



Northern Drakensberg Traverse *Sentinel to Cathedral Peak over 6 days*



On the Bell Traverse heading for Cathedral Peak

Route Overview

This is a classical traverse of the Northern Drakensberg escarpment, the so-called “Barrier of Spears”, which forms the border between the mountain kingdom of Lesotho and KwaZulu-Natal in South Africa, and which rises dramatically from rolling foothills to heights in excess of 3000m or 10,000 feet. This trek shows off the pride of the KwaZulu-Natal Drakensberg, beginning with an ascent of the **Amphitheatre**, and then making a southerly traverse along the rim of the escarpment towards Cathedral Peak. Your route will pass through the Mnweni Cutback area, which possesses some of the finest and remotest scenery along the entire length of the high Drakensberg escarpment. At Cathedral Peak, a decision can then be made to follow one of two descents, depending upon conditions and group ability. The favoured option is to break away from the escarpment line along the **Bell Traverse*** to the base of the **Cathedral Peak summit block**. Complete your trek with a climb to the summit at 3005m**, then descend to valley base via Orange Peel gap. The alternative is to follow the escarpment over **Cleft Peak** (for wonderful views) and descend via **Organ Pipes Pass**.

** If the Bell Traverse is very wet, or the guide feels the exposure is too challenging for participants, the alternative descent using Organ Pipes pass will be opted for.*

*** A climb of the Cathedral Peak Summit block is a relatively exposed climb over 300m. Although it is not technical, there are some sections which involve scrambling, which become more challenging when wet. If you are prone to vertigo, this climb is probably best skipped. The trek along the Bell Traverse and past the summit block will still be rewarding though.*

The Experience

While the trek is not technical, it passes over rugged terrain in a **pristine wilderness area**, and you will be off marked trails except when ascending or descending the major passes. You will experience extensive views of the high Drakensberg and the Maluti Mountains of Lesotho, and have the opportunity to ascend a variety of short summits in excess of 3000m as you progress. You are likely to meet Basotho herders en route, and experience a variety of mountain birds, including the magnificent **Bearded Vulture** (previously named the **Lammegeier**, or “lamb killer”), whose wingspan can reach 3m. You will be travelling along the African Watershed where the water in the streams is the purest on the southern continent!

Grade: Strenuous - this is a medium altitude trek requiring good walking stamina. You should be comfortable covering 15 kilometres per day over undulating territory between 2500m and 3300m off marked trails, and be comfortable ascending 1200m in a single day.

Altitude: Mostly between 2800 and 3300m. Various 3000m+ short summits

Style: This is a camping-style trek lead by an experienced, personable local guide, supported by porters, and vehicles where appropriate to/from trailheads.

Itinerary

Day 1 - Arrival at Drakensberg Base

Today you will need to make your way to The Cavern Hotel (1430m) at the base of the Royal Natal National Park in the Northern Drakensberg (either self-drive, or we can arrange transfers from Johannesburg, Durban or specific accommodation). This is an excellent, family run three star hotel that makes a good base for pre-trek and post-trek nights. The trek will start a short drive from the hotel. The guide will meet you at the hotel in the late afternoon to introduce himself and give you a pre-trek briefing.

Overnight at The Cavern Hotel in a standard room on a full-board basis

The Cavern (TGCSA 3-stars)



The Cavern is an old-style 3-star family resort hotel tucked away up a side valley close to the Royal Natal National Park in the Northern Drakensberg. The hotel is family run and is set among well-kept mature gardens and woodland, offering accommodation in 55 well-appointed rooms (some thatched) in blocks set out on terraces around the hotel complex. Suites and Superior rooms are located away from the main hotel area, in a particularly quiet location overlooking a small wooded valley with a stream running through it. The hotel has a very friendly and welcoming atmosphere and is very much a traditional weekend getaway for South Africans, with swimming pool, horse-riding, hiking, fly fishing, games room and Saturday night dances. It also makes a comfortable base for those embarking to the high mountain. A firm favourite in the area.



