

GOLDEN GATE HIGHLANDS NATIONAL PARK





RIDING THROUGH **GOLD**

The rolling grasslands and precipitous sandstone cliffs make Golden Gate Highlands National Park very different to any other protected area in the country. By **Scott Ramsay**.

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'Golden Gate may be relatively small but it's one of the most beautiful national parks.'

It was early winter when I visited Golden Gate Highlands National park. A full moon ascended in the mauve sky above Brandwag, the most famous and photogenic of the park's sandstone cliffs, which shine like burnished gold at sunset to give the park its name.

'Golden Gate is a great park to visit at any time of year,' former park manager Johan Taljaard told me. 'It may be relatively small – just more than 300 square kilometres – but it's one of the most beautiful national parks.'

After travelling for more than a year, documenting South Africa's most special protected areas, I agreed with Johan, who had worked in the park since 2001 before retiring at the end of 2012.

Just north of uKhahlamba-Drakensberg, it's also the nation's highest national park, lying between 1 892 and 2 829 metres above sea level. The park's scenery is easily enjoyed and visitors can drive either of the two loop roads, but if you have more time, head out on foot or on the back of a horse.

'We have about 80 horses,' Johan explained. 'They're the only effective mode of transport for rangers to patrol the inaccessible hills and valleys.'

While rangers use the horses to apprehend poachers, fix fences, and sometimes rescue lost hikers during winter snowstorms, guests are accompanied by experienced Basotho horsemen. 'It's possible to go almost anywhere on horseback,' Johan emphasised, including to the remote caves and shelters used by early man who spent their summers up in the highlands, hunting eland, before moving with the wildlife to the coastal regions during winter.

The caves also sheltered early Afrikaner families, who escaped from the English during the Anglo Boer War,

preferring the wilderness to the disease and filth of the English prisoner-of-war and concentration camps.

I wanted to see one of these fabled eyries for myself, so I met horse guides Jim Mkhondo, Eric Makubo and Lawrence Mononela at the stables. Cathedral Cave was our destination, about an hour's ride away.

Jim passed me the reins of Boesman, an experienced stallion who carried himself with the aplomb of a Boer steed. We saddled up and cantered alongside a herd of red hartebeest, silhouetted against a cobalt blue sky. They allowed us to get within a hundred metres, before sniffing our human smell and bolting off behind the grassy ridge.

As the valley narrowed, the gorge loomed ahead, and we had to dismount. After a 20-minute walk, we came to Cathedral Cave – about 50 metres wide and 250 metres long.

'It's not really a cave,' Jim explained, pointing to the impressive cavern, 'more of a massive sandstone overhang. An ancient river carved out the rock, and although the stream hardly flows now in winter, there's always a trickle of water.'

We rested in the shade and tinkles of water echoed like a xylophone as drops fell into a small pool below. In summer, Jim told me, a stream flows down into the amphitheatre from above, the fine mist throwing up psychedelic rainbows against the sunlight. Remote and hidden, I could imagine how Cathedral Cave made an ideal place to hide from the British troops, who burnt most of the grasslands below as part of the ruthless scorched-earth strategy.

Grasslands and water

These hills and valleys that saved the Afrikaner families are still of strategic >

OPENING SPREAD: Golden Gate Highlands National Park takes its name from the colour of the sandstone cliffs, but in winter everything turns to gold, even the grass. **ABOVE RIGHT:** Grasslands in South Africa harbour a high proportion of the country's endemic species, yet because of farming and urban sprawl, there are only a few untouched areas left. **RIGHT:** Horse riding allows visitors to see some remote parts without too much effort.





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importance and, according to ecologist Marna Herbst, the wetlands and marshes of the grasslands in the Maloti-Drakensberg region provide more than 30 per cent of the country's fresh water.

Golden Gate receives between 700 and 2000 millimetres of rain every year, and falls within one of the few places in the country where annual precipitation exceeds evaporation. 'It also forms part of the watershed between the Orange and Vaal rivers, so it has an important role to play in South Africa's economic and social well-being,' Marna said.

Golden Gate is the only national park conserving grassland, once one of the largest biomes in South Africa, covering a quarter of the country. This has been

reduced to small pockets by farming and urban sprawl.

