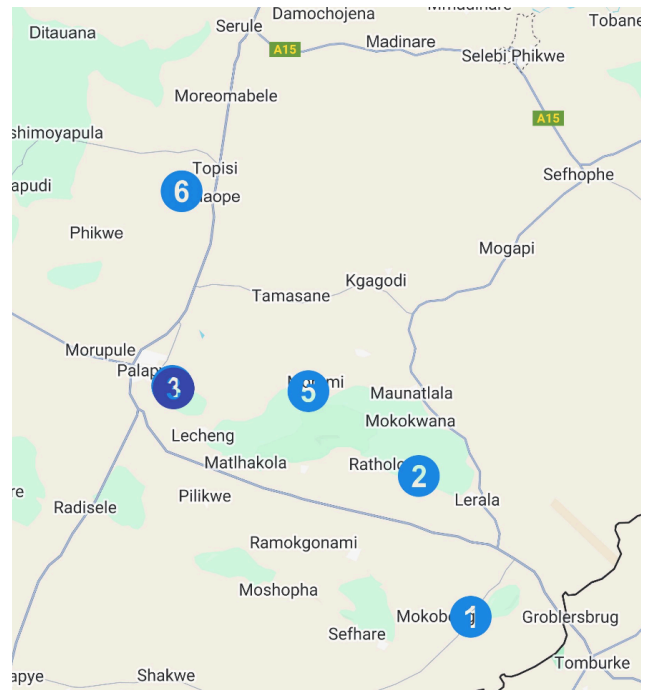
FAMILY FUN IN THE TSWAPONG HILLS OF BOTSWANA

A road trip with children can be fun, but long drives are often a test of endurance for young and old alike. The secret is to break the journey often, so the younger members of the family can blow off steam. If they can do this somewhere interesting or physically challenging so much the better. Queuing at a border post doesn't really count.

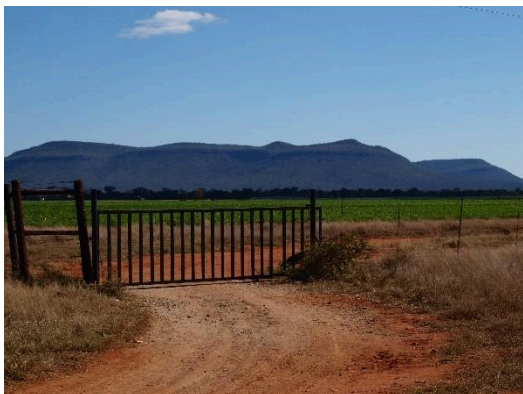
In our day jobs at Self Drive Tours Botswana we often field queries from families who want to drive from Johannesburg to Nata or Maun in a day. The Okavango Delta or the Chobe National Park beckon on the morrow. But Car Cricket and I Spy can keep the kids occupied for only so long.

The advice we give our customers is simple. The Central District of Botswana is 147,000 square km, packed with interesting places and things to do. Enough to occupy a family for the whole of the school holidays. So why not make the time to stop along the way?

In this article we share six of our own favorite stops around the Tswapong Hills of Botswana. These hills run pretty much all the way from Groblersbrug to Palapye. We know them well, because for us they are home.



1. Ngwapa Quarry



Passing across the bridge at Martin's Drift, Ngwapa Hill looms to the SW. Spare a thought for Assistant Commandant-General Frederick Grobler. The man remembered the name Groblersbrug.

In October 1899, in the opening days of the Boer War, the Waterberg Commando assembled on the Transvaal side of the Limpopo. Grobler intended to advance on Palapye, establishing redoubts along the

way at Ngwapa Hill, Sefhare Hill and Ratholo. Ngwapa Hill was the key natural fortress controlling the river crossing at Martin's Drift. But he had been beaten to the hill by a regiment of the Bamangwato tribe, placed there by the redoubtable Khama III.

Grobler couldn't bypass the hill and leave 700 hostile and well-armed men astride his supply line. And taking the hill would require a major effort. Dislodging the defenders by artillery fire failed. The Boer commando retreated across the river, never to return.

