

# The best of the 'Berg

The Drakensberg mountains are SA's highest and longest range, stretching about 250km in a crescent along the escarpment border with Lesotho. Formed by volcanic eruptions about 180 million years ago, the basalt cliffs are slowly being eroded away by rivers and tumbling streams

Text and photography: Scott Ramsay

**The imposing Drakensberg** mountain range supplies about 30% of SA's fresh water and for this reason it is one of the most important natural protected areas in the country.

Most of the mountains form part of uKhahlamba-Drakensberg World Heritage Site, famous for their beauty, diversity of

flora and the largest and most concentrated collection of rock art in Africa.

Ezemvelo KZN Wildlife, the KwaZulu-Natal conservation authority, protects much of the area and also offers some of the best places to stay.

Over the centuries, rivers and streams have cut deep, long valleys across the length of

the mountain chain. To get from one valley to another, you may have to drive 50km east and then 50km back west again to reach a destination that is no more than 10km north or south as the crow flies.

And if you're hiking, well, be prepared for much sweat and possibly a few tears. The hiking passes are some of the steepest I've experienced. But that's why the "Barrier of Spears" (translation of the Zulu name) is one of my favourite protected areas – because the mountains retain so much of their wilderness atmosphere.

These are my recommendations for things to do and places to stay:

## Thendele Rest Camp (about 30km west of Bergville)

The chalets high up on a mountainside at Thendele in Royal Natal National Park have one of the finest views in SA – of the 4km-wide Amphitheatre of basalt cliffs, soaring to more than 3000m above sea level. This is the northern-most part of the Drakensberg, and if you visit only one place in the mountains, this should be it.

Although all the rooms have great views, the chalets with the best locations are numbers 15 to 19. There is no restaurant, so take your own food and firewood. There is a small shop, but not



Above: The Sentinel Peak hiking trail takes a full day, but this spectacular view of the Amphitheatre is just an hour's walk from the parking lot at Witsieshoek. Right: If you have a bakkie or 4x4, then you must drive up the short Mike's Pass near Cathedral Peak, because the views are some of the best in the Drakensberg.





**Recommended reading**

There are three books that everyone who loves mountains should read: *Barrier of Spears* by RO Pearse, *Encounters with the Dragon* by John Hone (both by Art Publishers) and *Best Walks of the Drakensberg* by David Bristow (Struik Publishers). The first two contain the best photography and natural history information, while the last is indispensable for hiking the mountains.

much in the way of fresh provisions.

The nearby campsite of Mahai is pretty, but campers and caravanners don't have views of the Amphitheatre. Avoid campsites 1 to 4 and 40 to 43, as these are alongside the entrance road to Mahai.

**Walk the Thukela Gorge (at Royal Natal National Park)**

The 14km walk up the Thukela Gorge is one of the most scenic in SA. (It used to be spelt Tugela, but that's the English corruption of the isiZulu spelling.)

Starting from Thendele, you can easily spend a whole day walking the gorge, and it's not overly strenuous.

In winter the Thukela River is a trickle of a stream compared to the raging torrent in summer, when the thunderstorms arrive. Then it features one of the highest waterfalls

in the world, plummeting several hundred metres over the cliffs.

The walk isn't too strenuous if you go slowly, and it provides plenty of opportunities for taking pictures. Once you're at the top of the valley, the gorge narrows and you can climb ladders to get even higher, where the

path eventually fizzles out.

Then you are confronted by the Amphitheatre in all its majesty, and a "booming silence", as David Bristow writes in his book, *Best Walks of the Drakensberg*.

Being alone in these mountains is humbling and enthralling.



Above, clockwise: Baboons are common in the 'Berg. In winter, their fur thickens noticeably to protect them from the cold; A male reedbuck on the slopes of Kamberg. Their distinctive warning whistles echo through the valleys; An immature bearded vulture soaring near Giant's Castle; A Cape Griffon vulture comes to inspect the bones at the nearby vulture hide.

