

TAMING THE DRAGON

They were warned not to go. A thunderstorm was approaching. But, braving the elements, one couple set out to take on a Drakensberg traverse. It was about to go very, very wrong...

WORDS AND PHOTOS **DAN SLATER**

“OH, I WOULDN’T go in January if I were you” — the words echoed back to me off the thunderhead that rolled across the dark sky. “You’ll certainly get wet,” my mentor and Drakensberg authority had said. He was right — we had been wet for the past four days.

Our feet were rotting in our boots and now, one kilometre from home, our way was barred by the Mlambonja River in full flood. We could not pick out the fording point in the moonlight, as it was 10pm and we’d been walking for 15 hours. Heavy precipitation had swollen all the rivers and, unbeknownst to us, we were in the wrong place anyway, because the crossing was mismarked on the official map. We were so close to a bed and real food, yet it would have been suicidal to risk crossing that torrent in the dark. There was nothing for it but to heave a big sigh, stamp down a patch of the chest-high grass and pitch the tent on a 30-degree slope for another night.

The Drakensberg is the highest mountain range in South Africa, reaching its peak of 3482m at Thabana Ntlenyana, officially the highest point in the tiny landlocked mountain kingdom of Lesotho, and the highest peak in Africa south of Mt Kilimanjaro. The name means “beautiful little mountain” in the local Sesotho dialect. The word Drakensberg means “dragon mountains” in Dutch, a reference to the jagged escarpment which marks part of the international boundary between KwaZulu-Natal province and Lesotho. The Zulu people call the area uKhahlamba, or “barrier of spears” — another apt description of the formidable cliffs which are composed of a combination of sandstone topped with basalt. A good portion of the range is protected wilderness including the Maloti-Drakensberg Transfrontier Conservation Area, itself part of the UNESCO Ukhahlamba/Drakensberg World Heritage Site listed in 2000.

Don’t underestimate the Berg, as George W. Bush might have said. Of all the South African wilderness areas, the Drakensberg is the wildest, most treacherous and downright deadliest, and summer is a time of persistent rain and fierce lightning storms. There were 55 hiker deaths recorded in the period before 1985, mostly from falls and exposure. Even so, I wanted to do a Drakensberg traverse and January was the only time I had free. Unluckily for her, my fiancée Gerda had agreed to join me.

WE AIMED TO start from the Royal Natal National Park near Mont-aux-Sources, mount the escarpment at the Sentinel and follow it south as far as Cathedral Peak, where we would descend the Mlambonja Pass back to the lowlands and civilisation of the five-star Cathedral Peak Hotel. I estimated that a good pace would get us there in four days with the wind behind us. To say I was being wildly ambitious was an understatement — I didn’t have a clue what I was getting us into.

While paying our fees at the entrance gate, the rangers



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Rangers tried to dissuade us from our course by mentioning the storm on the way. “We’re not afraid of rain,” declared Gerda, after which we could hardly turn back. . .

tried to dissuade us from our course by mentioning the huge storm on the way. “We’re not afraid of rain,” declared Gerda, somewhat prophetically, after which I could hardly turn back if I’d wanted to. We spent that morning hiking up a gorgeous kloof (valley) through the RNNP, the emerald-green slopes dotted with proteas and what might have been agapanthus. By lunchtime we hit the gravel road leading to the car park at the base of the Sentinel — the huge, vertiginous buttress that marks the start of the escarpment proper. With a bit of luck we could grab a quick lift from a ranger or another tourist and start up that afternoon.

