



YEAR IN THE WILD
With Scott Ramsay

Barrier of Spears

As part of his year-long expedition covering 31 South African nature reserves, Scott explored the uKhahlamba-Drakensberg Park. Though within easy reach of many cities, it is one of the country's wildest and most rugged protected areas

The mountains of uKhahlamba-Drakensberg are one of the country's true wilderness areas and cover some of southern Africa's most inaccessible terrain.

"uKhahlamba" means "Barrier of Spears" in Zulu, while "Drakensberg" is the Afrikaans name for the "Dragon Mountains".

Although the foothills are dotted with rural villages, country hotels and traditional Zulu homesteads, the higher altitudes are wonderfully wild and accessible only to the most determined and prepared of hikers.

The average altitude of the range's basalt peaks is more than 3000m. There are also innumerable gorges, valleys, high plateaus,

sandstone caves and towering cliffs.

The protected area is about 160km long and 28km wide, and runs in a crescent shape along the edge of the country's eastern escarpment. It includes the highest point in SA, the peak of Injisuthi at 3408m.

The reserve borders landlocked Lesotho, and even today the boundaries are disputed. There are no fences – the rugged terrain makes this impossible.

For centuries, stock thieves have used the mountain passes as an illegal passage through which stolen cattle and sheep are herded between the Lesotho and South African communities. The same routes are

used to smuggle dagga. This continues today.

"There are at least 35 passes that the smugglers use," said park co-ordinator Oscar Mthimkhulu, "and the only routes are through the park. Visitors do feel threatened sometimes, but our rangers are trained and armed, and we've done a lot to reduce the risk."



The view of the famous amphitheatre in Royal Natal National Park is easily seen from the beautiful Thendele rest camp, but if you are prepared to hike up into the mountains, the views are even better.

Inset: uKhahlamba-Drakensberg has one of the biggest and most concentrated collections of rock paintings in the world. There are more than 40 000 individual paintings across 1000 caves and shelters.

During the 1800s, British colonial forces were deployed for several months in the Drakensberg in a futile and somewhat laughable attempt to dynamite the passes in a bid to stop the stock thieves. Today, Oscar sits with the same problem. The latest suggestion is that the passes should be cabled and chained, so that people may move through them, but not livestock.

Oscar and his team of roughly 500 staff, including 100 rangers, certainly have their work cut out. There are more than 1500km of hiking trails through the mountains, and all of them need to be patrolled and maintained.

Then there are the camps, often spectacularly situated, which require lots of hard work to maintain and service. "In these mountains, you have to sweat to get things done. It's the nature of the place – whether you're hiking, patrolling or simply servicing a camp, you are dealing with one of the wildest and most inaccessible parts of the country." But for Oscar – and countless visitors – all the hard work is certainly worth it. "It's a special place, absolutely magnificent. It's an untamed wild area which I think is the most beautiful in the country."

The mountains of uKhahlamba Drakensberg Park are one of only 28 World Heritage Sites that are of both "cultural" and "natural" global significance, and the only one of SA's eight sites that meets both these criteria.

For a naturalist, the region is full of interest. Besides the awe-inspiring views, the peaks, valleys, marshlands and hills are brimming with life. There are more than 2500 flowering plant species in the Drakensberg Alpine Centre, of which 334 are found nowhere else, while 594 of these are near-endemic. One of the country's rarest plants, the cloud protea (*Protea nubigena*) is found only at a single site at the Royal Natal National Park, in the north.

The area is also one of southern Africa's eight major centres of diversity of amphibians and reptiles, while 311 bird species have been recorded, including the vulnerable Cape vulture and the endangered bearded vulture. One of the best places to see these two species is at the vulture hide at Giant's Castle. (See "Top things to do".)

There are 64 animal species in the park, including 1700 eland, but because the sourveld grasses in winter don't have much nutrition, the carrying capacity of the Drakensberg for grazing animals is much lower than elsewhere in the country. The smaller grey rhebok is common, however, while the single largest oribi population in

the subcontinent (about 300) can be found here. The park also protects the country's largest populations of Cape clawless otter and spotted-necked otter, both of which thrive in the streams and rivers that flow off the mountains.

These mountains are the main water source for most of SA. "One-third of all of SA's good quality, fresh drinking water comes from uKhahlamba," says Oscar. "The biggest rivers all have their sources here. The park is of vital strategic importance to the country."

