

SOUTH AFRICA
Drakensberg - Exploration
January 2009
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30 December 2008: After quite an eventful night at Witsieshoek mountain retreat where we had to battle with the plumbing (after a search for the tap handles, only to find that there was no hot water, later no water at all and then the pipes complaining throughout the night), we were more than ready to explore the mountains around Phuthaditjhaba. We couldn't have hoped for better weather. We followed several cattle trails down to the Fika Patso dam and several river crossings followed.

Chris had been studying the topographic maps and was the only one that knew where we were heading. During one of the interesting downhill, Jenny twisted her ankle badly and the going was slowed down. There were many locals around and we were asked for food and even water every time we were approached by a group. One guy said that there was cholera in the water but maybe his English was not that good. Nevertheless, I begged some chlorine tablets from Jen, getting the ratio and waiting times mixed up thus providing the opportunity for much laughter and reducing the tension that had built up. We were very aware of the thefts taking place on top of the Sentinel and we have just stumbled upon a "coming off age" ceremony and were made to feel most unwelcome.



Several river crossings followed

The amount of caves in the area was mind blowing. We finally made it to Suoi cave, where we set off cleaning the cave before settling down for the evening. It was decided that Warren and myself would follow Chris the following day and Phillip would keep Jenny, who at this stage could hardly walk, company and fix up the cave.



Bundu bashing through the chi chi bush

31 December 2008: The weather couldn't have been better but the two bachelors, Warren and Chris took their time and we finally got away by 6am. The general idea was to explore the unknown passes. The going was extremely tough since there were no paths and the grass was extremely lush. (Not to mention the patches of Chi Chi bush)

A long ascent followed before we finally reached the exposed grassy slopes. Trying not to hyperventilate, I reminded myself to get some help for my "must be old age and some bad experiences" fear of heights once I reach civilization.

Sunrise on Africa's Peaks - South Africa



Steep uphill - I am getting too old for this!

Luckily, Chris and Warren came to my rescue. Chris grabbed me by my backpack and Warren shoved me from behind. We decided to have a short break. I was trying my level best whilst sitting under a dripping rock NOT TO LOOK DOWN, while the two bachelors were chatting away, admiring the lovely EXPOSED VIEW and baking in the warm sun.

The chattering of my teeth announced that it was time to go.

Warren was talking to himself most of the way and when I asked him what the conversation was about he said, "I am crazy going with you guys!".

The view was spectacular and after one last scramble, by 14h00, we reached the top of the escarpment. Chris christened the pass Black Wall pass and built a big cairn and then it was time for lunch. It was very noticeable that there was no litter to be found, which enforced our feeling that no one had been up this pass. We scrambled down another unknown pass and Warren had several falls, injuring his knee. Every stumble was followed by the mug attached to his bag clanging, Warren falling and me asking, "Warren, are you all right?" Luckily it was not too bad and I could convince Warren that his cup clanging was not irritating me but rather warning me to get out of his way. A long excruciating downhill followed (have I mentioned that my left big toenail was removed 3 weeks ago and it was still very tender?) and by 17h00, with my feet begging for a new owner, we stumbled into the cave. Jenny's ankle was swollen badly and it was decided to take the easiest route out the next morning. Our new year's celebration lasted exactly until 20h00.



Chris, Warrick and myself on top of the just named pass.

1 January 2009: With a large bag of litter strapped to my backpack (mostly sardine cans left by locals), we headed straight for Fika Patso dam, hoping to catch a taxi on the main road. Locals having a braai next to the dam wall couldn't believe their eyes when we walked past them and they insisted on taking some pictures of the crazy hikers that had appeared out of nowhere. Further down we bumped into more locals who were showing off their skills on a quad bike. They were reluctant to give us a lift, claiming that they were out for the day enjoying themselves and did not want to be interrupted. We had forgotten that it was a public holiday and that everyone was in a party mood. The road took us straight into Phuthaditjaba where everyone was once again extremely surprised to see us. We had to explain to everyone where we came from and where we were heading. The one lady informed us that we should have just gone over the mountain but after trying to explain the situation to her she just nodded her head in a strange way.