Day 2 - Hike to the top of the Tugela Falls, Amphitheatre



Day one of your trek is a big day, and you will be ascending continuously. You will start walking from Mahai (1440m) in the Royal Natal National Park (RNNP), which is about 30 minutes by road from The Cavern. You will be lifted round early in the morning, taking packed breakfasts and packed lunches with you. Mahai is a good place to start as firstly, the porters will have spent the night here and it is easy for the group to assemble and sort of packing, and secondly, it provides the most straight-forward access for ascent to Witsieshoek, the end of

the first stage of today's hike. It's also a beautiful climb, following the Mahai Stream, up past the Mahai Cave and Falls, before climbing the Gudu Pass onto the ridge at Witsieshoek. Other than forming the boundary of the RNNP, this ridge also forms the border between KwaZulu-Natal and the Free State Provinces and, more interestingly, forms the Southern African Continental Divide. Follow this ridge all the way up to Witsieshoek Mountain Lodge at 2240m. This stage takes between 4½ and 5 hours and covers approximately 8.5kms.

Having reached Witsieshoek, you will be lifted in a lodge vehicle up the 8km long dirt road (boring to walk!) to the Sentinel car park at 2500m. From here, you will start the second stage of your hike and ascend to the top of the Amphitheatre at 3000m (about 2½ hours). The walk is punctuated with superb views looking down into KwaZulu-Natal, and along the Amphitheatre wall to the Devil's Tooth and Eastern Buttress. There are two ascent options: the Gully or the Chain Ladders. The Gully is more physical and summits on top of the Beacon Buttress, whereas the quicker, more direct route is up solid steel chain ladders that are bolted to the rock face – the ladders are in two stages, separated by a grassy shelf about two thirds of the way up, and cover a vertical distance of approximately 35m. Once on top one heads for the lip of the Thukela (Tugela) Falls which plunge over a drop of about 850m. In summer the flow can be quite good and one can see the whole fall as it drops into the Thukela gorge below. In winter one overlooks the iced waterfall, which often has huge icicles. Camp is either made near the top of the Thukela falls (2980m), or about a kilometre further on, near the Bilanjil falls (2960m).

Total distance - approximately 14kms; vertical metres climbed on foot - approximately 1300m

Overnight on top of the Amphitheatre close to either the Thukela or Bilanjil falls

Day 3 - Amphitheatre (Thukela Falls) to Mbundini Abbey, overlooking Madonna and her worshippers

From the Amphitheatre, a route is followed taking you inland through Lesotho, following the Kubedu River valley. You will then break away up a tributary back towards the escarpment, bringing you to a logical camp spot (2940m) close to Mbundini Abbey, tucked behind the escarpment close to a small stream. This walk will give you a good feel for the true remoteness of the high rolling interior of highland Lesotho, and add variety to your trek - it's a little like being on a high Scottish moor, without the threat of meeting other people or seeing lights and roads. An alternative camping spot (2900m) can also be used in the valley just back from the escarpment edge by Fang's Pass.

Total distance - approximately 15kms; vertical metres climbed - several short ascents over undulating terrain

Overnight camp in the vicinity of Mbundini Abbey, or alternatively Fangs Pass

Day 4 - Mbundini Abbey to Orange River Source



Soon after leaving camp you'll reach the escarpment edge close to Madonna and her Worshippers (sharp rock pinnacles and shapes inspired this name), and get your first views of the Mnweni Needles. Excellent views of the needles appear again a short while later as you look out from the top of Fang's Pass (pictured left). From here on south, you'll start getting superb views of the Mnweni Cutback and the Rockeries beyond. This section has so much beautiful scenery to enjoy, and you'll be tempted to linger to take advantage of excellent

photographic opportunities over the Cutback area, especially the Mnweni Pinnacles, which appear sharply as you make your approach. Having passed the Cutback's apex on a high ridge, there's a lovely long descent towards the Orange River, and you'll cross a wide marshy plain with the fluted Rockeries rising in front of you. After making camp near the stream (2860m), provided you have the stamina and the light is good, it's worth walking out to either the top of Mnweni pass, or the Rockeries Pass (both about 30mins from camp) for sundowner views.