The pristine soils and marshes ensure that the prodigious rainfall – between 1000ml and 2000ml a year, depending on altitude, is soaked up and released slowly throughout

the year into the rivers.

Soil erosion and alien vegetation pose the greatest threats. Wattle and bluegum trees in the southern part of the park use up millions of litres of water every day, and although there is some soil erosion from overgrazing, most of this is outside the reserve in areas that are open to cattle and other livestock.

Culturally, the park is important because of the thousands of ancient rock paintings left by the original people of SA, the Bushmen. The hundreds of sandstone caves in the foothills host the largest, most diversified – and some say most beautiful – collection of rock art south of the Sahara.

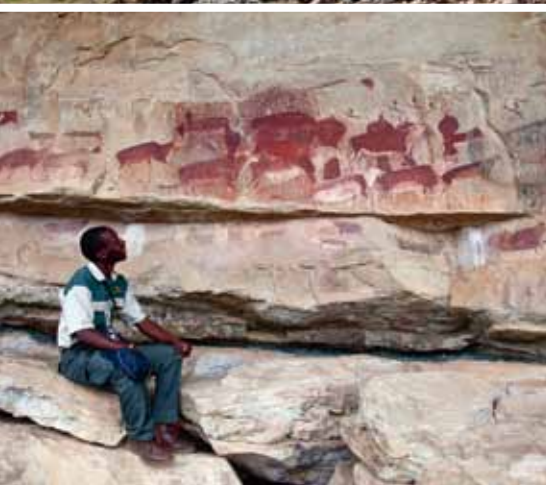
There are said to be more than 40



SA's highest mountain peaks fall within the Drakensberg Alpine Centre, a biodiversity node that includes 2500 flowering plants, of which more than 300 are found nowhere else. As can be expected, the insect life is diverse, too. One researcher discovered more than 100 species in a single locality. There are at least 44 dragonfly and 74 butterfly species. A brightly coloured Drakensberg crag lizard (bottom left) was seen on the Sani Pass.



The Sani Pass is the only road from KwaZulu-Natal into Lesotho, and although there are plans to tar it, nothing has been done so far. A 4x4 is regarded as mandatory for travellers, but taxis based in Lesotho use the pass all the time.



Above: Across the Drakensberg in Lesotho, life carries on at its own pace. Here a goat relaxes on the steps of a lonely loo. Left: Bushman painters depicted so-called “therianthropes” – symbolic figures that were part human, part animal. The paintings illustrated the close bonds the people maintained with nature and the animals they relied on for survival. Top left: Rock art guide Raymond Mweni at Game Pass Shelter at Kamberg, in the southern Drakensberg. This site is open to the public, but visitors must be accompanied a guide from the nearby interpretive centre.

000 paintings spread across 1200 sites, caves and shelters. According to Celeste Rossouw of Amafa, an organisation which studies and controls access to the rock art sites, the oldest paintings date back about 7000 years. But on average, most of the art is about 4000 years old.

Some sites, like Elands Cave, have more than 1000 paintings, many of which are layered more than eight times over each other. Other sites contain only one or two paintings. It quickly becomes evident that the Drakensberg is one of the world’s most concentrated collections of rock art.

The Bushmen painted with a mixture of red and yellow ochre, charcoal, manganese oxide and clay. These substances were bound together with blood, fat, egg or plant extract. Experts suggest that painters used feathers, animal hairs or grass to paint the figures, although the exact method is not known.

Many of the paintings are of eland, Africa’s largest antelope, and an important animal for the Bushmen, who relied on it for meat and nourishment, but also for spiritual power. The healers would access this power by attaining “an altered sense of consciousness” through intensive dancing and singing. Sometimes artists would paint what they had felt or experienced while in a trance. Most

of the rock art is highly symbolic, and not just a depiction of everyday things. Paintings of therianthropes (long, elongated figures, half-animal, half-human) are common. Researchers suggest this is what healers felt like when in a trance -- a lengthening of their bodies and a sense of becoming animal-like.

This sense of “oneness” with the natural world is reflected in several folktales of the “First People”, when animals could speak and humans were combined with creatures as one.