Finally we convinced a local to take Chris and Phillip to the resort to retrieve the vehicles. Jenny, myself and Warren kept on walking along the road. In a short while the locals who had given Chris and Phillip the lift passed us, shouting that Chris and Phillip would be with us shortly. A long wait followed and still no sign of them or the vehicles. Finally they arrived and explained that they had been delayed because Phillip had barricaded the toll road and refused to budge until the official returned their toll money as he had promised. Happily reunited, off we went to the Shell garage for a quick wash and to repack the cars. The decision was that Chris, myself and Phillip would go exploring in Lesotho while Jenny and Warren return to Gauteng. A short and memorable trip through Golden Gate took us to Fouriesburg Country inn where we spent the night – a place I highly recommend.



A cute worm



Chris and myself on top of a pass in Lesotho

2 January 2009: The start of our adventure in Lesotho. After studying the Lesotho map and consulting with some locals, it was decided to take the scenic route to Katse dam. Phillip and Chris were enjoying the 4X4 thing while I was sitting in the back, trying not to notice all the pot holes in the road. Around 12h00 a puncture stopped us. Since we had intended a 6 day hike in the mountains and not a 4X4 trip in Lesotho, I had left most of the repair kit and tools at home. While Chris and Phillip were changing the tyre, a 4X4 passed us, informing us that we were on a private road leading to a mine (opened 2 years ago) and that the road to Katse that we intended to take was pretty bad after the rains. We decided to have the tyre fixed in Matlehong and then head on to Sani Top Chalets.

The Supa Quick shop we had expected to find turned out to be 4 old tyres next to the road. Le Duc, the owner, had to be fetched from the river and charged us R80 to fix the puncture. Relaxed and happy that once more we had a spare, the adventure continued. The feeling didn't last very long because 20 minutes after leaving Matlehong we heard a big bang. The tyre Le Duc had just fixed, exploded. – obviously his air pump gauge was faulty and he had over inflated the tyre. We stopped to inspect the damage and did our usual wave to the locals and realized that they were not waving back but rather throwing stones at us. We jumped into the car and sped off, absolutely shocked at the hostility shown us.



This was definitely some sort of celebration

The erosion due to over grazing around Matlehong was incredibly bad. The mountains were a desert landscape. (Who said that it was difficult to break a mountain?). We arrived at Sani Top Chalet at 16h00 where we were welcomed by the owner and given the following sleeping options since the place was packed

- share a hut with the locals
- share a room with the owner and his 3 big dogs
- take over Liam's room, a tourist from England, forcing him to share a room with the owner and his 3 big dogs.

Taking into account Phillip's snoring it was unanimously decided to kick Liam out of his room.



The litter on top of Sani Pass

3 January 2009: One look at the owner's face the next morning convinced me that he didn't get too much sleep the previous night. (Phillip's snoring must have gotten to him since his dogs made it impossible to close his door).

After breakfast, the nightmare trip down began. Since I suffer from a fear of 4X4ing, I chose to close my eyes during the first part of the road down Sani Pass. The road turned out to be a highway with at least 15 4X4s passing us and the expressions on the drivers' faces were all the same. Did you get down in this little 4X4? Once again, Cutie, my little 1300 Daihatsu Terios had stood the test.

The tyres were quickly sorted out in Underberg and we headed to Kgotso Backpackers where two hours of horse riding in the mountains followed. The backpackers was full and most of the guests were international tourists waiting to go on 4X4 trips or pony trekking into Lesotho.

4 January 2009: Time to head home. The guys had not yet had enough of dirt roads and decided to take all the "off the beaten tracks" whilst I tried to sleep or read, already thinking of dates for the next trip to the mountains.



The very steep winding road down Sani Pass

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Yes, she made it down!