

The Natal Drakensberg

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Mr A. R. Willcox, internationally known authority on the Rock Art of Southern Africa, recently said:

'Here [the Natal Drakensberg] is one of the finest playgrounds left in this over-populated planet: here one can still walk fifty miles and see no other human being, except by chance a forester or game ranger, and no mark of man upon the face of nature save the footpaths and the relics of the Bushman race. . . . But you will see superb scenery and a wealth of wild life . . . and the bird-lover and the botanist will find as much to enchant him as will the lover of animals. For good measure there is mountaineering and rock-climbing, and perhaps the largest number of un-spoilt rock-painting sites to be found anywhere in the world in an equivalent space.'

These mountains, on the eastern littoral of South Africa, form what is undoubtedly the finest mountain chain in the whole of Africa. There certainly are higher mountains in the rest of the continent, notably Kilimanjaro (5895 m), the Ruwenzori Mountains (*c* 5121 m), Mount Kenya (5199 m), and the mountains of the Eastern Congo, but these are isolated peaks or mountain



masses. The Drakensberg Range is actually a mountain chain some 600 miles in length. In the N it separates the Transvaal Lowveld from the Highveld, and, commencing at about Lat. 23° , runs S to Laing's Nek, at the point where the three Provinces, Natal, the Transvaal and the Orange Free State, meet. From this point it swings SW, forming the boundary between Natal and the Orange Free State. At Mont-aux-Sources (3282 m) it turns SE and forms the boundary between Natal and Lesotho (the former Basutoland), veering SW again at Giant's Castle (3316 m). Soon after this it enters the Cape Colony and gradually merges into the Stormberg Mountains.

In this article I am limiting myself to the 60 miles between Mont-aux-Sources and Giant's Castle. Here the range is at its finest, the average height being 3050 m, and the highest peaks rising to over 3350 m. North and S of this area, especially N, it is nothing like so impressive. These 60 miles of towering peaks, together with a series of subsidiary peaks and ranges jutting out from them, form a mountain world of surpassing grandeur, beauty and interest, and offer a challenge to the mountaineer that will tax his powers to the utmost.

This lovely area consists, first of all, of the Little Berg, a maze of sandstone hills and forest-clad valleys, through which flow clear mountain streams. The average height here is about 2000 m. Towering over these are the basalt giants of the true Drakensberg.

Geologically, the Drakensberg forms part of the Karroo System. Millions of years ago, as our modern world began to take on its present shape, a series of geological strata were laid down on top of the older Dwyka and Table Mountain sandstones. These consisted, briefly, of the Beaufort Series, about 190 million years old, followed by the Molteno Beds and the Red Beds. Then came the Cave Sandstone (European equivalent Triassic-Jurassic) about 160 million years old. These vast sheets of sandstone were laid down by wind erosion. Finally, came tremendous volcanic upheavals, probably the greatest the world has ever seen, as vast seas of molten lava bubbled up through the sandstone and overlaid this latter stratum with a capping of basalt, 4000-5000 ft thick.

After the break-up of Gondwanaland, the whole of this eastern littoral of South Africa tilted seaward, and the forces of erosion began to work on these succeeding layers. Gradually the escarpment retreated westwards under the influence of this erosion (the rate of retreat has been calculated at about 30 cm every 200 years), until at last it reached its present position in the Drakensberg Range. The main face of the range consists of the basalt layer, 4000-5000 ft thick. Below that is the sandstone layer, 300-700 ft thick, and then come the Red Beds and the Molteno Beds, merging into the Middle Beaufort Beds, the latter appearing only rarely in the deepest river valleys of the Drakensberg. This whole vast escarpment is one of the most remarkable in the world.

The sandstone layer, the Red Beds and the Molteno Beds form what is known as the Little Berg. This, of course, lies at the foot of the mighty face of the Drakensberg. It is a country of towering sandstone cliffs, often sculptured into the most fantastic forms, a country of deep river valleys and lush forests.



