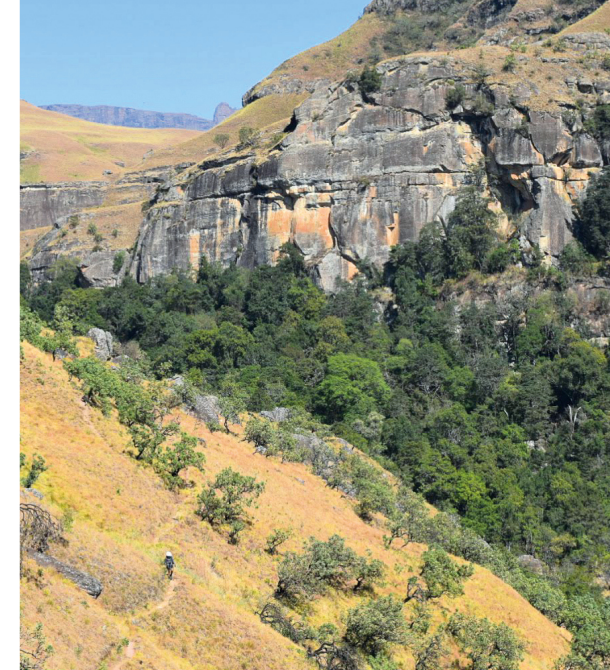


GHOST OF INJISUTHI

A sleep-out in the Central Drakensberg brings freedom, solitude and room to breathe

WORDS HLENGIWE MAGAGULA



WITH EACH STEP HIGHER, THE AIR TASTED COOLER AND THE BASALT PEAKS WERE MORE SHARPLY DEFINED AGAINST A CLOUDLESS SKY.

I stopped to take a 360. Behind me in a haze lay the farmlands, slow baking in the summer oven. The trail, a brown thread weaving through tussocks of green, curved on a ridge, then disappeared into a deep Drakensberg fold, only to reappear on the next ridge, and so on down the valley. Far below, I could just discern a splash of lime-green, the copse of plane trees that shelters Injisuthi Camp.

That tidy camp, with its clipped lawns and braai scents, is a final outpost before SA's greatest mountain wilderness. After leaving it, we didn't meet another person for two days – only ghosts. Ghosts, you ask? Yes, these valleys are filled with the spirits of those who have threaded the trails, who have hunted eland across the grasslands, bathed in tumbling streams, taken shelter in dust-dry overhangs.

They left their mark in these half-caves, painting red ochre tales of hunts and battles. The Drakensberg geology favours the creation of these natural rock shelters, as its soft sandstones are overlaid with hard volcanic layers. A million years of wind and water does the rest. Many have traces of rock art, and one in particular, Battle Cave, is famous – a rich gallery of life forms. It's no wonder the area was inscribed on the UNESCO World Heritage Site list for its traditional art and natural conservation value. Today, the Maloti-Drakensberg Park is managed



ADVENTURE

by Ezemvelo KZN Wildlife, who maintain a rich choice of camps and trails.

A handful of rock shelters that don't have art are open to hikers to spend the night, and one such was our goal: Marble Baths Cave is about a four-hour hike from Injisuthi on well-signed trails. And it was so nice to hike free from the burden of a tent. The deep V-shaped valley has gentle inclines that give way to steep and sweaty scrambles, with the firm trail skirting thickets and rocky outcrops. Here and there, a gnarled protea tree offers a shady break. About 9 km from base camp, we reached Marble Baths, finding the cave has several floor levels with room for eight or 10 to sleep safe from the elements. But with clear skies forecast, we dropped down 60 m to the Injisuthi river, to be closer to the water for a skin-tingling dip and cooking on the camp stove. We found the river gushing in a hypnotic cascade through rock chutes and pools sculpted smooth over eons.

After an afternoon of relaxation and raptor spotting, setting up camp was the easiest ever, rolling out sleeping kits on the flat rocks. By 5 pm, the valley floor was in shadow and, as the temperature plummeted, beanies and gloves were deployed. It was my first time without the reassurance of a tent's shelter. I think the best way to describe the experience is magical with a tinge of vertigo-inducing wonder at the sweep of the Milky Way, shooting stars chasing shooting stars, the white skyglow before the moon rose at midnight, a celestial spotlight that made the white stones glow.



Need to know

• When to go:

Between the summer rains and winter ice, autumn (March – May) is the ideal season for Drakensberg hikes.

• Conservation fee:

Overnight visitors are exempt from the conservation fee. Day visitors pay R45 per adult, R20 per child (free with Rhinocard or Wildcard).

• Camping:

Injisuthi camp sites are R100 pp in low season and R130 pp in high season (no plug points), two person safari tents are R380 in low season and R480 in high season.

• Hiking permit:

Overnight hikes are R80 pp. Guided hikes to the finest rock art site, Battle Cave, are R80 pp, and self-guide is also allowed, with the key available at reception. Make sure to sign the hiking register and be equipped for all weather conditions. A hiking map is available for sale at camp reception.

• Bookings:

Ezemvelo KZN Wildlife
033 845 1000
kznwildlife.com



PHOTOGRAPHY: COURTESY IMAGES



I slept with dreams of mountain spirits, waking to the dawn sun flooding the Drakensberg towers in warm red. Staying wrapped a while against the chill, I was mesmerised by the sounds of gushing water and bird song hanging in the still air. It felt humbling to be there, feeling small in the crinkle of a fold in an ancient and mighty mountain range.

Then it was time to retrace our steps, startling a shaggy-coated grey rhebok on the trail. There was time on the return walk to drop backpacks for a detour to Battle Cave, which is fenced to protect its precious artwork. It was impossible not to ponder the circumstances of its creation, as time and again little groups gathered in the shade, bellies full of trout, to tell tales and add their own marks.

Returning to pick up my backpack, I found a zipper open, and my snacks disappeared. Was it you, little rhebok? I don't think so. Perhaps it was a light-fingered ghost, pausing on its silent way to higher ground. ★