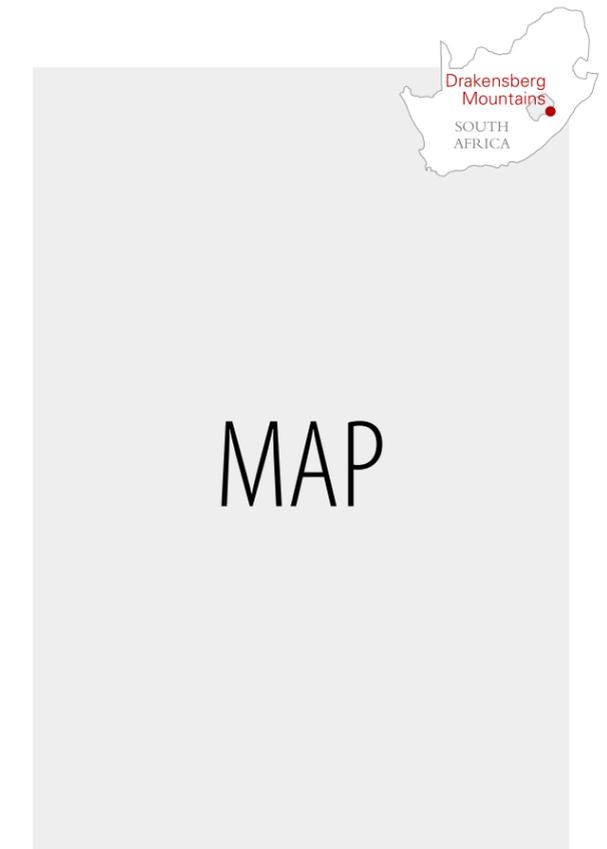
It was not to be. We ended up slogging the whole 8km uphill in full gear under a blazing sun, with only an occasional bush offering enough shade in which to cower. By the time we panted into the car park there was no point continuing that day, and we elected to sleep in the convenient Sentinel bunkhouse.

The next morning we set off with fresh optimism and a spring in our step. The imposing cliffs were misty yet mesmerising and we soon reached the infamous chain ladder that grants access to the plateau. Clinging to the rock wall, this welded jumble of bent iron bars seemed a precarious instrument in which to place one’s life and we were glad to get past it.

Ten minutes later we followed the Tugela River through low scrub until it flowed into empty space — at 947m Tugela Falls. This waterfall is one of the highest in the world and is an impressive sight tumbling down the cliffs to disappear into cloud. Here, we left the track and struck out along the top of the gentle curving cliff known as the Amphitheatre. The marked path went inland but we thought it would be much more pleasant to follow the line of the escarpment. The views would be tremendous if the mist ever cleared.

As we came level with the Devil’s Tooth, a spectacular rock pinnacle that pokes up between the main ridge and the Eastern Buttress, the clouds thickened and blackened and soon the sky was split by forked lightning and rocked by peals of thunder. The rain pelted down unbelievably hard and we were quickly soaked through, despite our waterproofs. The soil, far from soaking up the flood, seemed to saturate immediately and turned the ground into one big swamp, drowning the scrubby bushes.

The top of the escarpment is a good place to be struck by lightning, but there was nowhere to hide. We were heading for Icidi Cave, an overnight spot a little way down the Icidi Pass, which we only reached after three hours of detouring around sharp cutbacks and struggling up and down hills. It’s amazing how the ridge that had looked so level from the plains below turned out to be so steeply undulating. After searching frantically along the walls of the pass all we found was a shallow



niche into which we could just about squeeze — a far cry from the advertised ‘cave’ that was supposed to sleep six. We were thoroughly drenched by this time and made the best of things by hanging our sopping gear around the walls. Fortunately there was leftover foliage lining the floor which we used to start a fire. It smoked us like kippers but at least we warmed up a little as we huddled together and tried to sleep.

AFTER SHIVERING through a cold and uncomfortable night we opened our eyes to a bright, cloudless morning. We had battled so much yesterday that we decided to cut back west and find the path. I got out my compass to take a bearing only to discover its bezel had smashed in my pack and all the liquid had leaked out, rendering it useless. Instead I took a rough ‘inland’ direction, thinking that we would hit the path somewhere even if our direction wasn’t spot on. This turned out to be a mistake.

