

Setting up camp was the easiest ever, just rolling out sleeping mattresses and bags on the flat rocks.



**SOUL FOOD** The breathtaking vistas, fresh air and deep quiet of the Drakensberg offer city dwellers a pure nature fix.



# Beauty SLEEP

Whether under canvas, in a cave or below the Milky Way, at Injisuthi in the central Drakensberg, you'll sleep like a rock and wake up to see South Africa's highest peaks glow in the morning sunlight. **By Hlengiwe Magagula, Photos Denis Costello**

**W**hat do you get when you take thick strata of sandstone, layer on harder volcanic rock such as basalt, then watch erosion do its thing for a million years? A landscape of peaks, cliffs, deep valleys and thousands of overhangs and shallow caves. Simplifying greatly, that's the basic geological story of the Drakensberg. Little wonder our ancestors found this place very liveable for some 4 000 years.

I was finding it pretty liveable, too. Injisuthi, in the central Drakensberg about an hour's drive west of Estcourt, is one of the best places to experience such caves, and even overnight in one. After the drive from Durban, and a night soothed by the lullaby of a burbling stream, I emerged onto the deck of our safari tent to see the peaks glowing in the morning sunlight.

The Ezemvelo KZN Wildlife camp at Injisuthi has the feel of a bygone era, all clipped camping lawns and tidy bungalows in the shade of plane trees. In these days of greater awareness of native biodiversity, those interloping trees would not be planted, but as well as shading our tent their vivid lime-green branches are happily used by Cape weaver birds and other nesters.

Filling water bottles at the campsite tap with delicious, pure, chilled water direct from the mountains, I met our neighbours, Philip and Courtney, who had driven all the way from Cape Town to climb Mafadi, a four-day looped expedition. As they described their route, our own little weekend adventure seemed tame, and then one name jumped out: Marble Baths. Their last night would be our hiking destination. It is one of four caves open to overnight hikers upon payment of a ▶



small fee at the camp reception. Why just four, you may ask, when there are countless caves? That's because many of the others are cultural treasures, the sites of rock art that reveal rich details about the lives and belief systems of hunter-gatherer society. In 2000, the area was inscribed on the UNESCO World Heritage Site list, both for its rock art and natural conservation value.

With a final layer of sunblock applied, we set off into a V-shaped valley, the lower slopes patterned in alternate shades of green and brown, as if by an artist's hand. In a way, this is the case, as the vegetation is actively managed and burnt in a regular sequence, each burn block getting its turn every few years. Fires are a natural and essential element of Africa's grassland biomes, clearing matted clumps of dried grass and allowing seeds to germinate in the sunlight. What's more, rainwater runoff is reduced, allowing more moisture to be stored in the ground.

The neat trail, just wide enough for one walker, climbed gently through red themeda and tussock grasslands studded with spring flowers. I stepped over a fresh pile of antelope dung, and stopped to look around. The recent owner remained elusive, perhaps hidden in the thickets close to the river below. Perhaps it was an eland, with this area a stronghold for the elegant animal.

