

HIGH ON A HILL

With a new pony pal, **Hlengiwe Magagula** discovers that Alpine adventures are not as distant as we think



CLOSE YOUR EYES. IMAGINE A FARAWAY LAND,

where rivers tumble through Alpine meadows under dramatic snow-capped peaks. A place where intrepid travellers venture on horseback to overnight in remote valleys, waking to the sound of shepherds' bells.

Ok, open your eyes and listen. What if that distant country was right on your doorstep? No expensive long-haul flights or irksome visas required. You may have already guessed it – I'm talking about Lesotho, so near and yet so different. The land of the lammergeier and mokorotlo hat, African ski slopes and dinosaur footprints in ancient rocks.

As a native of another little country embraced by South Africa, I was curious to discover what makes the home of the Sotho so special. The first impression, and the most obvious feature, is the geography. No matter which aspect you approach, you will be met by mountains. These define the country and are the reason for its

independence, a place proudly apart. Even Lesotho's 'lowlands' are high, 1 000 m above sea level.

As I left behind the neat farmlands and straight roads of the Free State, I plunged into those highlands. And the change was instant. Sheep in their hundreds, mowing unfenced pastures, watched over by their leathery shepherds. Men wrapped in big colourful woollen blankets, on foot and on horseback. The road – better than I expected – curving, winding, sweeping, climbing. Its bends, and many pedestrians, made me slow down dramatically, all the better to enjoy views of the increasingly vertical topography of the south west of the country. In the past, I've walked the Drakensberg on the KwaZulu-Natal side, but now I felt I was being swallowed in their great mountainous belly.

There was a plan, an equestrian plan. Horses aren't a big feature in my Swati homeland, so I was chewing my lip the next morning, wondering if ponies and I were meant for each other. What if



Where to stay

Former trading posts have been reborn as tourism centres and one such is **Malealea Lodge**, a good base for pony trekking expeditions into the south western highlands. Its gardens contain a rambling selection of rondavels, Basotho huts, camping spots and modern rooms. Meals are served at communal tables in the dining room. Horseback riding is well organised by the Pony Trekking Association, who bring the horses to the lodge. Costs start from R275 pp for day treks and from R540 pp for overnight treks, depending on group size. Malealea Lodge is 200 km from Bloemfontein, near the town of Motsekuoa. Check the website for directions. From R135 pp for camping, R210 pp for forest huts (BYO bed linen), and R440 for rondavels (linen supplied). Tel: SA Bookings +27 82 552 4215, Lodge +266 (0) 5840-7816, malealea.com



I can't control mine and we gallop off a cliff? I met my mount, Pepper, and she took my measure. Sporting a hairnet and riding helmet, I was already looking a bit funny. It was obvious from her steady gaze who'd be in charge in this relationship – and it wasn't going to be me.

Happily, these Basotho ponies are bred specifically for tourist trekking, and understand exactly what is expected of them. Calm and surefooted, Pepper knew the mountain trails as well as any guide. Soon, horse riding felt as natural to me as walking, and we made steady progress away from our mountain lodge and into a grassy water-eroded valley. After an hour, we dismounted above some cliffs, where the paths became too steep and narrow for the horses. A Verreaux's eagle glided in the void, hunting dassies.

I followed my guide into Pitseng Gorge to a series of rock shelters, an outdoor art gallery.

'Lesotho is full of Bushman paintings, we keep finding more,' he told me.

This artistic flair has been passed to the Basotho people, who are famous for their skill in weaving, crafts and music making. That evening, I found some of these craftspeople at work in Ribaneng village, where we stayed in a traditional Basotho hut. Our overnight kit had been sent ahead, slackpacking style. Cosy inside, I was glad I'd taken that option rather than camping, as a rainstorm swept up the valley, and lightning flashed on the cliffs.

In the morning, the sky was clear, and the scene idyllic. With Pepper parked – actually freely grazing amid the cattle



Buy the book

More used to two feet than four, Hlengiwe Magagula is co-author of *Walking Safaris of South Africa*, due for publication by Struik Travel & Heritage in February 2021. penquinrandomhouse.co.za

– we set off on foot for an hour or so, descending into a green chasm. The prize was a mighty waterfall, as spectacular as anything that draws hordes of visitors to the other extreme of the Drakensberg range on Mpumalanga's Panorama Route. Except here, in Lesotho, we were the cascade's only admirers.

The mountain chill did not tempt me for a swim – and anyway, I had a new four-legged friend waiting for me. ★

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