

Paradise at your fingertips

Sertorio has a quiet, calm way about him and his personality interchanges between being a chatty tour operator and a silent spectator to his surroundings. His patience with the visually impaired is apparent in the way he talks and interacts with them and his love and interest in the beautiful province that is Mpumalanga, shines through during our conversation.

He started his career in the tourism industry as a guide and here he acquired most of his knowledge on South African fauna and flora. But by his own confession, his knowledge of bird life is a bit lacking - but he is definitely working on it. Bird book firmly clutched under his arm during the interview, he spends many a free minute paging and reading through it.

Sertorio established Ntwanano Tours in 2005, but not being satisfied with being "just another tour operator", he decided

At the moment, the most important thing for Sertorio is getting the word out about the existence of the tours.

that he genuinely wanted the splendour of Mpumalanga and the Lowveld to be enjoyed by anyone and everyone. "Mpumalanga captures the world's vision of Africa, I didn't want this wonderland of fauna, flora and geological wonders to go unexperienced by physically and visually challenged South Africans. It belongs to them too." So, he launched his visionary project of tour opportunities for the blind. They comprise The Genesis of Life, The Braille Walk and The Flora Kingdom Tour.

In September last year, 25-year-old Nokuthula Dladla (who has been blind since birth) became the first visually impaired traveller to experience a guided tour organised by Ntwanano. The day turned out to be one that no one who was involved will ever forget.

Typical of Ntwanano's agenda,

Get it spoke to Sertorio Mshothola of Ntwanano Tours, who launched his groundbreaking project at the Tourism Indaba last year. This initiative creates travel for the blind and physically disabled and lets them experience Mpumalanga's splendour in a unique way. **By Marise le Roux**



Sertorio loves visiting the botanical garden. Here he is on a minitour with Candice Thevenau. Her vision is limited as she has an extremely rare eye condition that has left her retinas permanently damaged

Nokuthula's tour started at Berg-en-Dal in the Kruger National Park (KNP) - an area which supports one of the greatest floral diversities in the park and includes trees that occur nowhere else. The site has an

exclusive Rhino Trail which was established in 1988 and caters for the blind by means of Braille reading boards and guide ropes that run alongside it. Visually impaired visitors can also touch and smell various plants and

GET TOUCHING

Sertorio is keen to explain their medicinal properties to anyone who will listen.

His range of tours includes a visit to KwaMadwala game farm (to touch and interact with tame elephants) or the Lowveld National Botanical Garden and as part of the Botanical Bliss tour, Ntwanano Tours & Travel offers customised tours to an indigenous muti or medicinal garden at Skukuza, also in the southern parts of the park, as well as a variety of nurseries on the outskirts of the KNP.

At the moment, the most important thing for Sertorio is getting the word out about the existence of the tours and he hopes to organise groups with the help of the South African National Council for the Blind. Locally, his work has been recognised by the Lowveld Chamber of Business and Tourism which honoured him with its annual hospitality award (in the small category) last year.



Nokuthula Dladla at the Rhino Trail which caters for the blind with Braille information boards

In the meantime, his passion for tourism and his province, continues to drive him and makes his job so worthwhile. "I am positive that these initiatives will open new doors for tourism and visitors to the area."

Enquiries: Sertorio on 082-970-9188 or sertorio@ntwananotours.co.za or www.ntwananotours.co.za

The Braille Walk

Blind and visually impaired persons will have the opportunity for a "touch, feel and smell" experience. This includes the KNP's Braille trail as well as a visit to KwaMadwala elephant retreat where there will be opportunities to interact with these giants of the animal kingdom.

The Flora Kingdom Tour

This includes various destinations such as the world-renowned Lowveld Botanical Garden, the so-called cycad forest, a fever tree cluster, a herb farm, as well as other exotic plant-related destinations. The exquisite flora and rare plants of Mpumalanga and the indigenous uses thereof in medicine, food, drinks and cosmetics, will be experienced on this tour.



Accompanied by Sertorio to KwaMadwala Private Game Reserve, Nokuthula Dladla had the once-in-a-lifetime experience of touching a tame elephant



Touching is a huge part of Ntwanano Tours' experiences for the visually impaired. Here, Nokuthula Dladla had the opportunity to feel an animal skull

The Genesis of Life Tour

This tour includes visits to areas where traces of the first life on earth, the oldest gold on earth, as well as ancient fossils, can be seen (and touched) in the Makonjwa Mountains. The tour also includes visits to old and operational mines, gold panning and storytelling and live tribal performances around a campfire.

Useful tourism links for the visually impaired
www.ntwananotours.co.za
www.exploringkruger.co.za
www.visitmosselbay.co.za
www.linx.co.za
www.martinstoursandtravelers.co.za
www.parks-sa.co.za