

Northern Drakensberg Tours

[Amphitheater Backpackers, Jagersrust](#)

The Lodge

We are found near the foot of the Amphitheatre, close to the bottom section of Royal Natal National Park with a picture postcard view of the Amphitheatre from the lawn. In fact the panorama that stretches around us takes in the entire Northern range from the Amphitheatre all the way to Cathkin Peak.

The lodge is built from stone, thatch and wood. Sip a cocktail from the swimming pool, climb the indoor climbing cave, relax tired bones in the sauna or Jacuzzi. All double rooms are en-suite. The funky bar has a wonderful range of music to listen to and is a great meeting place for all. No need to bring anything along as the restaurant (which opens at 07h00) serves gorgeous food and light snacks.

Prices begin at R5 a meal. The al-a-carte menu runs until 14h45, after which we offer a SET three-course menu every night @ R65 for meat eaters and R55 for vegetarians. You get a starter, main course and a cocktail or dessert for this price.

A river wends its way through the lands and there is a small dam. For those with a head for heights we already offer Abseiling from mountain peaks and bridges. The idea of the hostel is that it is a base from which you can explore different sections of the Drakensberg Park each day.

Features of the area

Although we offer all the usual abseiling, fly-fishing, mountain biking and horseriding that other berg hostels do our day tours are what set us apart from the rest!

We are lucky to have two of South Africa's most popular hiking destinations within easy access, The Royal Natal National Park and Cathedral Peak. Both areas have recently become World Heritage Sites. We are also on the edge of South Africa's longest and deepest dam, Sterkfontein.

We are closely positioned to Lesotho.

- HIGHEST WATERFALL IN AFRICA, 2ND HIGHEST IN THE WORLD.
- LARGEST INDIGENOUS FOREST IN THE DRAKENSBERG.
- BIGGEST CONSOLIDATION OF CAVE PAINTINGS IN THE WORLD.
- HIGHEST COUNTRY IN THE WORLD

The three main tours are the highlights of the area and we have a package deal for those doing all three.

However there are many other activities available for those staying longer than three days.

3 x day tour / package

1 - Tugela Falls / Mont Aux Sources / Sentinel Hike

As you can see this trip has many different names. It is the most famous hike in South Africa as it takes one to the highest waterfalls in Africa (the second highest in the world!!). The trip starts at Amphitheatre Backpackers at 7:30 am after the indemnity forms are signed. Then we drive around the spectacular Sterkfontein Dam. We stop briefly at the viewpoint that looks out over the section where Sterkfontein and Driekloof dams meet. We are given a brief explanation of how the scheme works. Then it's through Qwaqwa and up the side of the Amphitheatre via Witsieshoek Pass. If one decided to walk from the BOTTOM (Mahai campsite) to the TOP then it would take about 3-4 days to get there and back again. This is why we cheat and travel the extra distance to the base of the Sentinel where we walk to the TOP and back in one day (the perfect

hike for impatient people!). After signing the mountain register we set off around the massive Sentinel Peak. At the first look out point we stop for a break and to hear how the mountains were formed. Then its on up the kloof gully as we stop for breaks we are shown a variety of mountain flora. At the top of the gully we are shown where Devil's Tooth is and we listen to how the vegetation at the top differs from that on the lower slopes. Now we are the TOP of the Amphitheatre (over 3000m up) and the TOP of the Drakensberg. From here you get your first view of the 1km drop down the Amphitheatre Wall into the bottom section of Royal Natal. Off we tramp across the escarpment and along the Tugela River where folk can dip in the rock pools. Here you can stand a chance of catching a glimpse of the elusive and famous Bearded Vulture. We talk about what birds one can expect and also what animals are in the berg. To your right is the highest point, Mont Aux Sources, (and the source of 4 of our major rivers.) Then it's on to the lip of the Amphitheatre to the Thukela Falls that plummets 948m in five clear leaps, making it the world's second highest waterfall. The falls upper reaches occasionally freeze in winter. Here we have lunch. Over lunch we hear about the different weather patterns as well as the various mountain rescues that have been done in this area. We explore the plateau and then off back to the car with knee tingling 100-rung chain ladder on your descent. When we get to Qwaqwa we stop and fill the bus with petrol. Here we chat about the history of the area, how "homelands" began and what new developments there are in the area at present. On the drive home we stop to watch the sun set over the dam at the Vulture-feeding site. Here we hear about how the site works and the different birds. We get back home in time for dinner.