Total distance - approximately 14kms; vertical metres climbed - several short ascents of up to 250m over undulating terrain

Overnight in tents near the source of the Orange River

Day 5 - Orange River Source to Mlambonja Pass



Start the morning by hiking up a ridge behind Nquza Pass to find an amazing natural swimming hole where you can take a refreshing dip if do inclined. Then continue hiking along a river valley that cuts behind the Saddle peaks, until you can eventually cut up to a lovely lunch spot on the escarpment edge with a superb view over the whole Cathedral Peak range, comprised of the Chessmen, the Inner and Outer Horns, the Bell and finally, Cathedral Peak itself – this is the line of the Bell Traverse which you should expect to follow tomorrow, conditions and

abilities permitting. After lunch continue past the top of the Ntonjelana Pass, cutting down into a river valley that runs parallel to and just set back from the escarpment. Camp is then made near the Kwakwatsi stream (2860m), just back from entrance to the Mlambonja (meaning "Hungry Dog") Pass (2980m), which also provides access to the Bell Traverse.

Total distance - approximately 14kms; vertical metres climbed - several short ascents of up to 250m over undulating terrain

Overnight in tents close to the top of Mlambonja Pass

Day 6 - The Bell Traverse OR to Organ Pipes Pass



Two routes for descent to the Cathedral Peak Hotel over the next day and half now present themselves – the first of these is the Bell Traverse, which affords the opportunity to summit Cathedral Peak (3005m) before descent to base the following morning; the second route is to continue a traverse of the escarpment over Cleft Peak (3277) to Organ Pipes' Pass, which is descended to base the following morning. Both of these are fine routes, and there are advantages to each; the Bell Traverse is not for everyone owing to exposure, and the ascent of Cathedral Peak (which is optional) also

involves some mild scrambling. Conversely, the view from Cleft Peak back towards the Amphitheatre is one of the classic Drakensberg views and Organ Pipes Pass is one of the most pleasant passes in the Drakensberg to descend. Route choice will depend upon the prevailing weather conditions (the Bell Traverse can become dangerous when wet – it is also the least preferable route in poor visibility) as well as group competence and ambitions (trekkers who are averse to reasonably high levels of exposure or not sure-footed are likely to be discouraged by the guide from making the traverse).

Option 1 – Bell Traverse & Cathedral Peak

The Bell Traverse follows a 6km ridge that breaks away from the line of the Drakensberg escarpment. Notwithstanding the precipitous nature of the Drakensberg escarpment generally, the Bell Traverse is considerably more exposed than earlier stages of the trek. It involves following a path that traverses steep slopes with a relatively high level of exposure for around 3 kilometres. The reason for undertaking the traverse is to gain access to Cathedral Peak itself, which is a free-standing summit separated from the line of the main escarpment, to which it is tethered by a comparatively jagged ridge line comprising the Chessmen, the Inner and Outer Horns and the Bell itself, across whose flanks the path cuts its way. The traverse ends at the base of the Cathedral Peak summit block, which can then be climbed, weather-permitting. An out-and-back ascent of the peak takes around 2 hours from the base of the summit block, plus time to admire the view from the summit (*pictured*). Please note that whilst the ascent is not technical, it is steep and there are several rock bands which require some scrambling – there is a chain ladder near the summit. These sections are also relatively exposed and pose particular difficulty when wet – a rope is taken for back up and may well be used if you are not a confident scrambler. Those who are vertically challenged would do best not to attempt the peak. Having climbed the peak, descend further down Bugger's Gully to a path leading to Orange Peel Gap. About 1½ km before Orange Peel Gap, the path flattens and begins to contour. Camp is made here on account of it being the only flat ground (2400). **Please note that there is no water here** – the last water point is at the previous night's camp spot at Mlambonja, and water bottles must be filled here, sufficient to last 1½ days. A key reason for making camp here is to afford the possibility of climbing Cathedral Peak the following morning if poor weather scuppers an ascent today.