Golden Gate is the largest of these pockets, and is a critical component of the country's conservation strategy. There are more than 50 species of grass in the park, including red *Themeda triandra*, a highly nutritious grass for grazing antelope and an indicator of a healthy ecosystem. Much of the grasses outside the park have been lost forever because of overgrazing and erosion.

Valuable habitat

South African grasslands, in general, contain more than just grass. On average, only one in six plant species is a grass. There are more than 3300 plant species across South Africa's grasslands, including lilies, orchids, aloes, red hot pokers and watsonias.

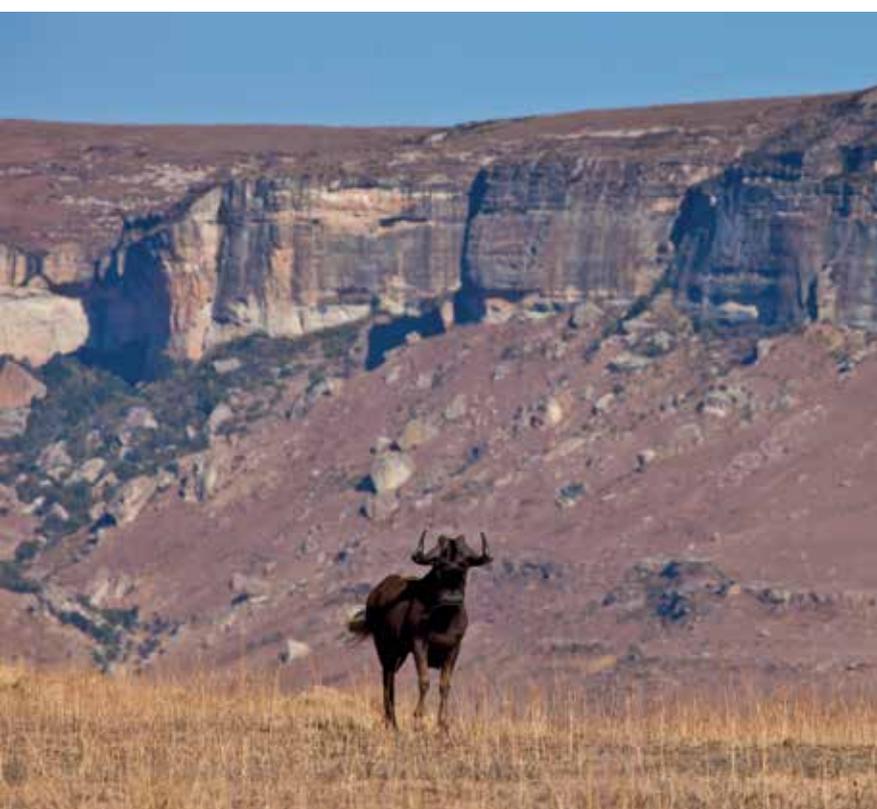
Almost half of the country's endemic mammals are found in this biome, while 10 globally threatened bird species can be seen flying overhead. The vulture restaurant on the Oribi Loop road is a good place to spot the endangered bearded vulture, of which there are less than 100 pairs in Southern Africa. The grass owl and bald ibis are two other red-listed species in the park.

The vulnerable sungazer lizard (*Cordylus giganteus*), a remarkable reptile that hibernates underground for four months during winter, is found only in the grasslands of South Africa. Black-backed jackal is the park's main predator, and while Marna believes leopard occurs, there's no dangerous wildlife such as lion or buffalo.

'That's what I love about this park,' she said, 'you can just go walking or riding into the grasslands without worrying and you have the whole place to yourself.' ■

📅 **Travel planner overleaf**

ABOVE: Brandwag is the iconic sandstone cliff that greets visitors to the park, and is easily observed from the Alpine-style hotel. **ABOVE RIGHT:** Cathedral Cave is an impressive sandstone formation that can be reached either on foot or on horseback. **RIGHT:** Black wildebeest, which were almost hunted to extinction, are endemic to Southern Africa's higher altitudes, and are often spotted in the park.



GOLDEN GATE'S FAMOUS EGGS

In 1977, Wits University palaeontologist James Kitching discovered seven fossilised eggs in the park. At the time, there was no technology to extricate the tiny embryonic bones, so the eggs lay in a slab of stone for years until they were sent to Canada in 2000.