**Hike the Sentinel Trail (Royal Natal National Park)**

Although this trail starts just a few kilometres from Thendele, to get to the start you have to drive for an hour-and-a-half round the back

**Sani Pass**

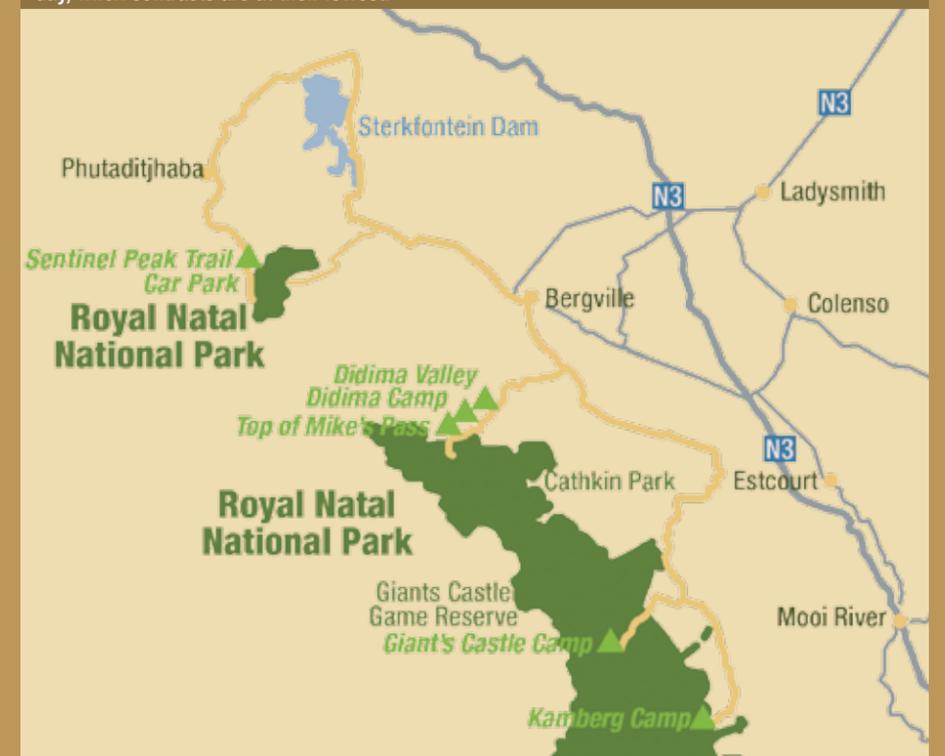
No trip to the southern Drakensberg is complete without a drive up the famed Sani Pass – an 8km gravel road that climbs 1000m up to 2900m above sea level. It's the only road link between KwaZulu-Natal and Lesotho.

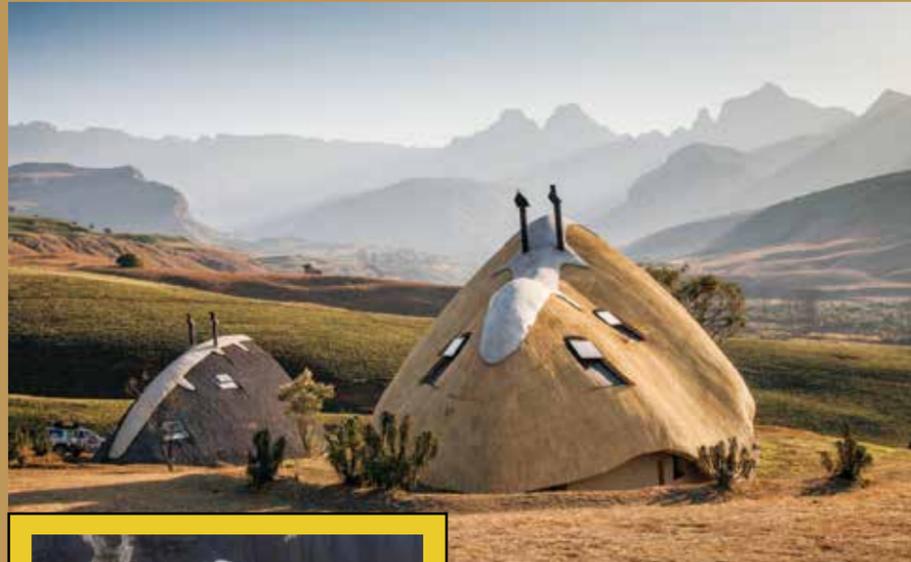
For years there has been talk of tarring the pass, making it accessible to all vehicles, not just 4x4s. But fortunately, as often happens in Africa, there have been delays and for now the pass remains gloriously untarred.

You might see taxi buses from Lesotho careering down the zigzagging road, making a mockery of the "4x4-only" rule, but still, it's best to drive a 4x4, especially in wet and snowy weather.

At the top of Sani Pass is a Lesotho border post, so take your passport. The old hotel at the top has been upgraded under new ownership, so spend a night there and enjoy a beer at the "highest pub in Africa". Check out [www.sanimountain.co.za](http://www.sanimountain.co.za).