Map 2 The Natal Drakensberg

The climate is mild and delightful, even in winter; innumerable sandstone caves give shelter to the mountaineer; over all is the sound of many waters, and the richly-wooded valleys drowse in the warm African sunlight. Above towers the mighty face of the true Drakensberg, isolated peak on peak, deeply-etched channels, tremendous gorges, dark, eerie chasms, knife-like ridges, minarets, towers, citadels. It is a grim and a hard world, especially in winter. For long months the ice binds the rocks in a grip of iron, the snows block the passes, and about the soaring spires the winds cry endlessly in the silence of the night. But it has a wild beauty of its own that tugs at the heart-strings.

Who were the first inhabitants of this mountain region? Of this we are not sure. No skeletal remains of primitive man have ever been found in the Drakensberg, though down in the plains of Natal, 20 miles away, Middle and Early Stone Age tools have been found in abundance. It is possible that Early Stone Age Man lived in the Drakensberg, and that his remains have been swept away in the heavy erosion of the Late Pleistocene period. Against that is the fact that no deep excavations in the caves of the Little Berg, where erosion would not operate, have ever revealed any traces of him. The earliest race of which we have any certain record is that of the Bushmen. Trekking down from the great plains of Central Africa, perhaps a thousand years ago, they eventually came to these pleasant valleys, and here they made their homes and painted their story on the rock walls of their caves. These paintings are amongst the richest treasures of the Drakensberg. There are literally thousands of them, the finest collection of Stone Age art in the world. How far they date back we do not know. We do know that the last were painted about a hundred years ago.

Here, in the Little Berg, the Bushmen lived an idyllic existence. Game was plentiful, the grass rich and tall, there was water in abundance, and there was none to say them nay. Down in the plains lived the amaZizi, a tribe of the Embo Nguni group of Bantu, who had arrived round about A.D. 1700 from the N, but there was peace between the Bushmen and the amaZizi. Then came Shaka, savage warrior King of the Zulus, and from 1818 to 1828 the whole country of the Drakensberg was bathed in blood, as the fierce warriors of Shaka's *impis* swept down on the inoffensive amaZizi and the simple mountain Bushmen. The peace of the valleys was shattered with the roar of battle, and at night the dark precipices of the sleeping peaks glowed red with the flames of burning kraals. This was the end for the Bushmen, for in addition to Shaka's rampaging armies had come the white man, first the Voortrekkers descending the passes of the Drakensberg from the NW, and then the English pressing up from the SE. It was the clash of two irreconcilable cultures, and the weaker had to give way to the stronger. Many of the Bushmen survived in the remoter valleys of the Drakensberg until the early 1870s, but by the end of the decade the last had disappeared from the pages of history.

The first white men to cast their eyes on the Drakensberg were almost certainly a party of shipwrecked Portuguese sailors. On 24 March 1593, the *Santo Alberto*, a large Portuguese vessel, was wrecked on what is today the coast of Pondoland. Electing to travel inland instead of along the coast, so as to avoid the large river mouths, the survivors set out for Lourenço Marques,

and one day, while travelling through the midlands of Natal, they saw, away to the w, a range of snow-clad mountains, which could have been none other than the Drakensberg. Did some of the more adventurous ones amongst them venture into this mountain world? Did some, perhaps, even attempt to climb them? Who can say! The record is silent.

The first white men to visit the Drakensberg were two French missionaries, Thomas Arbousset and François Daumas. Trekking across the high Basutoland plateau in 1836, from their Mission Station at Moriah in Basutoland, they arrived one day in April at the edge of the stupendous escarpment, and gazed down in wonderment over the cliffs of the Amphitheatre. It was they who named Mont-aux-Sources.

Throughout the middle years of the nineteenth century, Natal was rapidly filling up as ship-load after ship-load of immigrants arrived at Port Natal and pressed inland, but for many years the Drakensberg remained a *terra incognita*. No roads led into this mountain area. It was wild and inaccessible, and the intrepid adventurer who attempted to probe its mysteries was as likely as not to get a poisoned Bushman arrow in his back. Writing in 1855 Dr W. H. Bleek said: 'The recesses of the Kahlamba [the Zulu name for the Drakensberg] are practically unexplored.' Although a few exploratory and hunting trips must have been made into the mountains by the more adventurous settlers in these middle years of the century, we have no record of them beyond the accounts of several expeditions of the military in pursuit of raiding Bushmen. It was not until 1888 that the first recorded climbs were made in the Drakensberg.