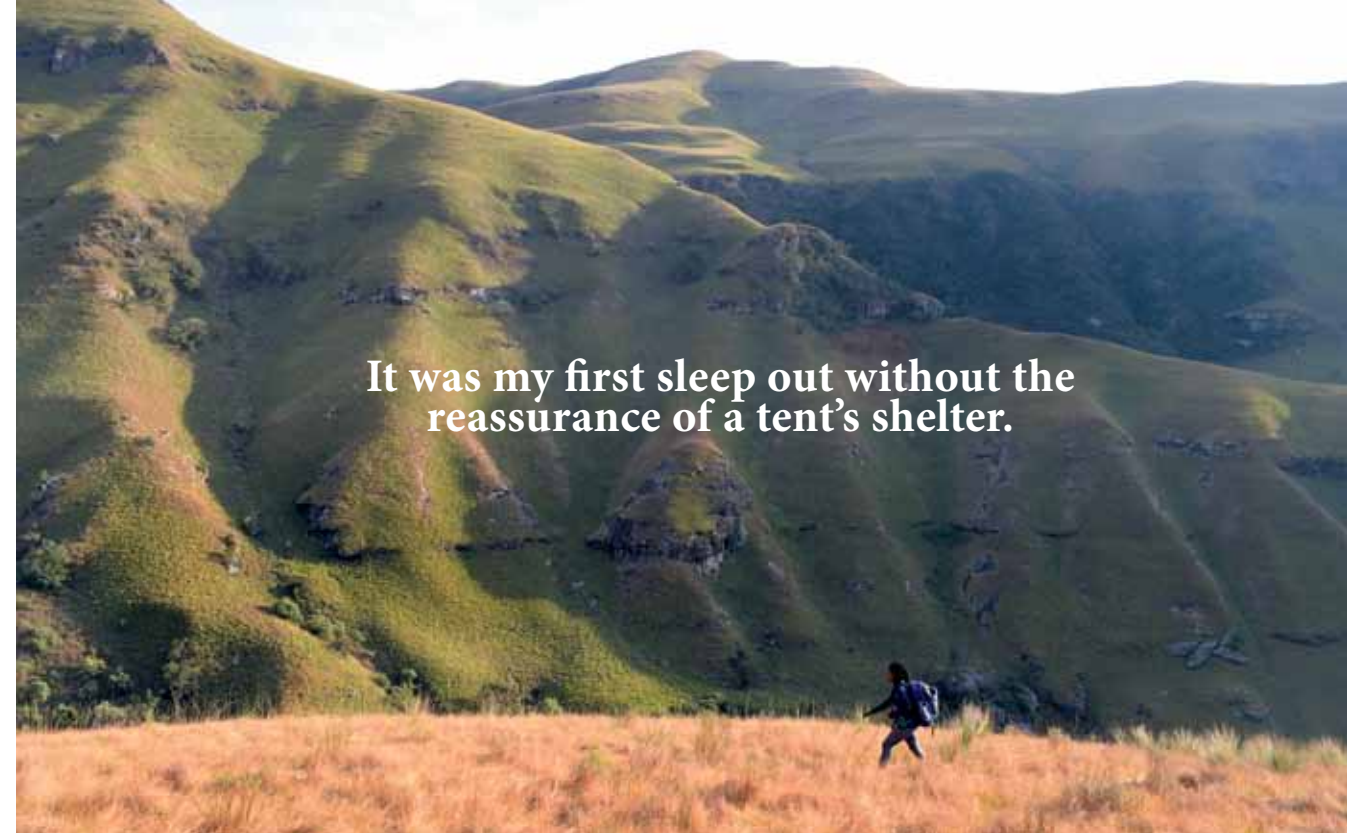
After two hours of walking, we came to a fork and a stone inscribed for Marble Baths. After crossing the Injisuthi River on natural stepping stones, we followed the trail into a side valley, directly towards the towering escarpment wall, the frontier with Lesotho. At an altitude of over 1 500 metres, the terrain is open grassland, with dense wood-

lands in the clefts and valley floors. Gentle inclines gave way to steep and sweaty scrambles as we skirted thickets and rocky outcrops. Now and then, a gnarled protea tree offered a shady break. These *Protea dracomontana* trees are well adapted for the fire cycle, with deep roots.

A further two hours took us to our goal, Marble Baths Cave. With several floor levels, there is room for up to 10 to sleep here safe from the elements. But with clear skies forecast, we dropped down to the river, to be closer to the water for a skin-tingling dip. We found the river gushing in a hypnotic cascade through rock channels sculpted smooth over aeons.

After an afternoon of relaxation, setting up camp was the easiest ever, just rolling out sleeping mattresses and bags on the flat rocks. By five the valley floor was in shadow and, as the temperature plummeted, beanies and gloves were hauled out. It was my first sleep out without the reassurance of a tent's shelter. The best way to describe it 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.

The reverse walk was into a cooling breeze. A shaggy coated grey rhebok (see page 44) skipped across the trail and turned to give us a curious look. We managed the descent 30 minutes faster than the ascent, giving us time for a shower in the spotless ablution block at Injisuthi camp before the drive back to Durban. I have a feeling this won't be the last time I book a rocky bed at the wilderness hotel. 🐾



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Injisuthi Nature Reserve is a three-hour drive from Durban.

### TRIP PLANNER

**Conservation fees** Day visitors R45 an adult, R20 a child, free with a *Wild Card Camping*. Injisuthi campsites are R100 a person a night in low season and R130 in high season. There aren't any plug points. Two-person safari tents are R380 a night in low season and R480 in high season.

**Hiking permits** Overnight hikes are R80 a person. Self-guided hikes to the finest rock art site, Battle Cave, are also R80 a person, 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, [www.kznwildlife.com/](http://www.kznwildlife.com/)



Above: Hikers must sign the mountain register before setting out. This picture: Bedding down on stone slabs smoothed by water.

**COSTS** 2-bed safari camp R380 + overnight hike R160 + fuel R460 = R1000