There’s no doubt that people of that time were far closer to nature than modern man. In fact, they probably saw themselves as indistinguishable from their environment. The arrival of African tribes from the north and colonial powers from the south resulted in the Bushmen’s cultural disintegration and disappearance. Their beautiful rock paintings are a poignant reminder of their rich beliefs and respect for nature.

WHERE TO STAY

uKhahlamba-Drakensberg Park is an amalgamation of several protected areas managed by Ezemvelo KZN Wildlife, from north to south: Rugged Glen Nature Reserve, Royal Natal National Park, Cathedral Peak State Forest, Monk’s Cowl State Forest, Giant’s Castle Game Reserve, Highmoor State Forest, Kamberg Nature Reserve, Mkhomazi State Forest, Loteni Nature Reserve, Vergelegen Nature Reserve, Cobham State Forest and Garden Castle State Forest.

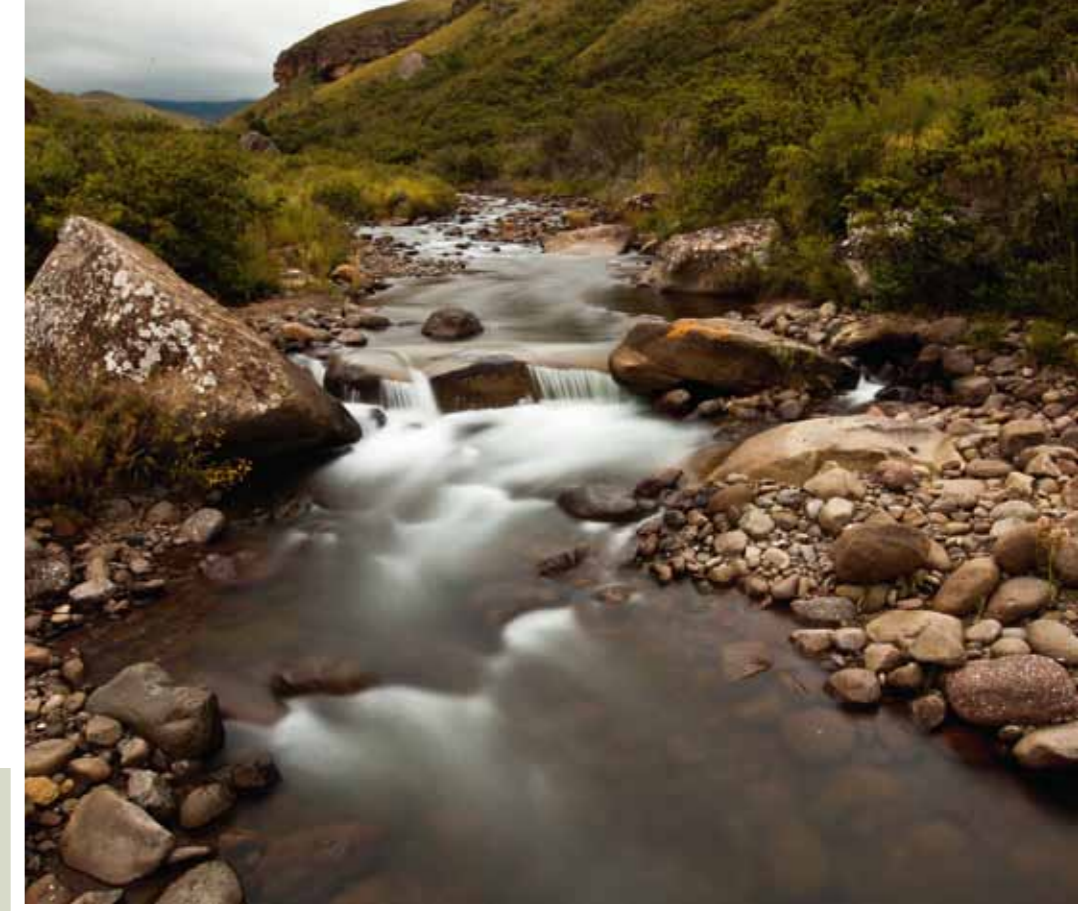
There are several rest camps managed by Ezemvelo KZN Wildlife, as well as many privately-run hotels and lodges. I recommend the following Ezemvelo rest camps: Thendele Camp, Didima Camp, Injisuthi, Giant’s Castle and Kamberg. For bookings, tel 033-845-1000, e-mail booking@kznwildlife.com or www.kznwildlife.com.