Top, left: The Thukela Gorge hiking trail at Thendele is one of the country's most rewarding trails, and isn't overly strenuous. Above: The so-called "tunnel" at the top of the Thukela Gorge is a favourite among landscape photographers. The best light for photographers here is on a cloudy day, when contrasts are at their lowest.





The chalets at Didima Camp have panoramic views of Cathedral Peak and the Inner and Outer Horn.



The streams and rivers that tumble down the basalt mountains supply 30% of the country's fresh water, making the Drakensberg one of the most important protected areas in SA.



**Gear Review - K-Way Venture 70 Backpack**

While hiking in the Drakensberg, I used several K-Way items of gear, but my K-Way Venture 70 backpack was critical to comfortable hiking. I tested it while hiking for five days in the challenging Mnweni area. It's very light but has a strong frame, with good padding on both the hip and shoulder straps, which are adjustable to suit your build and height.

There are two voluminous zip-up compartments on either side of the backpack, as well as two smaller ones on the top. It's waterproof, with its in-built raincover, which makes it ideal for hiking in summer in the 'Berg.

There are four buckles on the outside to strap on things like sleeping bags and tents. The only thing I missed was a zip-up pocket inside the bag for small valuables.

It costs just over R1000 and is available from Cape Union Mart stores, or online at [www.capeunionmart.co.za](http://www.capeunionmart.co.za).

of the Amphitheatre, through the town of Phuthaditjhaba in the Free State. The drive itself is very scenic, so don't rush it.

The Sentinel Trail gives access to the top of the Amphitheatre, looking down onto the valleys below, and so the views are predictably brilliant.

Be sure to leave on the trail early because it involves climbing up some chain ladders, and you'll be stopping often to admire the scenery. It's also quite steep on the way up.

When I did the trail, I left too late, and so didn't make it up the chain ladders.

If you're doing it for the first time, it's not a bad idea to hire a guide. My preferred guide in the Drakensberg is Caiphus Mthabela. Contact him on 073-603-9107.

**Didima Camp (Cathedral Peak, about 50km west of Winterton)**

Like Thendele, Didima Camp has spectacular views, but they are very different to the "horizontal" Amphitheatre. Instead, visitors gaze onto the vertiginous Cathedral Peak and the Inner and Outer Horn, each of them towering over 3000m.

This is my favourite view in the Drakensberg, because it typifies the rugged terrain.

The popular Cathedral Peak Hotel is just up the road, but Didima has a very different style and feel. Although it's not as well frequented by tourists, I prefer the African style of accommodation, and the views, which are more panoramic than those at the hotel.

The chalets with the best views are 24 to 34, and although there is a restaurant, the service and food is not commensurate with the price. So rather cook for yourself. Most of the chalets have small kitchens.

**Hike (or fly!) to the top of Cathedral Peak**

Whereas the hike up the Thukela gorge is moderately strenuous, the day hike to the top of Cathedral Peak is serious stuff, only for the fit and strong. It's a tough walk, starting out from the Cathedral Peak Hotel in the valley below.

From an elevation of about 1450m above sea level, it's a solid, steep six hours to the top of the 3004m peak. The last few hundred metres involves plenty of rock scrambling, so if that's not to your liking, stop at the last level patch and enjoy a leisurely picnic lunch instead.

If you're not up to hiking, you can fly around the peak with Westline Aviation (tel 036-488-2055). The company has a helicopter based at the hotel. Prices start at about R800 per person for a 20-minute flight.

**Didima Valley and the Rock Art Centre (Cathedral Peak)**

The thousands of rock paintings in the Didima Valley near Cathedral Peak are among the most impressive you could find anywhere. To visit them, you will need an accredited guide, so ask at Didima Camp's reception. In some cases you must also obtain a permit from Amafa, the heritage authority.

Some of the rock art dates back 8000 years. To me, the paintings are more impressive than any Renaissance masterwork in a European gallery.

It was here, in 1926, that a farmer found an intact Bushman hunting kit, including several arrows with poison encrusted on their tips.

Of course, the mountain Bushmen are no longer here. These original inhabitants of SA were

either absorbed into the local Zulu tribes, hunted down or pushed out by colonial powers.

You should visit the Didima Rock Art Centre, just down the road from the camp. It gives an excellent introduction to Bushman art in the Drakensberg.

**Drive Mike's Pass (Cathedral Peak)**

For those who are allergic to hiking boots (we all are, sometimes!), the hour's drive up Mike's Pass is a great way to see some of the best scenery in the northern Drakensberg.

