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NEW STERKFORNTEIN CAVES FACILITY READY FOR EASTER HOLIDAYS

To bring the facilities at Cradle of Humankind World Heritage site in line with international tourism standards a major upgrading initiative is underway. The first phase involves an extensive revamp and the building of new facilities at the Sterkfontein Caves. These are nearing completion and some of the facilities will be ready in time for the Easter holidays.

Because of their importance in terms of fossil finds and their heritage site status, the Caves have interested millions of visitors from all over the world. As an added attraction, the new facilities will now house a scientific exhibit (due to open in August 2005), a 130-seater conference centre, a first-class family restaurant and a retail specialist shop.

The retail specialist shop will be run by Tigers Eye, part of the Tourvest Group. The conference facility and restaurant will be managed by Afritour Management Services, a joint venture between Leswikeng Minerals and Energy (Pty) Ltd and GBD Investments and Consultants (Pty) Ltd. It is one of the first Hospitality Management Companies which is 50% owned by a historically disadvantaged group.

Starting at the exhibition area (which will open later this year) visitors to the Caves can look forward to an informative guided tour that goes via the lime kilns, past the sundial and then underground into the depths of the caves.

Improved pathways and wooden walkways will take visitors over the excavation area where one of the world's most renowned hominid fossils was found, namely Mrs. Ples in 1947. Since excavations started hundreds of hominid fossils as well as stone tools have been discovered at Sterkfontein Caves. The excavation of Little Foot and other fossils is an ongoing process.

After proceeding over the walkways, the tour continues past the fossil preparation areas where scientists investigate the clues to our past and ends up at the restaurant to complete the morning's outing.

All in all, the Cradle of Humankind World Heritage Site consists of 40 different fossil sites, 13 of which have been excavated. These include Bolt's Farm, where the remains of three sabre-tooth cats have been found in a pit that trapped animals; Swartkrans, site of the earliest-known deliberate use of fire around 1.3-million years ago; Haasgat, where the fossils of early forest-dwelling monkeys, around 1.3-million years old, were found; and Gondolin, where 90 000 fossil specimens have been found since 1979.

An important element in the renovation process is an upgrading of the access within the Caves

themselves, due for completion in July. This will be done in close cooperation with the South African Heritage Resources Agency (SAHRA) to ensure that all work adheres as far as possible to the best international practices required by UNESCO for World Heritage Sites.

The second phase, the Cradle of Humankind Interpretation Centre Complex located eight kilometres away from the Sterkfontein Caves, is also progressing well. When completed it will include a large conference venue, restaurants, a visitor attraction with kiddies' cave, destination retail store (also run by Tigers Eye), a bar and viewing deck, a 5000-seater outdoor amphitheatre and an arts and crafts marketplace. There will be a choice of accommodation on offer ranging from a 120-bed learners' accommodation to a five-star, boutique hotel.

The innovative and iconic architecture and layout of the Interpretation Centre Complex lends itself to a spectacular venue for cultural and corporate events. The visitor attraction element will take visitors on a fun and informative journey of discovery using spectacular methods to tell the stories of the evolution of life and the origins of humankind in Southern Africa. "To date the total investment in the Sterkfontein upgrade is in the region of R12-million. This has been invested in the new visitor centre, the upgraded facilities and improving access for the public. The new hominid exhibition area should be completed by September this year, and once we have completed the project, the cost of the entire Sterkfontein Caves development will be to the tune of R17 million," says Anton Post, general manager of the Furneaux Stewart Gapp Consortium, who is in charge of the development. "At the end of March the existing tea room, shop and the old parking lot will be demolished and our landscape architects will go about restoring this area of the Sterkfontein Caves site to its natural and once pristine condition," he says.

Editor's Note:

The Cradle of Humankind development is the first public private partnership of its kind in South Africa. Furneaux Stewart Gapp Consortium, comprising eight companies, won the concession to design, build and operate the Interpretation Centre Complex and the Sterkfontein Caves over a ten year period. It is a project of the Gauteng Provincial Government to develop this World Heritage Site as a premier tourist destination. The Gauteng Department of Finance and Economic Affairs is responsible for the development and management of the World Heritage Site. The University of the Witwatersrand is the owner of the Sterkfontein Caves and is the major excavator of the Cradle of Humankind World Heritage Site and Standard Bank donated 100 hectares for the Interpretation Centre Complex.

Issued by:

Lesley-Ann van Niftrik

Image Communications,
011 880-1340

Mobile 083 378 2902

e-mail: imagecom@telkomsa.net

On behalf of:

Chrissi Drunk, brand manager, Furneaux Stewart Gapp Consortium,

011 466 2320

Mobile +27 82 346 2681