Up and down low, treeless hills we walked, the wet clothes tied to our packs soon drying in the sun, if not our boots. It didn’t matter though, as by mid morning we had to cross a large river. It looked harmless from the hillside above but up close it was thigh-deep and fast flowing. There was also something not quite right about it that I couldn’t put my finger on, but which would prove vital later that day. There was nothing for it but to undo our pack straps, grasp each other’s shoulders and inch nervously across.

Another steep climb awaited us on the other side, which we sweated up with still no sign of a path. At the top we met some Basotho shepherds, each dressed only in a blanket, balaclava

helmet and wellington boots. The blanket is the national costume of Lesotho... Had we come too far? These young men were farmers who looked vaguely interested in why two white people might be tramping across their precipitous grazing land. By this time I was getting curious about our true location and its relation to the path we should have come across some time ago. I tried talking to them but of course they had no English. There was nothing for it but to continue on.

We had better luck with another shepherd we met on the next ridgeline. He spoke some English and he explained that there was a road some two days walk in a westerly direction, from where we could probably get transport to Maseru – the capital city. This was not quite what we were hoping to hear.

We sat on a Therm-a-rest, getting drenched and counting the seconds between lightning strikes.

After guiding us around his family rondavels (circular huts) to avoid his vicious dogs, we set off again, with me trying to keep my increasing worry from Gerda.

After going steeply down the next valley to be confronted by another river, it suddenly hit me! The thing that had been nagging at me since the last river crossing leapt from my brain stem into my frontal lobes – the water was flowing in the wrong direction! How could I have been so stupid? The international border is actually demarcated according to the water table – if a river runs west into Lesotho, it is in Lesotho; if it flows towards and over the escarpment, it is in South Africa. Looking now at our map, I realised we'd come too far north. We were in Lesotho, and we didn't even bring our passports! We would have crossed the path at some point as planned, but it obviously wasn't substantial enough to be noticed.

It was early afternoon by now, and we had no choice but to about-turn and march back up the hill. It was soul destroying. Hours later we collided with a path briefly, but having waded slowly back over the river it disappeared again. We followed another sheep track up the opposite valley and as the light faded, after 11 hours of walking the wrong way, we were back on top of the escarpment. We'd basically achieved nothing the whole day, and Gerda had badly sunburned legs into the bargain, courtesy of some out-of-date sun cream. At least we were fairly sure we knew where we were, and we were dry. Not for long.

I WAS WOKEN about midnight by flashes of light in front of my eyelids. I thought I was dreaming until I slowly woke up and realised the coruscation was lightning. Then the rain came. If being caught on the escarpment was bad, being caught in a tent with metal poles, the only upstanding object for miles, and being on the escarpment, was worse. The thought of leaving our cosy tent was disheartening to say the least, but staying put was too much of a risk. Stoically we stepped out into the deluge and sat on a Thermarest some distance away, getting drenched and counting the seconds between lightning strikes.



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This was a low point. I think if there had been an easy escape route, such as a nearby road and taxi, we'd have taken it. But there wasn't. When the storm had passed we got out of our wet clothes and tried to sleep. We were so cold we shared a sleeping bag and slept fitfully on top of each other.

A day behind schedule, in perfect hiking weather, we found the path immediately and managed to follow it all day along the bare crags and past some breathtaking scenes – the Mnweni Cutback wreathed in mist was gorgeous. We also passed the source of the Orange River (South Africa's longest) which flows 2200km towards the Atlantic Ocean, along the way forming the South Africa/Namibia border. In the late afternoon mist we carefully followed a line of cairns up a rocky buttress to Mponjwana cave. This rough refuge is famous for its dawn views over KwaZulu-Natal. I began to think that things may turn out all right after all.