This date is important, for it marks the inception of Drakensberg climbing. The Cape Mountain Club was only founded in 1891, with the first recorded climb on Table Mountain in 1892. The Stockers climbed in the Drakensberg in 1888. The Rev A. H. Stocker was an English priest, member of the Alpine Club, and a mountaineer of considerable experience. Towards the end of 1887 he came out to Natal on a visit to his brother, Mr F. R. Stocker, who was managing a farm only a short distance away from the Drakensberg. The good parson's eyes lit up when he saw the beckoning mountains on the western horizon. Of the majestic scenery that confronted him he wrote in the *Alpine Journal* in 1889: 'Of this I hardly know what to say. Word-painting cannot describe (it)'. On 23 January 1888, he persuaded his brother to accompany him on an attempt on some of the peaks, and periodically, during the next eight months, the two men climbed in at least two of the main areas of the Drakensberg.

In April they succeeded in climbing Champagne Castle (3377 m), a 'D' climb. They gave the height as 11,355 ft. In May they made a reconnaissance of Cathkin Peak (3149 m), but failed in their attempt to climb it. In July they made a first ascent of Sterkhorn (2973 m), in the Cathkin area, another 'D' climb, and in June spent several days climbing in the Mweni area. In October they made another attempt on Cathkin Peak, but again failed.

Twenty-two years were to pass before the next serious climb was made. On



13 *Cathkin Peak and Sterkhorn*

17 October 1910, W. J. Wybergh and Lieut N. M. McLeod made a first ascent of Sentinel Peak (3165 m) in the Mont-aux-Sources area, and two years later, on 12 September 1912, W. C. West, G. T. Amphlett, Father A. D. Kelly, Tom Casement (brother to the notorious Sir Roger Casement), together with their two coloured servants, climbed Cathkin Peak for the first time.

In 1919 the Natal Mountain Club was formed, and the systematic exploration of the Drakensberg commenced in earnest. The Club was founded by a group of enthusiasts who had already spent some time climbing in the area, notably Hubert Botha-Reid (son-in-law of General Botha), D. W. Bassett-Smith and R. G. Kingdon. Almost from the commencement the Club started the tradition of the famous July camps. These camps, held every July, are centred each year in a different area of the Drakensberg, and are superbly run, attracting climbers not only from the rest of South Africa, but from overseas as well. They have one of the most remarkable safety records in the world. Although members have tackled climbs severe enough to challenge the most expert climber, they have not had a single serious accident in the 52 years during which the camps have been held. Not content with climbing in the Drakensberg, the Club has sponsored expeditions of its members to the Andes and to the Swiss Alps, while some have climbed in the Himalaya.

These 60 miles of tumbled peaks and tremendous valleys are conveniently divided into five main areas. Earliest of all to be opened up was the Mont-aux-Sources area. Today this region is under the control of the Natal Parks, Game and Fish Preservation Board, and has been proclaimed a National Park. In 1947 it housed for a few days the Royal Family during their visit to South Africa, since when it has been known as the Royal Natal National Park. Colonel Amery, who visited the area in 1900, maintained that there was nothing in the whole of the Canadian Rockies to touch it.

The most prominent feature of the area is the Amphitheatre, a stupendous wall some two to three miles long, and towering up to 3050 m. Over this wall plunges the infant Tugela river in one of the highest waterfalls in the world. The Amphitheatre is flanked on the N by Sentinel Peak and Beacon Buttress, (3121 m), and on the S by Eastern Buttress (3047 m), Devil's Tooth (2941 m), a grim 'G' standard climb (it has only been climbed three times), and Inner Tower (3044 m). At the foot of this gigantic wall the Tugela river flows for 5 miles through a tremendous gorge. Mont-aux-Sources itself (3282 m) is situated on the summit plateau, some 2 miles inland, and is only an 'A' climb.