Ngwapa Hill is made of the same ancient sandstone as the rest of the Tswapong Hills. But at the southern end of the hill the even more ancient basement gneiss is exposed in a long disused quarry, along with the edge of a 2.2 billion year old granite intrusion. The strata are tilted vertically, and provide a good view of the Ngwapa fault. A good place for a geology lesson for the kids, who will inevitably fill your car with interesting rocks. Those traveling with a GPS will find the quarry at 22.9999 S, 027.7546 E.

The quarry road carries on into Ngwapa Village. Eccentric Scottish lion hunter, Roualeyn George Gordon-Cumming, was here in the 1840's. He is said to have carved his signature into the bark of a large baobab to prove it

Others have had the same idea



since, and there are plenty of baobabs with modern inscriptions of the

'Tebogo Loves Leutlwetse' genre. We've yet to find the Gordon-Cummings signature, but have had fun searching.



2. Mmakodu

This is one of the very earliest iron smelting sites in Southern Africa, perhaps dating to as early as 600 AD. The old-time miners were smelting their ore in the shade of some enormous baobabs. The baobabs are still there, surrounded by pieces of slag; fragments of tuyere pipe and discarded pieces of ore. The miners were attracted here by the banded ironstones on the hillside above, which have a very high iron content.

The prehistoric blacksmiths were trading their products over a wide area, and the Tswapong Hills were a major iron smelting and metalworking hub for 1000 years. To this day it is traditional for a Batswapong bride to receive an iron object as a wedding gift. Mmakodu is just one site amongst many.

Mmakodu is a lovely peaceful spot, a 10 minute walk from the edge of Majwaneng village. Teenagers will enjoy scrambling up the hill to the mining pits near the summit. The climb is rewarded with a great view over the village, with the Tshweneng Hills in the background. Toddlers will enjoy playing in the shade of the baobabs, and kids of all ages will be intrigued by the big pieces of slag and other remains.

The Botswana National Museum has erected interpretive signage in both English and Setswana, but the site is unmanned and entry is free. You will almost certainly have it all to yourself.

You'll find Mmakodu at 22.7464 S, 027.6414 E.



3. Porcupine Loop Self Guiding Nature Trail

So far as we know this is the only real nature trail in the whole of Botswana. It's an 8 km long loop trail, climbing into the Tswapong Hills, and through forest all the way. It is very well marked, so children can safely run ahead of the adults. If you walk briskly and don't stop the circuit takes about 2 ¼ hours.

The trail was built for outdoor education and has been used by local schools. There are 25 numbered stops. An interpretive booklet provides detailed information about each. The booklets are available

at cost from Segaiyai Farm, which is the starting point for the trail at 22.5833 S, 027.1640 E. They are also available from several shops in Palapye.

You don't need to be staying at Segaiyai Farm to walk the trail, and there is no entry fee. The trail is entirely on tribal land.

4. Segaiyai Farm

This farm is set up to showcase some of the nocturnal animals of the Tswapong Hills, and features tame duikers, porcupines, and other animals seldom seen during the day. There is a frog listening post at the farm dam, and demonstrations of a bat frequency transducer on suitable nights. A trail through the forest marked with reflective markers caters for anyone wanting to explore by night.



Viewing the nocturnal animals really requires an overnight stop, and the farm has a small campsite and a well equipped self catering cottage. But day visitors are also welcome. It's a good place for a braai after walking the Porcupine Loop Trail. A small games area offers beach volleyball, pétanque, morabaraba; and miele. The entry fee for a day visit is BWP50 per person, with children half price. There is more detail about the farm and the evening activities on offer at www.segaigaifarm.com.

5. Senwedi Trail at Goo Moremi

The trail up the Goo-Moremi Gorge is well known. People flock here to take the guided walk up the gorge. They come to see the vulture colonies on the high cliffs, and the series of attractive waterfalls. The area is a wildlife reserve, so hikers up the gorge may also encounter kudu, baboons, hyrax and other animals. The reserve and the accommodations are run by the local community.

But for families pressed for time there is another walking trail here – the 2.5 km Senwedi Trail through the foothills forest from the entrance gatehouse to the restaurant. It's another trail where the children are safe to run on ahead – the track is well marked and the animals most likely to be encountered along the way are baboons, zebra and kudu. Allow 45 minutes each way. There are shaded seats at the halfway waterhole.

The restaurant deck offers a panoramic view of the hills, a small infinity pool, and a good view of any vultures circling in the local updrafts.