Mponjwana is a much bigger shelter than Icidi. Although more of an overhang than a cave, it was big enough that we could set up our tent underneath it and relax to watch the

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fog wrap around the tall rock pinnacles guarding tomorrow's descent. Relaxation was made difficult when we heard an eerie whistling approaching through the cloud. We froze. We'd heard numerous tales of hikers being robbed by the locals, admittedly more usually by stealth than by violence.

As the volume of the whistling increased, we tried hard to achieve invisibility. When he finally arrived the musical gentleman was rendered speechless by our presence before recovering to ask us countless questions. We conversed as politely as our shaking bowels allowed and swiftly urged the exchange to a close and he went on his merry way.

Although this cave was devoid of paintings, ochre depictions of humans and animals more than 3000 years old can still be seen in caves and rock shelters all over South Africa. Before the Basotho people migrated into the area between the 3rd to 11th centuries, the region was inhabited by Khoisan hunter-gatherer tribes, known as San or Bushmen. However, their simple subsistence culture led to them being pushed west by the incoming Bantu tribes, and later hunted almost to extinction by European settlers. Nowadays, the last remnants of these gentle people live in settlements in the Botswanan and Namibian Kalahari. The cave art is their legacy.

Reasonably well-rested at last, we were ready for our final day. We set off early along the escarpment and successfully reached the jutting ridge which leads to Bell and Cathedral Peak. At 2pm we were at the top of the Mlambonja Pass, and we judged we had plenty of time to make it to the Cathedral Peak Hotel in time for tea. Thus began a nightmare.

The path initially descended very steeply but safely, and there



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were even stone cairns to follow. The reasonable stage lasted only until the streams began. Thereafter, we zigzagged down an increasingly sheer slope until we were down-climbing through dense foliage, crossing and re-crossing multiple watercourses at dangerous points. Again and again we had to wade through a rushing torrent over slippery rocks above crashing rapids, only to walk a few metres and be directed back across by the cairns.

It went on and on; 3km, including 1000m of altitude loss, took us more than four hours to cover, all the while hoping we weren't lost. Eventually we drew away from the crashing ravine and into tall grass, and as the gloaming overtook us we calculated our position as One Tree Hill – a mere 5km from the end. We couldn't face another night out here, so we pulled out our head torches and ploughed on.

Progress was excruciatingly slow down the switchbacks to the river. We were trench-footed, blistered, sore, wet, tired, burned (Gerda's legs were later diagnosed with third-degree burns) and bruised. When one of our head torches died I was reduced to taking a few steps, then stopping and turning to light G's way over rocks and roots, and then repeating the process. When we realised we couldn't cross the final river at the bottom of the incline, the hotel lights twinkling cheerfully just beyond, we were gutted. Too exhausted to cook we collapsed. Harsh words were spoken. Sleep was scarce.

By daylight the river was obviously uncrossable. Thank goodness we hadn't been driven to try it last night out of frustration. The next nearest marked crossing was a 15km detour – heaven help us! – but thankfully we managed to alert the park rangers to our predicament by mobile phone and some sterling chaps reached us via a secret shortcut and led us to safety. Thus ended the most traumatic hike of our lives. However, the excellent manager of the Cathedral Peak Hotel saw fit to bestow on us a slap-up breakfast free of charge before we started the drive back to Zululand, and suddenly the past six days didn't seem so bad after all.