Anyone with a 4x4 or vehicle with diff-lock can drive it, and you can get a permit from the Didima camp reception. At the top are panoramic views of Cathkin Peak, Cathedral Peak and the Inner and Outer Horns, joined together by the phalanx of basalt cliffs. It really is a special sight.

The pass was built in 1938 by a team led by research officer Mike de Villiers, who was appointed by the government to figure out whether exotic trees which had been planted in the mountains were causing rivers to run dry.

**Giant's Castle and the vulture hide (about 50km west of Mooi River)**

The camp at Giant's Castle is my favourite in the Drakensberg. The views are as good as anywhere, the restaurant and bar are the best in any Ezemvelo camp in the mountains, and the staff service is exemplary and friendly.

Not all the chalets have good views, so be sure to ask for chalets 2 to 8, or 39 to 44. These chalets have unimpeded views of Giant's Castle, which is an imposing 3314m above sea level.

The vulture hide near the Giant's Castle camp is one of the best wildlife viewing spots in the country, because it gives you a great chance to see the Bearded Vulture and the Cape Griffon Vulture.

The Bearded Vulture is rare in southern Africa. Just 300 to 350 birds remain in the mountainous areas of Lesotho and the Drakensberg. They are listed as endangered, and although they once ranged far across the mountains of Africa, loss of habitat and poisoning have severely restricted their range and numbers.

The hide near Giant's Castle was started as a way to supplement the vultures' diet with extra bones, and to give tourists the chance

Contact Ezemvelo KZN Wildlife and Amafa To book at any of the camps, call 033-845-1000 or go to [www.kznwildlife.com](http://www.kznwildlife.com). If you want to visit rock art sites that are not usually open to the public, contact Celeste Rossouw at Amafa for a permit and get the name of an accredited guide on [celester@amafapmb.co.za](mailto:celester@amafapmb.co.za).



The Cathedral Peak trail takes a full day, and is tough. But as always when hiking, the harder the walk, the better the views! This is Orange Peel Gap, halfway up the trail.

to see them up close.

Such is the demand for places in the hide that it is often booked up six months in advance (at a price of R620 for four people), especially in winter, when the Bearded Vultures are breeding and need extra food for their young.

The hide is also an excellent place to see the vulnerable Cape Griffon Vulture.

Both species are in danger of extinction, and just before I visited Giant's Castle, I received a sad and disturbing e-mail from the Endangered Wildlife Trust, recording the poisoning of 48 Cape Vultures in the southern Drakensberg. It was one of the worst poisoning incidents in a decade.

**Kamberg and Game Pass Shelter (about 45km west of Nottingham Road)**

Although Kamberg camp lies in the Drakensberg foothills, and the views are comparatively mundane compared with other areas of the 'Berg, it's the smallest and most quaint of all the Ezemvelo camps, with just five chalets. You really do feel you have the place to yourself.

But even day visitors should try walking the 90-minute trail to Game Pass Shelter, the best of all Drakensberg rock art sites accessible to the public. You will be guided by a local expert, and the trail is not overly strenuous, although it does involve a fair bit of steep hiking near the shelter.

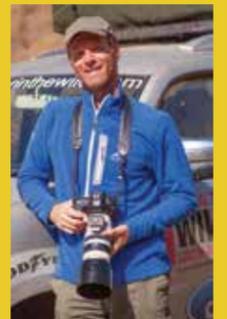
My guide was Sibusiso Zuma, and he explained that the paintings at Game Pass Shelter were particularly important because they confirmed for researchers that Bushman rock art is highly symbolic and even spiritual in nature.

One panel shows a therianthrope (half-animal/half human figure) holding the tail of an eland. Researchers, notably David Lewis-Williams, deduced that this portrayed

how the original inhabitants of southern Africa believed they could harness the power of certain animals – especially the eland – to heal the sick, or predict where rain was going to fall, or where the wild animals were. **LW**

**Wild 2013-14**

Following on from his first Year in the Wild, photojournalist Scott Ramsay is travelling from July 2013 to October 2014 to some of the same parks (but in different seasons) as well as to many new parks and nature reserves in SA and the transfrontier parks adjoining Namibia, Botswana, Zimbabwe and Mozambique.



Again, his goal is to create awareness about protected areas, and to inspire others to visit them. To follow Scott's progress, go to [www.yearinthewild.com](http://www.yearinthewild.com).

Year in the Wild's partners include Cape Union Mart, Ford Everest, Goodyear and K-Way, with support from EeziAwn, Fronrunner, Globecomm, National Luna, Outdoor Photo, Safari Centre Cape Town, Tracks 4 Africa, and Vodacom.

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