Two hotels and a hutted camp serve the area, together with a caravan park. Railhead is at Bergville, and this is also the end of the tarred road from Estcourt. From Bergville a good gravelled road, 28 miles long, leads into the area. From the two hotels a bridle path leads up to the summit of the Amphitheatre. The climb takes about seven hours, and the final rock wall is surmounted by a sensational chain ladder. Recently, however, the upper portion of this bridle path has been converted into a good motor road, and it is now possible to reach the summit in a mere two hours from the terminus of the road. To reach this road one has to proceed via Witzieshoek, in the Orange Free State, along a gravel road 32 miles from Harrismith. The Park itself is a joy, not only to the mountaineer, but also to the nature lover, for here is to be found a wealth of wild flowers and animal life, and some of South Africa's most glorious scenery.

Due S of the Royal Natal National Park is the Mnweni area. This is all Bantu Reserve territory, and access to it is restricted, a special permit being required from the Bantu Affairs Department. Here there are no hotels or camping facilities, and the climber who wishes to visit it must be entirely self-contained in the matter of food and bedding. Access to the area is along a gravelled road, about 15 miles long, which branches off from the main Bergville—National Park road at Dukuza. At the end of this road is a small police post where one's car can be left. From the police post it is a two-day march to the summit, via either Rockeries Pass or the Mnweni Pass.

The most prominent peak is Mponjwana, sometimes known as Rockeries Tower (3085 m). Next to it stand the two Mnweni Needles, the Inner and the Outer. Also prominent are the Ifidi Buttress, (3219 m), Saddle (3153 m), and the two sensational Mnweni Pinnacles. Here the Little Berg is at its loveliest. It is, indeed, a land of streams, singing their way to the distant ocean, the Mnweni itself, the two Ntonjelaans, the Ifidi, the Setene, the Mbundini and the shy Amanzana. Never are you out of sound of their singing waters.



14 *The Mtweni Needles*



15 *The Cathedral Range*

As we travel s the next area is Cathedral. A glance at the map will show that actually two mountain ranges go to make up this area, the main line of the Drakensberg, running roughly N and S, and a most spectacular spur, the Cathedral Range, running out at right-angles to the main Drakensberg. This range consists of the Twins (2899 m), the Mitre (3023 m), the Chessmen, a whole series of diminutive spires, the Inner Horn (3005 m), the Outer Horn (3006 m), the Bell and Cathedral Peak itself (3004 m). This latter peak is easily climbed, being of 'C' standard only. All the other peaks in this range, with the exception of the Twins and the possible exception of the Outer Horn, require rope and some experience in rock climbing.

In the main range we have the Elephant (3139 m), Cockade (3112 m), Clef Peak (3281 m), Windsor Castle (3065 m), and Little Saddle (3075 m). These peaks are all easily climbed from the summit plateau, if one reaches it via Organ Pipes Pass. From the foot of the escarpment all are major climbs. In addition to these peaks, there are two free-standing peaks, of 'F' and 'E' standard respectively, the Column (2929 m) and Pyramid (2926 m).

An interesting feature of this area is the world-famed Cathedral Peak Forest Influences Research Station, situated in the Little Berg. Here research work on the problems of afforestation and water supplies, of immense importance to the future of mankind, is being carried out by a team of dedicated scientists. The area is served by a fine, modern hotel, and this is reached by a gravelled road, 28 miles in length, from the little village of Winterton.

Cathkin Peak, one of the most dominant peaks in the Drakensberg, is the focal point of the fourth area. Cathkin is a free-standing peak, of 'E' standard. Between this peak and the main escarpment is another free-standing peak, the notorious Monk's Cowl (3234 m), the scene of the first fatal climbing accident in the Drakensberg, when R. V. M. Barry was killed while attempting to climb it in January 1938 (*AJ* 50 151). It was for long listed as unclimbable by the Natal Mountain Club, but was finally conquered in 1942.

Behind these two peaks, situated on the escarpment plateau, is Champagne Castle (3377 m). Although one of the highest peaks in the Drakensberg, it is easily climbed, being of 'B' standard only. A bridle path leads up and over the Little Berg, and into the Mhlwazini valley. Here the first night is spent. Next day a six-hour climb via Gray's Pass brings one to the summit of the peak. This area is a particularly beautiful one, and is deservedly popular as a holiday resort. It is served by four hotels, a Forestry tourist camp and two caravan parks. One can approach it either from Estcourt, 33 miles along a gravelled road, or from Winterton, just over 40 miles, tar from Estcourt to Winterton, gravel from Winterton into the area.

