

ENTER



THE DRAGON

Not for nothing is SA's most significant mountain range a hiker's paradise. But within the 300km of rugged peaks making up the Drakensberg (so named by the Voortrekkers for its resemblance to a dragon) lies a section so wild and remote it's known only to herdsmen, smugglers and cattle rustlers.

Scott Ramsay decides to tackle Mnweni – in the heart of winter →



FROM ABOVE  
The Thonyetana River, a tributary of the mighty Tugela. The rivers here are the source of most of SA's fresh water; a Basotho man on top of the 3,000m escarpment

PREVIOUS PAGE  
Mountain guide Caiphus Mthabela stands at the top of Mnweni Pass, looking west towards the Inner (3,096m) and Outer (3,099m) Pinnacles

The bottom of Mnweni Pass is a beautiful place to procrastinate. I stop hiking, dump my backpack and admire the wild mountains surrounding us. We're alone, my guide Caiphus Mthabela and I, in silence except for the bark of baboons bouncing off the basalt cliffs.

Behind us is a day and a half of trekking through the foothills of the Drakensberg. We'd passed small Zulu homesteads with their mielie fields, cattle, yapping dogs and clucking chickens; mothers and their children staring quizzically at two men walking into the mountains in midwinter. When the man-made paths disappeared we followed the trails of antelope, along narrowing gorges fringed with yellowwoods.

But now in front of us is the precipitous Mnweni Pass, zigzagging skywards for two kilometres. I'm dreading the prospect of lugging my supplies and camera gear to the top, yet it's my fault we're here.

Months previously I had planned to photograph this, one of the highest and coldest regions of South Africa, during winter. I'd hiked elsewhere in the Drakensberg several times before, but always along well-trodden tourist paths, and always in summer when the flowers and emerald peaks and big skies seemed to flirt with me. It wasn't enough. There was something in me that needed to plunge into the cold, the unknown and the remote in order to fully appreciate the mountains' extreme beauty.

So here I am, staring up at a formidable height. There's no escaping it: an icy breeze has drained the warmth of the day and the sun is dropping quickly. We can no longer delay the inevitable climb if we are to pitch our tents on the plateau before dusk. →

Photographs: Scott Ramsay

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A VIEW TO WAKE UP TO  
The landscape seen from  
the off-the-track site  
where the tents were  
pitched on the first night

FOLLOWING PAGE  
The top of Mweni Pass.  
As Jan Smuts said: 'The  
mountains of our land  
make a constant appeal to  
us to live the higher life of  
joy and freedom'

'Don't look at the top,' says Caiphus. 'It makes it worse. Just put one foot in front of the other.'

We set off, walking slowly, but strangely the higher we trudge the easier it becomes. The rock envelops us. We slip into a meditative state, as if on a pilgrimage.

The scenery, rich biodiversity and San rock paintings make the Drakensberg unique – one of only 29 World Heritage Sites out of 971 globally that are considered irreplaceable for both natural and cultural reasons. But this part of the mountains, Mweni, in the north-east, stands apart. During apartheid it was decreed a so-called 'Bantu' location, which resulted in its exclusion from the World Heritage Site – even to this day. Consequently, it is virtually unknown, with most visitors heading to popular tourist spots such as the Amphitheatre and Cathedral Peak in the north, Giant's Castle in the centre or Sani Pass in the south.

Yet Mweni is captivating, its sense of true wilderness unmatched. As we hike – thighs burning, lungs heaving – two towering spires

dominate the view, standing several hundred metres high, monuments to a landscape that intimidates and inspires in equal measure. These definitive geological features give the area its Zulu name (*mweni* means 'needles').

I'm not alone in my admiration. 'The very finest inland scenery of the whole of Southern Africa,' wrote landscape photographer John Hone. 'The wildest and most dramatic part,' said author David Bristow. 'Some of the grandest peaks in the whole of the Drakensberg,' stated mountaineer RO Pearse.

But Caiphus probably appreciates it best of all. 'It's my home,' he says.

The 39-year-old mountain guide was born here, and now lives at the top of a valley with his wife and five children, a dozen geese, five cows, four donkeys and two horses. As a boy he hunted antelope and rock hyraxes with his dogs, scrambling up and down the ravines. On leaving school, he moved to Johannesburg to look for work but couldn't find any. So he returned and joined a group of cattle rustlers and dagga smugglers. →

For decades, renegade Basothos have conspired to use the steep passes to transport packs of marijuana on mules down from Lesotho's high escarpment into KwaZulu-Natal, where it would be sent to Johannesburg to be sold. (Mnweni's exclusion from formal protection means it's still a trafficking hotspot, despite efforts by police and rangers.) After two years of earning a living this way, Caiphus was caught, convicted and spent four months behind bars. Once he got out, he put his unrivalled knowledge of the area to good use and started guiding hikers.