2 - Lesotho

This day trip is very special as no other tourists ever travel to the area that we visit. The day begins from Amphitheatre Backpacker's at approximately 07h00. We take you over Monantso Pass (a rugged pass on the side of the Amphitheatre) and into Lesotho. This mountain Kingdom is still as it was hundreds of years ago. The secret of the area that we visit is that it is not featured in any of the travel books and so it remains completely "untouristy." The bus travels around Sterkfontein Dam and through Qwaqwa, a town that has an interesting mix of both Sotho and Zulu people. It was also one of South Africa's first "homelands" during apartheid. It takes about 60 minutes to arrive at the South African border post. Visitors must ensure that they have a "multiple re-entry" visa into South Africa in order to be allowed back across this border on their way back. The day is spent hiking to San cave paintings. The emphasis of the day is on the unique geographic features of this beautiful Region. As we hike through the area we come across people going about their daily routines. Visiting cave art, sometimes there might be young musicians with their handmade instruments, hunters with their dogs, kids eating roasted mice that we buy and taste, sangomas, old women in the village are sometimes making Sotho beer or cooking traditional yams, pap and wild spinach which people are allowed to sample. Kids might be playing football, we often visit the local school and basically taking part in anything that is happening in the area at the time. The trip includes all food, guides fees and transport.

3 - Rock Climbing

No other hostel in the Drakensberg offers rock climbing. This is a sport that is increasing in popularity each year worldwide. Amphitheatre Backpackers offers incredibly well-priced Rock Climbing day tours run by knowledgeable and highly qualified guides. Unlike the other two tours this is a day where 2-5 clients make up a group. So it is very personalised. It is day of self growth as opposed to the more sociable emphasis of the other trips. The hostel has a bouldering cave built in the BAR! Designed by one of the

country's best rock climbers. This is a good introduction into the sport and most beginners "warm up" the evening before to get themselves "into" the experience. There is a wealth of rock climbing available in this beautiful area, routes that have been bolted and graded and also trad routes. Climbers are picked up from Amphitheatre Backpackers lodge in the morning and driven to the beginning of the climbs. Indigenous bush surrounds one and the views are not to be forgotten. Trips are tailor made to suit the ability of each client. For beginners this includes an introduction into the sport explaining how the different devices work, learning basic knots and the essential concept of the sport. Guides are fully equipped and qualified. Guides fees, equipment, climbing shoes, lunch, entrance levies and transport are all inclusive!

For those with more days in their schedule

4 - Cathedral Peak

- 64 Kilometres from the lodge. 80 Kilometres from Amphitheatre.
- There are amazing rock paintings to see. It is considered to be the RICHEST rock art area in the WORLD. There are 3900 paintings in 17 sites.
- "Sebaayeni Cave" has 1146 individual paintings in it alone!
- The reserve is found in the Mlambonja and Mdodelelo Wilderness area.
- "Ndedema Gorge" is also very popular and is the LARGEST indigenous forest in the Drakensberg.
- "Mike's Pass" is the ONLY road access to the TOP of the "Little Berg". It is 10.5 km beginning at the "Mike's Pass Gate" near Cathedral Peak campsite. This road gains 500m in altitude from bottom to top.
- Cathedral Peak is 3004 meters high.

5 - Sterkfontein Dam

- Sterkfontein Dam is the 3rd longest in SA and extremely beautiful with mountains surrounding it, cliffs to dive off and clear blue waters
- The fishing is fantastic with the largest variety of indigenous fish in the country.
- Woodstock, Driekloof and Sterkfontein Dams are part of a hydroelectric scheme in our area also known as a "pump storage scheme."
- Unlike normal hydroelectric schemes water is re-pumped from Woodstock Dam, along canals, into Kilburn and then BACK upwards under into Driekloof again.
- They pump when more electricity is being generated than being used (at night, holidays etc.)
- This scheme was built in the 1970's and generates 1000 MW for our national grid.
- The water is sucked down big water pipes from Driekloof, through a 4.5 km highway and down to Kilburn dam.
- The water travels at 218 cubic meters per second. There are 4 reversible turbines (to pump water up AND down the mountain) situated 52 stories below ground level! You can do a free tour of the station if you wish.
- Sterkfontein Dam covers 18000 Ha.

6 - Vulture Restaurant

- As farming has got bigger and bigger in South Africa the amount of big predators like lions has decreased, this means less food for scavengers like the vulture.
- A project has thus been set up where cattle and sheep farmers donate any dead animals to this site for the vultures and other meat eating birds to eat.
- The number of endangered birds now living near the hostel has increased.
- Besides large raptors other smaller birds can also be seen at the site. They visit because all the rotting meat has encouraged more insects. This means more food

for the little birds.

- The raptors you find at this site are the Bearded Vulture, Cape Vulture, Black Eagle and Martial Eagles.
- The Bearded Vulture or Lammergeier
- If you see one of these you are very lucky as they are extremely rare and only found at high altitudes. Especially on top of the Amphitheatre.
- It is a dark falcon-like bird with a three-meter wingspan. It has a black beard with red eye rings. It is normally silent but when it whistles it goes “feeeeeee”.
- The Cape Vulture
- You should see many of these at the site and on top of Pocolane. They always stick together in large noisy groups.
- They have blue throats and faces with yellow eyes. There is a black spot on the back of their wings.