Finally, we have the Giant's Castle Game Reserve, due S of the Cathkin area, with Giant's Castle itself (3316 m) dominant over all. Like the Royal Natal National Park, this is run by the Natal Parks Board, but instead of an hotel, there is a most delightful hutted camp for the use of tourists and visitors. All you have to bring with you is your food. Everything else, including an African

servant to cook your food, is laid on. The Reserve was first proclaimed in 1903, and today it consists of over 40,000 hectares of magnificent mountain country. Perhaps the most beautiful part of it is the deep valley through which the Injasuti river runs. Here you will find age-old forests of giant yellow-woods, clear, sparkling streams, battlemented sandstone spires, yellow, red and purple, and the brooding, enigmatic silence of soaring peaks. The Reserve is well stocked with game—eland, oribi, vaalrhebuck, rooirhebuck, hartebeest, and if you are lucky you may even be rewarded with a glimpse of the shy and dainty klipspringer, and of the mighty lammergeyer.

So much for the range itself, rich in history, in archaeology, in flora and fauna, apart from its challenge to the mountaineer and to the photographer.

The best time to visit the Drakensberg is during the winter months—May, June, July and August. At this time the weather is more settled, and rain falls only rarely. Once a month or so snow will fall on the high peaks, but it seldom reaches the grassy slopes of the Little Berg. Here, in these sun-soaked valleys, the weather is delightful—crisp, warm days and cold nights. Up on the heights of the main Drakensberg the climate is harsh, bitterly cold, especially at night, and snow will lie on the summit plateau for months at a time. Streams, and even rivers, are frozen solid. Not so pleasant is the summer. This is the rainy season. Violent thunderstorms are common, and for days on end the peaks will be shrouded in mist and rain. In addition to all this, the heat can be exhausting.

The whole area is, of course, a climber's paradise. Here you have every grade of climb from the pleasant walks and easy climbs in the Little Berg to climbs on the high peaks, in snow and ice, which will tax the powers of the most expert cragsman. Summit traverses are most popular, and very rewarding. Two points must, however, be made. Firstly, the approaches to the peaks are usually long and arduous. The country is broken and difficult, and from the majority of the hotels anything from four hours to two days must be allowed before you reach the base of your peak. Most of the major climbs involve sub-camping for at least a couple of nights, and often more.

Secondly, it must be remembered that Drakensberg rock is not good climbing rock. It is friable and inclined to break away. The climber accustomed to the safe, hard rock of England and Wales must be especially on his guard when climbing for the first time in the Drakensberg.

Equipment is simple. You will need a pretty capacious rucksack, for you may be away from supplies for several days, sometimes for weeks at a time. In summer a single sleeping-bag is sufficient: in winter two should be carried. Always carry with you, even in summer, plenty of warm clothing, for changes in the weather can be swift and devastating. For winter conditions on the summit, ice-axes and crampons are essential, and also a light, portable gas-cooker, for fuel is scarce. Tents should also be carried for summit work. In the Little Berg tents and gas-cookers can be dispensed with, for caves are numerous and fuel abundant. Snake-bite outfits should always be carried.

Camping trips in the Little Berg are pleasant and easily undertaken. Climbing trips to the summit are a different proposition. Here exposure in the depths of winter, without proper equipment or knowledge of the terrain, can spell disaster, and such trips should always be undertaken with caution. Until one knows the country one should always be accompanied by an experienced guide. No system of professional guides has yet been established in South Africa, but members of the Natal Mountain Club are always ready to assist in this way. Visitors are warmly welcomed, especially at the annual July camps, which, by the way, are one of the best ways of getting to know the Drakensberg. The address of the Club is P.O. Box 4535, Durban, Natal, South Africa. Good international airports exist at Durban and Johannesburg, and the distance, by road, from Johannesburg to Estcourt, main jumping-off place for the Drakensberg, is 260 miles, along a two-lane tarred highway, and from Durban to Estcourt, 120 miles, along a four-lane tarred free-way.

16 'Cathédrales de notre temps'—the new St. Gotthard road (see Pl 108)
Photo: Swiss National Tourist Office