'In jail I used to dream about the mountains, and the freedom that I have here. Prison is very different to this,' he says, as we eventually reach the top of the pass.

We look westwards, the last of the sunlight flowing like molten gold around the stark silhouettes of spires and peaks. I take a few photos of Caiphus standing on a ridge, providing scale to the ancient landscape, before we hurriedly pitch our tents behind a knoll on the plateau, sheltered from the wind. Dinner is two-minute noodles with canned tuna, and chocolate for dessert. The stars blaze above us in a moonless sky.

'No snow tonight,' Caiphus says, 'but it's going to be very cold.'

It is. I shiver through the night in my sleeping bag, even though I'm wearing →



#### **NOT UP FOR ROUGHING IT?**

Here, some hikes that don't require sleeping out

##### **NORTHERN DRAKENSBERG**

The walk up and down the Thukela Gorge from Thendele Camp in Royal Natal National Park takes five hours and is easy enough for most. The Amphitheatre is always in view, and the rock pools are superb for swimming. In rainy season (summer) the Tugela Falls plunges 614m, the fourth highest in the world, but in winter there's hardly a trickle.

Call +27 (0)36 438 6411.

##### **CENTRAL DRAKENSBERG**

The walks to Battle Cave at Injisuthi and to Game Pass Shelter at Kamberg are two of the best for seeing San rock paintings. The former takes about four hours return; the latter about two hours (and it's one of the most important – and spectacular – rock art sites in Africa). Both are fenced off and you'll need a guide.

Call Injisuthi +27 (0)36 431 9000,  
Kamberg +27 (0)33 267 7251.

##### **SOUTH DRAKENSBERG**

The walk up the Polela River valley from Cobham is one of the easiest in the 'Berg, with plenty of places to picnic, skinny dip and snooze. Call +27 (0)33 702 0831.

Also see [kznwildlife.com](http://kznwildlife.com).

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CLOCKWISE FROM RIGHT  
 Young boys and their hunting dogs in the foothills of Mnweni. For 200 years the Amazizi and Amangwane clans of the Zulu people have lived at the base of uKhahlamba, the 'barrier of spears', as these mountains are known; Basotho herdsmen at the top



**THE DRAKENSBERG AT A GLANCE**

- ⬇

The mountain range was formed by the outpouring of lava 200 million years ago, and is now being eroded westwards – about 1cm per decade.
- ⬇

The Drakensberg is one of SA's most important protected areas because it supplies the semi-arid central region with a third of its fresh water. From the summits the waterways gather to form the two most voluminous rivers in the country, the Tugela and the Orange.
- ⬇

Its sandstone caves host the greatest concentration of rock art in the world, some dating back 7,000 years. More than 50,000 paintings have been found across 1,200 sites.
- ⬇

About 2,500 flowering plant species decorate the grass valleys where grey rhebok, eland and oribi antelope graze. Living in the many pristine streams is the country's largest population of Cape clawless otters.

every item of clothing I have. My head aches; my feet are numb. In the morning our tents – and everything else on the plateau, including the nearby stream – has frozen over with ice.

For the next two days we explore the edge of the 3,000m plateau, putting one foot in front of the other, again and again; seeing, hearing and sensing everything around us, immersed in each moment. We see no other people. Now and again a bearded or Cape vulture – those ultimate high-altitude creatures – swooshes low over our heads, wind whistling in its wings. We speak only a little, Caiphus in his broken English, I in my inadequate Zulu. Maybe it's shortness of breath from the high altitude, or maybe we've started to intuitively understand each other. Either way, small talk seems absurd in such an environment.

On our last day we walk slowly down Rokeries Pass off the escarpment and encounter the first people we've seen in three days: two heavily cloaked Basothos and their donkeys, ascending the steep trail. Dagga smugglers, gun runners? They smile at us, unfazed by our presence. Caiphus greets them and asks if I can take their photo. For a moment, as I look through the viewfinder, I feel like I've earned the right to be here. But we are lowlanders, and so we descend to the lives we know below.

Now and again, catching my breath, I stop to look back up the pass. The Basothos seem to be floating upwards until they disappear from sight. ■



**GET GOING**  
**DESTINATION: DRAKENSBERG**

Call Caiphus Mthabela on +27 (0)73 603 9107 or the Amangwane Centre on +27 (0)72 712 2401. The closest town to the Mnweni Pass is Bergville, which is 235km from Durban. British Airways flies to Durban from Jo'burg. Join the Executive Club and collect at least 1,000 Avios for a return flight. Visit [ba.com](http://ba.com).

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