

# FOSSIL HUNTING in South Africa

All kitted out in bush gear, a group of excited travellers heads out on an African safari with a difference, searching not for wildlife but for evidence of life millions of years ago. An intrigued **Bridget Hilton-Barber** joins in



ALL PHOTOS: BRIDGET HILTON-BARBER

"Imagine", says Paula, as she carefully digs around a piece of bone that juts out of the earth, "just imagine if I find that one fossil that is the missing piece in a great big human ancestor puzzle?"

Paula is from Ireland and is a long way from home at the bottom of an excavation pit in the Cradle of Humankind World Heritage Site in South Africa, where around 40 per cent of Africa's human ancestor fossils have been found.

She's one of six international tourists who are here on a paleo-safari organised by Ancient Odysseys, a US-based travel company that offers people the chance to get in touch with their inner *Indiana Jones*, as they put it, and participate in scientific digs and excavations around the world.

"We offer palaeontology, archaeology or palaeoanthropology digs for that once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to become a citizen scientist," says founder Marisa Rodriguez. "Our guests get to work alongside professional researchers and scientists; they are part of active scientific endeavours."

Ancient Odysseys offers trips like dinosaur fossil hunting in Australia and Montana in the USA and excavating for lost civilizations at Hadrian's Wall in England. It's a win-win for both the research projects and the participants, explains Marisa. The money paid by their guests helps the projects, which are often under-resourced, and the travellers enjoy the unique experience of working alongside experts in the field. On this particular trip, she says, a portion

**40%**  
of Africa's human ancestor fossils have been found here

of the funds will contribute to training African female scientists in the paleo field.

This is the company's first South African tour and despite the inevitable heat of an African summer's afternoon, the Kromdraai excavation site is buzzing with people and excitement.

"This is like getting into a time machine every day that goes back more than two million years," says Professor Jose Braga, director of archaeological excavations here, who is covered in dust and sporting a leather hat. He adjusts a laser theodolite, a machine that records the exact locations of recent finds, before climbing nimbly down into the excavation pit.

Braga, who has been working here since 1995, is also a professor in Toulouse, France, and "filling in gaps in the fossil records of both *Australopithecus* ancestors and their cousins *Paranthropus*". Alongside him are a team of scientists and assistants from the Evolutionary Studies Institute (ESI) at the University of the Witwatersrand, and the paleo-safari group.

Under the guidance of the research team, the

tourists participate in excavating, retrieving fossils, sampling and sieving sediments. It's hot and dirty work — manicures will be destroyed in seconds! — but there is a palpable spirit of enquiry, which rises to a fever pitch as Braga and a colleague unearth a chunk of rock containing something of possible significance.

The Ancient Odysseys group are themselves an impressive bunch — professors, engineers and academics — and are clearly having the time of their lives. There is a steady stream of high-powered chat as the scientists share their expertise and the visitors make comments and ask questions about how, as anthropologist Robert Ardrey said, "humanity evolved beneath the canopy of the African skies on the immense card table of the African savannah".

The thirteen-day paleo-safari involves many days of fieldwork, but the group also gets to enjoy a luxury weekend in the bush watching wildlife and enjoying delicious food and a hot air balloon ride.



A few days later we meet up again for a once-in-a-lifetime treat: a visit to the Fossil Primate and Hominid Vault at the Evolutionary Studies Institute, which houses the largest collection of fossil hominid remains in the world. With over 3500 individual specimens, the vault is a mecca for scientists from around the world.

We are shown the enthralling collection of dinosaur fossils by Professor of Comparative Palaeobiology, Jonah Choiniere

— Ancient Odysseys is planning an

ancestors of mammals therapsid fossil hunting expedition to the Karoo in 2025 — and then taken into the hominid fossil vault by Dr Bernhard Zipfel, the Curator of Fossil and Rock Collections, to meet some of the most significant fossils of the 20th and 21st centuries, such as the Taung Child skull (*Australopithecus africanus*), and the skeletal remains of *Homo naledi*, the single largest fossil hominid find yet made in Africa.

For a moment, there is a profound silence as we contemplate our complex emergence from a lineage of African apes.



**Above:** Dig this. The group of travellers at work in the Kromdraai excavation site

**Left:** Making history. Professor Jonah Choiniere explains the fossil examination process at the Evolutionary Studies Institute

**Opposite inset:** Head start. The Taung Child skull was among the first early human fossils found in Africa, in 1924

**Below:** Suspicious finds. Dr Braga and a colleague with a rock containing something of possible significance