Today, American palaeontologist Jonah Choiniere is studying the fossils of the park and surrounding region, and he put the Golden Gate eggs into context.

The small eggs – about 10 centimetres long – come from the herbivore *Massospondylus carinatus*. From a hatchling, it would have grown into an animal about four metres long, with a horizontal neck, thick tail, short forelimbs and long back legs. 'These are the oldest-known dinosaur embryos on Earth, dating back 200 million years,' said Choiniere.

Even more profoundly, the hatchlings don't have teeth. 'This suggests the babies required parental care of some kind for some time after emerging from the egg. If this interpretation is correct, it's the oldest known indication of parental care in the fossil record.'

In terms of palaeontology, Choiniere explained, Golden Gate is one of the world's most valuable protected areas and these eggs are among the most important fossil discoveries.

ABOVE: Former park manager Johan Taljaard holds a plaster cast of the famous dinosaur eggs that were discovered down the road from Glen Reenen Rest Camp.



PLAN YOUR TRIP

GETTING THERE

Golden Gate Highlands National Park in the eastern Free State lies on the public R712 road, about 20 kilometres east of Clarens. From Bloemfontein, take the N1 north and turn right at Winburg onto the N5 to Bethlehem. Then take the R712 to Clarens and head east to the park. From Johannesburg, head east on the N3 to Durban, but turn west at Warden onto the R714 to Bethlehem. The park gates remain open all day and night.

STAY HERE

BASOTHO CULTURAL VILLAGE REST CAMP in the east of the park has 24 rondavels. From R65 for two people.

GLEN REENEN REST CAMP has a campsite (from R165 a site) and several rondavels and cottages (from R690 for two people), all fully equipped for self-catering. Tel 058-255-0909

GOLDEN GATE HOTEL has luxury rooms (from R995 for two people) and conference facilities, while the adjacent 34 chalets are better suited to families and tourists (from R910 for two people). The upgraded hotel is surprisingly congruent with the mountainous location and looks out over Brandwag, the most famous of the sandstone cliffs. Tel 058-255-1000.

NOORDT BRABANT GUEST HOUSE. To the west of the hotel an old farmhouse has been renovated and sleeps six people, with kitchen, lounge, dining room and a beautiful sunny stoep. Costs R1 190 for four people.



HIGHLANDS MOUNTAIN RETREAT has the best views of the lot. On a mountain ridge at the top of a steep road, eight fully equipped, self-catering log cabins look east over the park towards the basalt peaks of the Drakensberg. From R1 110 for two people.

DO THIS

Golden Gate's quintessential activity is horse riding. A one-hour guided ride is R100 a person or R155 for two hours. Full-moon rides are offered on request. The two-day Rhebok Hiking Trail costs R135 a person. It traverses the park's wilder areas and accommodation is in a basic hut.

GETTING AROUND

The park has a limited network of roads, but two tarred loops ensure that visitors get to see some of it as well as a variety of animals. The 4,2-kilometre Oribi Loop in the northwest looks north and east towards the Drakensberg. The 6,7-kilometre Blesbok Loop on the southern side of the R712 gives great views of the high plateau into Lesotho, with good chances to see herds of eland, grey rhebok and red hartebeest and, if you're lucky, the tiny oribi.

USEFUL CONTACTS

Email goldengate@sanparks.org,
www.sanparks.org.

OPPOSITE PAGE: Hiking is one of the best ways to experience the park, because the road network is limited.

ABOVE LEFT: The Basotho Cultural Village offers comfortable self-catering accommodation in the east of the park. **ABOVE RIGHT:** The view of Brandwag from the chalets at the Golden Gate Hotel.



The 2013/14 Year in the Wild: Photojournalist Scott Ramsay is about to embark on another journey to more of South Africa's reserves and national parks, including the transfrontier parks on the country's borders. Year in the Wild is sponsored by Ford, Goodyear, Cape Union Mart, K-Way, Total, Fronrunner, Globecom, Vodacom, National Luna, EeziAwn and Outdoor Photo. Follow the new adventures at www.yearinthewild.com, www.facebook.com/yearinthewild and blog.getaway.co.za.