



Drakensberg Hiking

*Text Fiona McIntosh
Photos courtesy John Hone
from his book Encounters
with the Dragon*

I'll admit to being a peak bagger, my favourite type Drakensberg outing usually taking me up one of the steep, unrelenting passes to the top of the escarpment. I love the freedom that peering over the edge of the high basalt plateau brings – looking down on the soaring lammergeier (bearded vulture) and at the green ridges and valleys below. I've scaled the terrifying chain ladders that lead up the sheer grey cliffs near the Sentinel to the mighty fortress of Mont aux Sources, and looked out across the majestic, symmetrical Amphitheatre - one of the best views in the world – scrambled up Cathedral and Rhino Peaks and slogged up to the summit of the Thabana Ntlenyana, at 3 482m the highest peak in the range. So today's outing to the Marching Men of iKanti, a little-visited

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rock painting in the Southern 'Berg near the Sani Pass should have been a walk in the park.

In the summer heat it wasn't, and I was struggling to keep up with my guide, Mduduzi, when he suddenly veered off to a surprisingly insignificant-looking boulder. Sheltered underneath it was a freeze of stunning paintings, the Marching Men of iKanti - several rows of ochre figures striding out of the picture. Mdu explained "the uKhahlamba-Drakensberg Park was awarded UNESCO World Heritage Status in 2000 as much for its cultural significance as for its natural beauty. There are over 150 exceptional rock art sites in the Southern 'Berg alone representing the earliest samples of rock art where colour and dimension were introduced. Unfortunately, in many of the more popular sites the paintings have



Hiking in 'The Berg'

not survived well – that’s why we’re lucky to have this little secret here.” He went on to explain a little of the history of the San people that used to inhabit the region, the significance of the paintings and the techniques used in their art, before we headed back to the car. It had been a magnificent hike.

And an unplanned one. When I arrived in the area four days ago I’d had no intention of dipping into rock art. My original plan was to hike the Giant’s Cup trail from the bottom of Sani Pass through to Bushman’s Nek. But although this four-day trail is well marked, follows the more gentle terrain of the lower ‘Berg and has excellent, if basic, hikers’ huts en route it’s still a tough undertaking and I was struggling to get a group together. My friends’ concerns

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were well-founded. With its rugged terrain, unpredictable weather and the inevitable heavy packs required for a self-sufficient trail, hiking in the Drakensberg is definitely not for sissies. Then a friend put me in touch with Paul Colvin of SA Adventure Trails. Paul offers a comfortable alternative the standard hike - his Giants Cup Hikeathon - which follows the main trail but in a somewhat different style. Instead of staying in the huts and self-catering, you’re met at the end of the trail each day and ferried a short distance to a lodge or private home for the night where a shower, cold beer, cooked meal and soft bed await. It’s perfect for less hardy hikers, particularly since your overnight bags are ferried around from place to place, leaving you to hike with only a daypack. Suddenly the interest perked up and the trip was on.

Matthew Wiggell, an accredited and passionate rock art guide, joined us for dinner on the first night and offered to guide us should we wish. The first and last days of the Hikeathon are short and straightforward so we opted to walk unguided, but Matthew would be escorting us on the long, second day. In the course of the evening he told us about the ‘Berg’s outstanding rock art and mentioned the Marching Men of iKanti. My interest was piqued.

For the next three days we hiked the trail, admiring the eroded sandstone hills, the dramatic views of the high ‘Berg, sightings of eland, and cooling off in crystal clear pools. At the end of the trail we were ferried back to our cars at Sani Pass and I asked Matthew to show me the Marching Men. He passed me on to Mdu and I was not disappointed. Peak bagging? That’s for the macho. Give me leisurely trails and rock art any day.

Bookings: SA Adventure Trails, +27 (0) 33 343 1217, reservations@trails.co.za, – www.trails.co.za/kzn/hikeathon.html. For general permits to hike in the ‘Berg, guided visits to other rock art sites and accommodation contact Ezimvelo KZN Wildlife, +27 (0) 33 845 1000, www.kznwildlife.com. Accredited rock art guide: Mathew Wiggell, +27 (0) 82 595 8444