There are also several private hotels, including Cathedral Peak Hotel (www.cathedralpeak.co.za), The Cavern (www.cavern.co.za), Sungubala Mountain Bush Lodge (www.sungubala.com), Champagne Castle Hotel (www.champagnecastle.co.za), The Nest (www.thenest.co.za) and Eland Valley (www.elandvalley.co.za).

If you drive up Sani Pass, via Himeville in the south, you can stay overnight at Sani Mountain Lodge (www.sanimountain.co.za), which has comfortable rooms, a restaurant and “the highest bar in Africa” at 2865m above sea level.

THINGS TO DO

Go hiking, mountain biking, horse riding and climbing. The park is best known for its superlative views, mountain streams and steep climbs. There are innumerable hiking, mountain biking and climbing routes, and stables that offer horse riding.



Above: uKhahlamba-Drakensberg supplies 30% of SA’s fresh water, and is the source of its two most voluminous rivers, the Orange and the Tugela. This stream is in the upper reaches of Giant’s Castle game reserve. Below: The Policeman’s Helmet above Thendele Camp in Royal Natal National Park. Left: The Basotho people are accustomed to harsh conditions, especially in winter, when snow is commonplace and temperatures plummet well below freezing. Below left: The mountains are home to a wide variety of plants, including fynbos species such as proteas.





Year in the Wild

Year in the Wild is supported by Total, Ford, EeziAwn, Frontrunner, National Luna, Goodyear, Evosat, Vodacom, Digicape, Lacie, Garmin, Hetzner, K-Way, Cape Union Mart and Conqueror Trailers. For more blogs and photos uploaded via Evosat, go to www.yearinthewild.com and www.facebook.com/yearinthewild.



Left: Rangers in uKhahlamba-Drakensberg often carry weapons, in case they encounter dagga smugglers, who use the remote mountain passes to evade the police. Below: These mountains are not only special because they're beautiful. Like all great mountain ranges, they offer an opportunity to lose - and find - oneself in their wilderness.



One of the most accessible and rewarding day hikes is in the Tugela Gorge at Royal Natal park in the north. Hikers can see the Tugela Falls plunging 850m over the escarpment, making it one of the highest waterfalls in the world.

When hiking, remember to always be prepared with enough water, clothing, food and shelter. Never underestimate the terrain or the weather.

For in-depth and trustworthy advice on exploring in the Drakensberg, contact Sarah Drew or Carlos Gonzalez at Active Escapes on 033-330-6131, e-mail sarah@active-escapes.co.za or www.active-escapes.co.za.

Drive up the Sani Pass via Himeville in the southern region. This switchback pass is the only road from KwaZulu-Natal to Lesotho and is one of SA's most scenic and challenging drives. There are plans

to tar the road one day, but for now the 8km journey remains gravel, and a 4x4 is recommended. In winter, snow and ice can make for a thrilling – and dangerous – adventure. Guided tours are available with Thaba Tours (www.thabatours.co.za) and Sani Pass Tours (www.sanipasstours.com). Remember to take your passport, which you will need to get into Lesotho.

See the rock art at Game Pass Shelter near Kamberg, or visit the interpretive centre at Didima Camp near Cathedral Peak Hotel.

Game Pass Shelter is a sandstone shelter and is a two-hour walk from the Kamberg camp. It is probably the best and most beautiful example of rock art that is easily accessible to the public. Visitors must be guided by one of the local custodians.

There are about 30 rock art sites open to the public in these mountains, and 16 of

them are in the park. For a list of custodians for each site, contact Celeste Rossouw at Amafa on 082 809 8801 or celrossouw@gmail.com.

Visit the vulture hide at Giant's Castle. Visitors can book the hide exclusively for the day, and are given a bag of cattle bones to throw onto the cliff edge. (Remember to take your camera, because you are assured of some good photographs.) Book at Giant's Castle rest camp on tel 036-353-3718. Cost is R645 for four people.

Take a helicopter flight over the Cathedral Peak area with Westline Aviation. The shortest flight is 20min and costs R799 per person. For R890, you land on top of the mountain and enjoy a glass of champagne while surveying the view. Tel 036-488-2055 or e-mail cathedral@bergflying.co.za.