THE ESSENTIALS

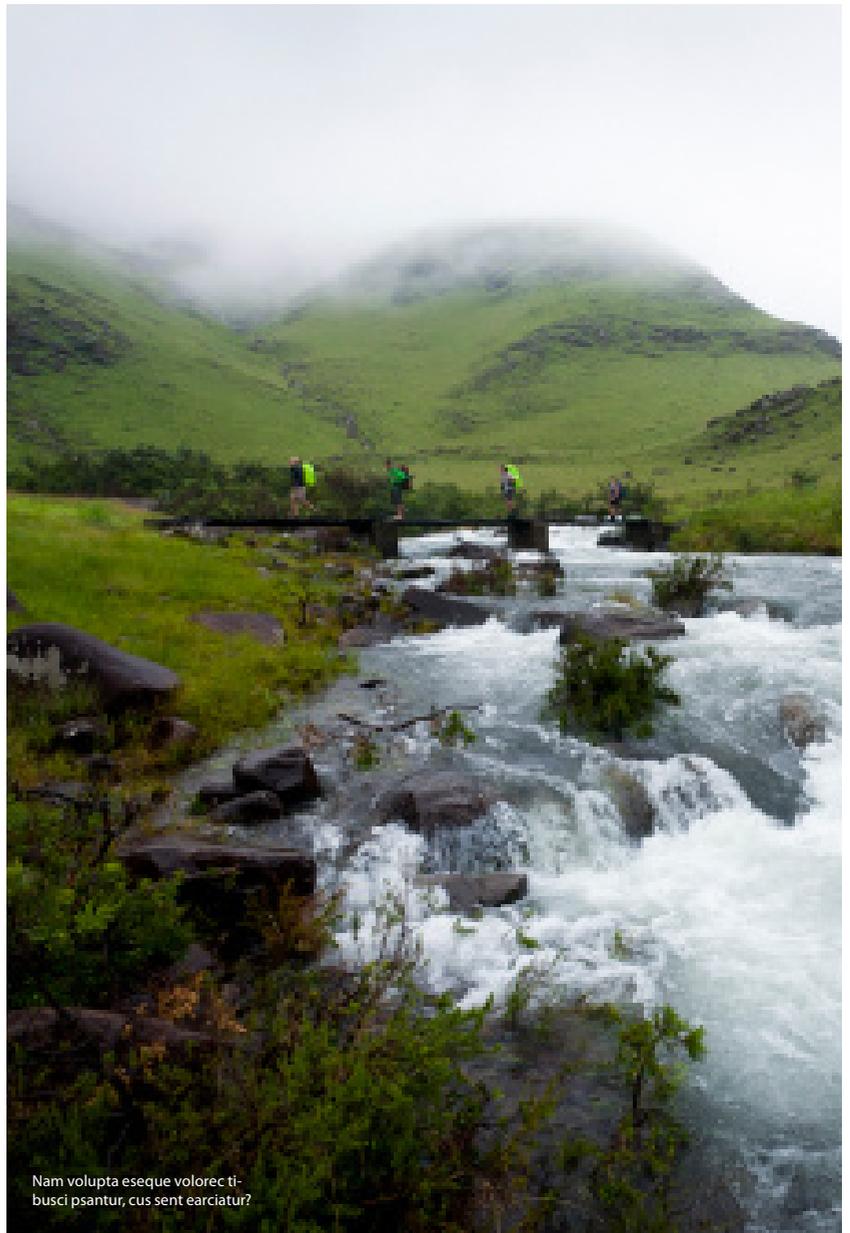
Getting there: Fly to Johannesburg (South African Airways from about \$1500) and rent a car to drive via Harrismith to the Royal Natal National Park (5 hours).

How to do it: The trek can be done independently by experienced hikers, but many people get lost and/or die, so if in doubt find a guide. Guides can be hired from various hotels in the area or independent websites like www.drakensberghiker.co.za.

When to go: For the full midsummer rain, thunder 'n' lightning experience December or January are optimal, but for a drier, more sedate trek, March to June might be more pleasant. Beyond then it can be very snowy and cold, and water sources freeze.

Maps: The best maps of the area are the six-part 1:50,000 Drakensberg recreational series, available in good map shops or from the South Africa National Parks offices in the RNNP. For this hike you would need nos. 1 and 2 in the series: Royal Natal and Cathedral Peak. Definitely take a compass, and make sure it doesn't break!

Staying there: There is a SANP campsite and chalets at Tendele in the RNNP, or the more swish Royal National Park Hotel. At the other end, you can't beat the Cathedral Peak Hotel for luxury. There are also numerous private campsites/lodges all over the area.



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