7 - Golden Gate National Park

- This is a nice route to use when either driving to or from Johannesburg.
- Nestled in the rolling foothills of the Maluti Mountain lies the Golden Gate Highlands National Park.
- This is a beautiful park, set on the edge of the Lesotho border and Qwaqwa National Park.
- There are lovely drives and short walks. Mushroom Rock and Echo Ravine is a great hike to do, lasting about 45 minutes.
- Places of interest include: the Van Reenen family graveyard (including the two black tombstones of the siblings struck by lightning at the top of the Amphitheatre,) the impressive Brandwag buttress rock formation and a bird hide at the Langtoon Dam
- Interesting lookout points and viewpoints are: Zuluhoek lookout point, Generaalskop viewpoint, Oribi basin and Drakensberg view.
- Entrance fees are free.

8 - Qwaqwa National Park

- This 22000 ha nature reserve borders the Maloti mountains and merges with Golden Gate Park.
- The two Parks are linked by the R712.
- There are hikes in this area but they require overnight stops.
- The Basotho Cultural Village is the main attraction where informative guided “cultural” hikes are very popular.
- Sterkfontein and Qwaqwa National Park are managed as one Park.
- Most people see this park simply as a means to reach Golden Gate Park when in fact it has pretty picnic spots and view points of its own where game can be spotted.
- Entrance is free.

9 - Eskom’s Pump Storage Scheme

- There is a daily 2-hour tour around the pump-storage scheme.
- The trip runs on weekdays and is free of charge.
- There are trips at 10:00 am and 2:00pm. Prior booking is essential.
- The trip begins at the visitor’s centre where children are given a slide show that gives a detailed account of the environmental impact of the hydro-electric scheme on the area and how electricity is generated using water.
- After the talk visitors are taken 52 stories below to view the turbines.

10 - Historic Sites

The area in and around the hostel is steeped in history; some sites reflect 1000 of years of past where the san travelled throughout the area hunting and decorating caves with their beautiful artwork.

Other sites are far more recent reflecting the many bloody conflicts between Boer, Brit and Zulu, as well as clashes between other groups.

Most museums and battle sites are inexpensive to visit, but the experience is improved with the aid of trained guides.

11 - Harrismith

- A two hour guided tour around Harrismith introduces children to the historic importance of Harrismith.
- The kids visit the local museum, and the Boer cemetery; discuss local architecture and its influences.
- To end the day they pay a brief visit to the local township, Intabazwe.
- The cost of the tour is R15 a child and also needs prior arrangement.
- Lunch is not included.
- Another interesting place to visit is the Harrismith Botanical Gardens that has an entrance fee of R5 per scholar.

12 - Lady Smith Siege Museum

- Ladysmith is a mere 60 minutes from the hostel and is the site of a siege where the British were surrounded by the boers for days.
- It is also the area where Kruger captured a young Winston Churchill.
- Even Mahatma Ghandi appeared in the area as a stretcher-bearer during the war, there is a sculpture of him in the town.
- The siege museum in the centre of town is a must as it contains artefacts taken off battlegrounds, uniforms, old printing presses, weapons and other interesting items reflecting life at the time of the siege. It is set in the original building where rations were handed out to the British.
- Entrance is free to scholars and teachers.
- Guides are available to explain the significance of the area.
- The tour lasts a day and begins at the museum. It includes a visit to: the site of a 23yr old Churchill's capture (he was a war correspondent at the time,) Clouston Military cemetery, a talk on the battle of Colenso (where 10 artillery guns were stolen from the British) and it ends in a wonderful hike up to the top of Spioenkop (overlooking Spioenkop Nature Reserve) to discuss the battle of Spioenkop.
- The tour costs R35 per child this includes the historian and entrance fees. Lunch is NOT included.

13 - Spioenkop Battlefield Site

- The area around Spioenkop and the Nature Reserve is rich in history with remains of a number of late Iron Age sites present in the reserve.
- The main historical significance of Spioenkop involves the events that took place as part of the "Relief of Ladysmith" during the Anglo Boer War.
- The tragedy of war is evident in the number of gravesites in the surrounding area but the extent of the carnage can only be understood by visiting the battlefield on the summit of the mountain.
- There are graves containing close on eight hundred bodies.
- A booklet on the battle is available from the reception office and is well worth reading.
- An important bit of history is that three men present at the battle became

national leaders.

- Two of them played significant roles in world history.
- The three were General Botha, leader of the Boer forces, Winston Churchill who was a journalist, and Mahatma Ghandi who was a stretcher-bearer.
- There is a road to the top of Spioenkop, but it is much nicer to walk up overlooking the game reserve.
- The entrance fee for scholars is R10.

14 - Piet Retief's Rock

- 9km from the hostel is a very famous National Monument, Piet Retief's Rock.
- The road is not tarred, but is fairly well graded.
- Some guests enjoy the cycle ride from the hostel to Retief's Rock, as the view over the valley from this landmark is very pretty.
- There is also a monument that has been built at the end of the little berg escarpment to commemorate the Voortrekkers descent into Natal.
- It is a bronze statue of a young woman without shoes.
- The story goes that she walked over the pass into Natal without shoes, as she hated the British so much.
- There are no entrance fees to visit Retief's Rock.