

# TravelLife

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# ESCAPE TO THE BERGS

## SOUTH AFRICA'S UKHAHLAMBA DRAKENSBURG PARK PROVIDES INTERESTING HIKING ROUTES TO DISCOVER THE LAND AND ITS HISTORY

BY MELANIE CHAMBERS

Lightening cracks; the sky turns white, exposing an enormous wall of rock. Called "The Amphitheatre," the five-kilometer wall of basalt rises over a thousand vertical metres. "Last week, lightening killed two cattle and a herdsman," says Vaughn Piccione, owner of Berghouse and Cottages in the Northern Drakensberg Mountains, home to South Africa's Ukhahlamba Drakensberg Park. "We get some of the fiercest lightening storms in the world."

The Amphitheatre is the highlight of the "Bergs," a mountain range larger than 1,000 kilometres straddling South Africa and the north of Lesotho. Luckily, I witnessed the spectacle while wrapped in a wool blanket next to an outdoor fireplace, eating homemade chicken potpie.

Shortly after a visit from Sir Edmund Hillary (the famous Everest climber) 20 years ago, the park earned a much-deserved UNESCO designation. Ever since, the entire Drakensberg region has become a hiking haven. And to accommodate the hikers, many farmsteads have transformed into cozy cottages serving home-cooked meals.

I spent a week hiking and eating in the park. I started my journey in the north and can't decide which part I liked more: hiking or eating.

While driving to the visitor centre on my first day of hiking, my Afrikaans host, Vaughn, tells me about his childhood: growing up with a Zulu nanny, he spoke Zulu before English. Today, the Zulu nation lives primarily in the province of KwaZulu-Natal province—the location of the park.

Vaughn suggests a day hike to Tugela, the world's second largest waterfall, standing at 984 metres. After an hour walking alone alongside the tall, golden grass, the path leads into a forest of crooked black trees. When in full bloom, South Africa's national flower, the protea, turns brilliant pink and fuchsia. But, in winter, it feels like the crime scene of a twisted fairytale.

Abruptly, the path stops at the bank of a gushing river. When I look up, I realize it's actually two rivers bisected by a rock. Which way to go? I can't see around the corner of the left side, so I hike right and find a cool pool of water. It's irresistible. I rip off my clothes and jump in, but my bliss is interrupted: "We're coming down, you can get dressed, or not?" I grab some clothes, but the couple keep trekking past me quickly. "How far is it to the waterfall?" I ask. "Oh, it's about two more kilometres, but it's only a trickle right now because it's winter." With the couple out of sight, I decide to forgo hiking to the falls. Returning to the water, I revel in the quiet.

PHOTO COURTESY OF TOURISM KWAZULU-NATAL



PHEZULU SAFARI PARK DANCERS

That night, while I rest beside the fire at Berghouse, a smiling Zulu woman with a wooden tray arrives. She's holding homemade, still-warm bread, lasagna with cheese melting over the casserole dish and my favourite: malva pudding, a spongy, sweet caramelized cake dripping with cream custard. Afterwards, I take my South African sauvignon blanc out to the bench seat on the top of a ridge to watch the disappearing sun. The expansive sky turns from ochre to intense black in minutes.

On my final day at Berghouse, I choose something more challenging: an 11-kilometre trek to The Crack and Gudu Falls. After following the river on a gentle incline, I continue until I encounter a dark cavern between two towers of rock. Is this the trail? With my legs and arms stretched straight out, I climb up like a spider. For the final stretch, grabbing onto a metal chain ladder bolted into the rock, I emerge out of the darkness like a deep-sea diver bursting through the surface of the ocean to the light.

On a plateau overlooking an expansive sky and rock canyon, I sit to eat *boerewors* (South African farmer's sausage) topped off with a *koeksister*, a sugary donut, that my host packed for my lunch. Listening to the water and the wind, I hear the Gudu waterfalls behind me, swooshing over smooth rocks.

But, I lingered too long; it's almost 1 p.m. and I was supposed to meet Vaughn at the visitor centre. Running, but careful not to trip on a root, I come across three Zulu women carrying straw on their heads, wearing wool skirts and black rubber boots; one woman has a baby strapped to her back. I still can't keep up to them. On a grassy meadow near the office, another group of Zulu women are sitting and chatting beside dozens of colourful grass baskets—some woven with bright blue and gold twine. I buy so many that as a special thank you, one of the ladies adds a few chocolates into my bag.

The following day, I leave Berghouse and Cottages and drive an hour south to another section of the park: Giant's Castle (also the name of a mountain), a series of thatched roof cabins dotting the canyon and the site of many tribal clashes.

For thousands of years, the hunter-gather San people—the oldest inhabitants of South Africa—lived here before the Europeans and other tribes conquered them. But, they left behind a beautiful legacy: roughly 20,000 paintings in up to 500 different cave sites, the most in Sub-Saharan Africa. I decide to walk an easy 30-minute trail to see a sample.

After I cross a stream, the path leads into a forest alongside a slab of rock so large it blocks the sun. Eventually, a park attendant appears like a magical nymph. Tucked away in a small cave, the giant slabs of ochre-coloured sand rock reveal a prehistoric graphic novel; in one scene a stick woman hands another woman a baby; in another, a figure is dancing.

Heading back to the cabins, the sun is unrelenting—even in winter it's approaching 30 degrees. I

can't get to the restaurant's patio for a cold beer fast enough. But the server prevents me from stepping out: three baboons are fighting for a chair cushion. Once they've scampered off, I finally soak in the view of the Bergs. Sipping a cold Maluti beer (from Lesotho), I devour a bowl of spicy lamb curry—an homage to the large Indian population in nearby Durban.

A week wasn't enough; you might say I only got a "taste" of the Bergs.



GUDU FALLS

PHOTO COURTESY OF TOURISM KWAZULU-NATAL



PHOTO COURTESY OF PHEZULU SAFARI PARK



RUPESTRAN ART

PHOTO BY MELANIE CHAMBERS

## IF YOU GO

- *Fly into Durban. Driving to Bergville in the north is about three hours.*
- *Hire a car as bus service doesn't exist and car shuttles are expensive.*
- *Always register with the park centre before hiking.*
- *Bring everything you'd need in a backpack for day hikes—including a phone.*