The entrance fee for the reserve and the Senwedi Trail to the restaurant is just BWP55 for the car – no charge for the occupants, and no need to book ahead unless you want to take the guided walk up the gorge.

There is more information at www.goo-moremiresort.co.bw

Toutswemogala Hill

Heading north from Palapye along the A1 you pass the hamlet of Maope, population 18 at the 2022 census. Blink and you would miss it. But turning off the highway here takes you to Toutswemogala Hill. It's a flat-topped hill surrounded by cliffs, with just one practicable route to the summit plateau.

Hills like this were prime real estate for early Bantu pastoralists – the plateau was a ready made kraal easily protected from lions. As the capital of an early trading kingdom it has attracted much interest from archaeologists, and it is another site managed by the National Museum. The signboards concentrate on the prehistory, but this hill has it all: rich leaf fossil beds in the Permian age siltstones; a scenic arch; commanding views over the surrounding countryside; and raptors soaring in the updrafts produced by the cliffs.

The walking track from the road end takes about 1 hour return, but children of all ages will want to stay much longer. The site is not manned and entry is free. You will find Toutswemogala Hill at 22.2347 S, 027.1929 E



At Self Drive Tours Botswana we firmly believe that exploring interesting places along the way can make the journey just as much fun as the destination. We sell detailed guide notes to hundreds of the interesting but little known places in Botswana. If you want a set that matches your planned route feel free to get in contact.

I was going to write 8 stops into the story but decided that it was long enough already ! The ones below won't make the final version.....

The Hill Fort on the Male Swaneng Hill

Who knew that hills had a gender ? In Botswana some of them do, but a satisfactory explanation of how you can distinguish between male and female hills remains elusive.

The Male Tswaneng Hill is just outside Serowe. A steep cone with a flat top, it made an ideal fortress during the Difaqane Wars of the early 19th Century. The Tshweneng people fortified the summit as a place where they could defend themselves and their livestock when trouble threatened. The Tshweneng returned to their ancestral lands near the Limpopo River when peace returned. The fort was never needed and remains just as they left it.

Basalt columns form a natural rampart just below the summit plateau, and are densely populated with hyrax. The effort of scrambling the rest of the way to the summit plateau is rewarded by a superb view from the top. And of course the opportunity to explore the old fort. A great place for children to blow off steam, and just off the A14 highway. Allow an hour from the roadend at xxxx S, xxxx E.

Gemstones of the Motloutse Riverbed

Every child loves fossicking for brightly coloured stones in a riverbed. The Motloutse has more than its fair share. Although dry for much of the year, the Motloutse drains a large catchment with very diverse geology, and the annual flood brings pieces of garnet, jasper; moss agate; and geodes, along with pebbles of amphibolite; azurite and other minerals.

The bridge across the river at xxxx S, xxxx E on the outskirts of Bobonong provides easy access to the riverbed, and searching for brightly coloured pebbles on the sandy riverbed is fun for all ages. And the shady trees along the riverside are a great spot for a picnic.

The first diamonds in Botswana were discovered further upstream at Foley, where the A1 highway crosses the river. There will still be tiny diamonds amongst the river sands, but finding one with a gold pan would require a great deal of patience !

Mokoboxane Pan

The first village north of Orapa on the B300 highway is Mokoboxane. Before you reach it, the largely straight highway curves around the end of the Mokoboxane Pan. The pan is less than 1 km from the road, but invisible through the fringe of forest. This pan is unusual, in that it occupies the floor of a 10m deep depression in the surrounding countryside, presumably carved out by a long abandoned channel of the Boteti River.

If you park on the roadside at 21.2875 S, 025.0220 E there is a well defined track down to the pan itself. The glistening white surface is ideal for kicking a ball around; riding a bike or having a game of

tag. It's a beautiful spot, with forest almost reaching the bed of the pan, so parents can sit in the shade and watch the children tire themselves out.

Most cars speed on by without knowing it is there, and you will probably have the whole pan to yourself.

Journeys can be made just as rewarding as the eventual destinations. If you are travelling with small children this is an absolute necessity ! There is a wealth of information on other places to visit on our website: check out <https://selfdrivetoursbotswana.com/roadtrip-botswana-destinations/>.