Total distance - approximately 7½ kms, excluding summit block; 580m height loss, excluding summit block which is approx. 300m vertical ascent and 300m descent

Overnight in tents between Buggers Gully and Orange Peel Gap

Option 2 – Cleft Peak & Organ Pipes’ Pass



Although you miss out on the exposure of the Bell Traverse, and also the summit block of Cathedral Peak (which is not to everyone’s liking), this route traverses some awe-inspiring sections of the escarpment. The section around the top of Xenie Pass and the crinkled rim around Elephant, Plum and Cockade is certainly a Drakensberg highlight, and the descent of the Organ Pipes pass has some spectacular situations. Cleft Peak (3277m) is the highest point reached, although

this can be skirted if desired on the Lesotho side. The view from the top of Cleft Peak, looking over the Cathedral Peak range, back towards the Amphitheatre is one of the Drakensberg’s finest, and the views South towards Champagne Castle are also fine. From the top of Cleft Peak, descend fairly steeply to a camping spot (2860m) in the valley nestled between Cleft Peak and Ndumeni Dome, tucked behind Windy Gap at the top of Organ Pipes’ Pass.

Total distance - approximately 12kms; vertical metres climbed - several short ascents including a 250m ascent of Cleft Peak from Tseketske Pass

Overnight in tents behind Windy Gap/Organ Pipes’ Pass

Day 7 - Descent to Cathedral Peak Hotel and return to The Cavern

The descent time today will depend on which of the two routes you opted for on the previous day. Both descents bring you down to the Cathedral Peak Hotel, which is the trail end point.

Option 1 – Descend from Cathedral Peak/Orange Peel Gap

The final day is the shortest hiking day, although it will be lengthened if participants opt to ascend Cathedral Peak today. If the peak is to be attempted this morning, participants will need to retrace their steps back up Bugger’s Gully to the base of the summit block first – allow 3½ hours for the round trip to the summit from camp.

From camp, follow the contour path round to Orange Peel Gap, which you pass through to the south side of the Cathedral Peak ridge line. From the Gap it’s about 7kms down to the Cathedral Peak Hotel, which will take between 2 and 2½ hours to cover.

Total distance - approximately 8kms from camp direct to the hotel; descent from camp to the hotel is 950m; vertical ascent from Camp to Cathedral Peak Summit (optional) is 605m

Option 2 – descent from Organ Pipes’ Pass

The descent via Organ Pipes’ Pass down to the Cathedral Peak Hotel is one of the most straightforward in the valley, save for a few steep sections on the pass itself which will require the use of hands, but will be unlikely to cause any problems. That said, you will be descending from the top of the escarpment to the base of the park, a vertical descent of about 1540m, and this will take a good 4 hours. There are options to break off the route and make short ascents up to either Ribbon or Doreen Falls if you fancy a quick wetting to cool off. Overall, this is a pleasant descent with fine views across to the Cathedral Peak range.

Total distance - approximately 10kms from camp direct to the hotel; descent from the top of the pass to the hotel is approximately 1540m

Once at the hotel, you can opt to take a well-deserved brunch or lunch on the terrace (à la carte, at your own expense). The porters will be driven to the taxi rank located 30km down the road while you take some refreshment. The driver will then come back to meet you, and transfer you to The Cavern. Here, the guide will bid you farewell and you can spend the afternoon relaxing at the hotel, enjoying hot running water, a good dinner and a proper bed.

Overnight at The Cavern Hotel in standard rooms on a full board basis

Day 8 - Onward travel

If desired, Walks in Africa can make help you with onward travel in KwaZulu-Natal (Battlefields, Safaris with or without walking, Maputaland Coast – all excellent end easily linked), South Africa as a whole (Kruger, Cape etc., including further walking if desired), or the wider region (Namibia, Botswana, Zambia, Zimbabwe).

