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Drakensberg – South Africa's best kept secret

By Andrew Attwood

South Africa offers tourists coming to our country a huge choice of holiday destinations. But it's the

Drakensberg Mountains that are still kept as a secret place that seems a bit off the normal beaten track and while some folks do make it to the Drakensberg most don't.

The best place to start your journey would be to download the free Drakensberg Tourist Map which will give you a great idea of where everything is. This is the only to scale tourist map that's available for the region. It shows all the back roads, indicates which are recommended and which are not and indicates how far things are. But what I like about the map is that it's freely distributed, includes all the activities that the region offers and a great selection of the best accommodation that the Drakensberg has to offer.

The Drakensberg starts in the North with Clarens and the Golden Gate National Park and ends in the South at Bushman Nek. In between you will find the Royal Natal National Park with its Amphitheatre, Mweni the wildest part of the mountains, Cathedral Peak, Monks Cowl, Injasuti, Giants Castle National Park, Kamberg with the best Bushman rock art site in the whole Drakensberg Mountains, Loteni, Sani Pass, Cobham, and Garden Castle.

There is lots to do in the region but the main reason you come to the Drakensberg is because of the mountains. While every part of the Drakensberg is special and has its own uniqueness there are a few spots you don't want to miss. The best place to get to the top of the escarpment is at Sentinel Peak. The return hike is 5 hours and takes you to the top of the Tugela Falls which falls some 948 meters into the Royal Natal National Park below. The view from on top of the Amphitheatre is probably one of the most spectacular views in the world. Most tourists tend to walk at the bottom and while it's worth the visit it's just not the same as the top.

The Central Drakensberg and Northern Drakensberg form one region and by far the best example of this section of the Drakensberg Mountains is Giants Castle National Park. Essentially the experience in any part of this region is the same where you have the opportunity to hike the lower reaches of the Drakensberg Mountains or otherwise stay low in one of the valleys. What makes Giants Castle more interesting is the large choice of trails and the lack of other people. I suppose it won't stay that way

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forever but the experience of walking in the mountains and not seeing another soul can still be found here. From Giants Castle looking south the mountains become softer, less dramatic but make no mistake hiking trails in this gentler landscape is just as good and should be included in your trip. Kamberg is a really good spot where the added attraction of the best site of Bushman rock art is available.

Bushman Rock Art is most definitely a reason to visit the Drakensberg Mountains. The excellent video presentation before the 3 hour guided tour at Kamberg gives a great explanation of the history of the people as well as the rock art at game pass shelter. The rock art at Giants Castle at the main caves is also good and is a very easy walk. The Didima Rock Art Centre at Cathedral Peak offers a great presentation although the paintings are reproductions. All rock art must be viewed with a guide.

Horse riding through the foothills of the Drakensberg is an experience not to be missed. Sengani horse trails offers safe trails for beginners and experienced alike. Spionkop game reserve even offers game viewing on horse back.

Steeped in history, the Battlefields Region offers enthralling tales of British, Boer, Zulu and Voortrekker history. The Anglo Boer War reached as far south as Mooi River and the many sites are best visited with a specialist guide

The region offers a fun and fascinating collection of art galleries, craft shops, cheese tastings, leather work, antiques, clothing, gifts and pottery. All the activities represent a unique collection of South African creativity. Take a slow journey to view outstanding galleries such as Millgate, Indigo Fields Gallery, and Zombeza. Community development projects like Eyethu Ceramics and Thandanani Craft uplift local communities allowing tourism a wider benefit.

A trip up Sani Pass into Lesotho and a visit to the highest pub in Africa is a must. It's a dramatic 4x4 trail climbing 1330m in 6,5km's. Passports required.

Game viewing is available at Weenen, Spionkop, Umgeni Valley and Golden Gate. For Birders the Lammergeyer hide at Giants Castle the Crane Foundation at Kamberg and the bird of prey display at Falcon Ridge are highlights. Fort Durnford in Estcourt offers one of the most complete bird egg collections in South Africa.

For adventure seekers the region offers white water rafting and quad bikes, the longest cable slide in South Africa, a gorge swing and a flying trapeze, bicycle tours and even hot air ballooning

The Drakensberg Boys Choir is a world renowned choir which performs most Wednesdays at 3:30 pm. Bookings 036 / 468 1017. Don't miss this enriching cultural experience. Another enriching cultural experience is Mpopomeni Zulu tourism experience where tourists have the opportunity to meet local people, hear a bit of the history of the settlement and taste some of the traditional food. What's great is that the experience is about real people and does not feel touristy at all.

Or just pamper yourself at one of the region's many health spas. For a difference Indigo Fields offers a real Africa day spa experience

Drakensberg resources

- Hiking trails and accommodation in the Drakensberg. The best tourism promotion website for the Drakensberg and Natal midlands available on the net.
- downloadable map for the Drakensberg and Natal Midlands Regions. The most essential tool for tourists visiting this region
- A huge list of links to accommodation in the Drakensberg Mountains
- pictorial guide to the Drakensberg
- Antbear Guest House near Giants Castle in the Central Drakensberg
- Vergezicht Mountain retreat in the Northern Drakensberg
- Palmswift B&B accommodation in Winterton
- Treehouse accommodation in the Natal Midlands
- Horse trails in the Drakensberg Foothills
- Drakensberg boys Choir
- Mountain guide for the Drakensberg region
- Drakensberg central reservations office

Andrew grew up in the Drakensberg region and now runs the renowned Antbear Guest House situated near Giants Castle in the Central Drakensberg See this

. here.

Sublime Drakensberg Experience! The Drakensberg Boys' Choir

By Brian Kemp

Travelling to South Africa? Well, you're going to Cape Town, right? And you want to see if you can get the Big 5? Here's something that's better than Cape Town. Better than the Big 5. And it's the Drakensberg Boys' Choir.

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There are quite a few things that are unique or world class in South Africa, and the Drakensberg Boys' Choir is one of them.

Doors opened in 1965 to the first 20 pupils. The dream was of a multi-racial, multi-cultural Choir School to rival the Vienna Boys.

Not in the middle of a history-rich, ancient European city. But in the boondocks. In a beautiful, rural, sparsely populated valley in the Drakensberg Mountains of KwaZulu Natal, South Africa. The first and only one of its kind on the continent.

Today the annual intake is 100 boys between 9 and 15, and auditions are held nation-wide.

Can you think of anything more sublime than crisp, mountain air, majestic mountains, azure skies and natural beauty as far as the eye can see, complemented by the pure tones of counter-tenor harmony?

The Drakensberg Boys' Choir tours overseas every year and is internationally recognized as one of the best in the world. And they aren't just holier than thou brats either - after hours they're into rapids tubing, abseiling and hiking in their Drakensberg paradise. They work hard and play hard.

Be prepared for diversity. If you like a good dirge, stay away. The Drakensberg Boys' Choir has very catholic tastes. The first half of the concert is classical. You might hear Bach or Beethoven or Mozart. The second half can be anything. It could be Queen. (Freddie Mercury would have loved it). Or folk, or jazz, or sacred music. Or African harmonies you've never heard before that will bring tears to your eyes.

Come with tissues. And a jersey, for the goosebumps. But whatever you do, BE THERE. The Drakensberg Boys' Choir performs most Wednesdays during term time at 3.30 p.m. There is a world class auditorium on campus.

So if you're coming to South Africa - sure Cape Town's good and you need the Big 5. But you really shouldn't miss this. Sublime Drakensberg experience!

Brian & Janette Kemp own

, a 4-star retreat in the foothills of

the

in KwaZulu Natal, South Africa.



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