END OF ITINERARY

Mountain Guide



The guide for this trip is Zee Ndaba, a wonderful lady who is the only female Zulu Walking Guide in the Drakensberg. You may have spotted her guiding Julia Bradbury on the BBC series *South Africa Walks*, which was aired just before the Football World Cup (see below). Zee's local knowledge is second to none and, having lived and worked in the UK for 3 years, she speaks excellent English and has great empathy with culture in the UK - not only can she regale you with tales of her Zulu roots, she can entertain you with stories of life in Birmingham, Leicester, Hampton Court and beyond!

"Imagine arriving at one of the busiest airports in the world with £20 in your pocket and not knowing a soul? When Zee landed at Heathrow she didn't know London or anybody there and she survived on her guile, personality and tenaciousness. She is a true adventurer, a warrior woman, and a joy to talk and walk with" - Julia Bradbury, Television Presenter and Outdoor Enthusiast

Important Notes:

1. As you will be travelling in a mountain environment, please note that actual travel may alter owing to factors such as prevailing weather conditions and party acclimatisation. Activities and timings may vary slightly from those outlined, and decisions relating to pace and route will be at the discretion of your guide, who will at all times endeavour to enable the group to meet its objectives safely. There is some flexibility in the itinerary and it's possible that you will spend nights at slightly different points along the escarpment.
2. The Drakensberg is an extensive wilderness area, and once above the escarpment line, you will largely be travelling in an area where there are no marked tracks. There is some flexibility in the itinerary and it's possible that you will spend nights at slightly different points along the escarpment – again, this will depend upon prevailing conditions, group fitness and inclination, and the discretion of the guide.
3. The first day is arguably the toughest, although the descent is relatively tough too. The middle days of the trek, when you are traversing the escarpment, can be flexed to make up time if needs be. In which case, you may end up camping at positions that are different to those stated in the itinerary.

Best times for undertaking this trek

The South African autumn (Mid-April until Early June), is generally considered the best time for trekking in the Drakensberg, as it's generally very dry and sufficiently warm on high for traverses with camping to be made in relative comfort. The South African spring is also excellent, although generally less stable than the autumn period. As a good rule of thumb, the optimum time for making high level traverses is from about mid-March until mid-June and again in September and October. During these periods, typical maximum temperatures during the daytime reach between 15 and 20 degrees C, but at night temperatures can fall to around -5 degrees C, and sometimes lower. Snowfalls can sometimes occur as late as September (note that in 2009 it snowed heavily in November!), or as early as mid-April, although this is more the exception rather than the rule. At all times of year, there is always the chance that cold fronts can sweep up from the Cape, and these can bring cold, wet weather in the Drakensberg for several days at a stretch.

Do note that trekking can be undertaken at any time of year, so long as you are prepared for extremes of weather; summers are typically warm but with a higher incidence of rain (either in the form of short midday and afternoon storms, or more sustained as a result of a cold front), and winters see generally dry conditions but with low temperatures, which often fall to below -5 at night, but which can on rare occasions fall as low as -20. You would be unlucky, but must be prepared for it! When prepared, winter can be a wonderful time to experience the Drakensberg.

We can help with your onward travel too:

South Africa is a varied and interesting country with an excellent transport infrastructure, and there are a great many options for onward travel options available either before or after your trek. Walks in Africa have extensive knowledge of South Africa, its game reserves, coastal regions, cities, cultural and historical attractions, and accommodation. Many visits to South Africa are also combined with visits to neighbouring countries such as Namibia and Zambia, and we also have good knowledge of these countries too. We would be delighted to assist you with a bespoke travel itinerary.

KwaZulu-Natal province, where the Drakensberg mountains are located, has much to offer in its own right; it's home to the famous Zulu War battlefields of Isandlwana and Rorke's Drift, as well as Boer War and Boer-Zulu battlefields - excellent national parks (eg. Hluhluwe-iMfolozi) as well as private reserves (eg. Phinda, Zululand Rhino Reserve, Thula Thula) - and a magnificent, semi-tropical, protected coastline extending from the St. Lucia wetlands to the border with Mozambique. Travelling in KwaZulu-Natal alone makes for a very varied and comprehensive holiday.