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## **uKhahlamba/Drakensberg Park**

### **Barrier of Spears**

**By Johann van As and Max du Preez**

“Majestic” and “breathtaking” are probably the words most used by travel writers when they describe the Drakensberg Mountains, “awesome” being the younger set’s preferred cliché. Even the World Heritage Site Committee’s description sounds a bit out of breath – the uKhahlamba/Drakensberg Park has “superlative natural phenomena and beauty”.

And that’s just looking at the massive cliffs, gorges and valleys of the park. Besides its natural beauty and high level of endemic and threatened species, the park also met the criteria of a “cultural landscape” listing of a World Heritage Site: it is the world’s biggest and certainly most spectacular art museum. No other art site can boast 35 000 paintings, the youngest probably around 150 years old, the oldest dating thousands of years ago. The artists were the San or Bushmen hunters and gatherers who lived in these parts since time immemorial and started disappearing in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. The park can be seen as a monument to these remarkable people.

The park's double-barrel name tells the story of the other human beings who came after the Bushmen. uKhahlamba was the name the Bantu-speaking farmers who migrated into southern Africa from further north gave to the impenetrable mountain range – it means Barrier of Spears. The white migrant farmers who trekked over the mountains in their oxwagons during the 1830s called it the Drakensberg: Mountain of Dragons. (Well, “dragons” did live there once – many dinosaur fossils and some footprints have been found in the region.)

The rock art in the six hundred sites, mostly rock overhangs, are remarkably well preserved. It is still not known exactly how the Bushmen made their paint to last so long in the open, but we do know they used pigments and minerals from the soil and ground rock (ochre, ferric oxide, silica, gypsum, specularite, etc.) as well as charcoal, animal blood, fat and possibly urine and plant extracts. Bushman artists also sometimes engraved their images on the rock, but in the Drakensberg region most art was painted.

The World Heritage Committee stated that this art treasure was “one of the supreme achievements of humankind”. Yet for a long time, Bushman art wasn't regarded as important or valuable, because it was seen as the naïve and primitive scribbling of a childlike people. But serious research during the last four, five decades have unlocked some of its secrets and revealed its spiritual depths.

Most rock art is amazingly skillful and finely detailed, especially if one keeps in mind the rough surface of the rock and the fact that the artists only had feathers, sharpened sticks, bones or their fingers to paint with. Animals, especially eland which appears in so many of the art, are depicted in a variety of postures: standing,

lying down, running or leaping. Animals are sometimes seen from above or from behind. Human beings are also shown in fine detail and a variety of postures.

Unlike Western art where a viewer is advised to stand back and appreciate the whole painting, rock art should be studied from up close, because every detail, every posture has a meaning. This wasn't art for the sake of art only, or painting pretty pictures. Most, if not all, of the artists were shamans, spiritual and medicine men and women. They probably only painted after coming out of a trance, induced by rhythmic dancing and breathing, which was their way of entering the spiritual world. When they painted a human being with the head of an antelope, for instance, it had a very specific meaning.

Unfortunately we have little knowledge of the culture and spirituality of the artists themselves, and nobody left to ask about it. The modern understanding of rock art increased tremendously during the last two, three decades as researchers realised they had to scrutinise every little bit of information gained during the 19<sup>th</sup> century from the last Bushmen who knew how to interpret the art.

“There is no doubt that San rock art is highly sophisticated,” states eminent anthropologist David Lewis-Williams, one of the world's greatest experts on rock art. He adds that we need to move on from admiration to understanding. “Even as we start to discover and evaluate its finer aesthetic points, we come up against the sobering thought that we are doing so from a Western, not San, point of view. We have to remember that we are taking an outsider's view.”

The uKhahlamba/Drakensberg Park deserves to be recognised as a treasure to all humankind because of its richness in one of the oldest art forms practised by humans. But the park is also worth a visit because of its unique natural assets.

The Drakensberg Range forms the border between KwaZulu Natal in South Africa and the mountain kingdom of Lesotho. Its alpine region spans 193,6 square kilometers with roughly 3 percent extending into Lesotho. It also has alti-montane (high altitude mountain) grassland and woodland ecoregions. Its eco-regions are characterized by elevations over 2 500 metres. Among its peaks are Thabana Ntlenyana (3,482 metres above sea level, the highest in southern Africa) and Mont-aux-Sources (3,299 metres) near the scenic Royal Natal National Park.

Some researchers have compared this region, especially the highest altitude portions of the Drakensberg, to the alpine tundra. The mountain range with its steep and treeless alpine slopes is the southernmost point of the afro-montane regional centre of endemism, and is regarded as one of the world's oldest centres of plant endemism. It not only supports numerous endemic plants, but amphibians, birds and reptiles as well.

The Drakensberg Range is the source of both the Tugela and Orange Rivers. The Tugela plunges 2 000 metres over the edge of the Mont-aux-Source Plateau. The Orange River is southern Africa's longest river, originating on the Lesotho Highlands and meandering west forming a natural border between Namibia and South Africa, eventually flowing into the Atlantic Ocean. The Drakensberg range forms the watershed of South Africa, the water flowing either westwards down its slopes towards the Atlantic Ocean or eastwards to the Indian Ocean. The high altitude streams, oxbow lakes, wetlands, and high annual rainfall of this region provides

water to the urban and industrial complexes of Mpumalanga and Gauteng in South Africa.

The geological formations of the Natal Drakensberg belong to the Karoo Sequence which, from the base upwards, consists of the Upper Beaufort Beds of the Beaufort Group and the Molteno, Elliot, Clarens Sandstone and Drakensberg Basalt formations of the Stormberg Series. The Elliot Formation was formed approximately 170 million years ago and consists of alternating beds of red shale and fine-grained sandstone. This formation is rarely exposed and is best seen in the stream beds below the Clarens Sandstone Formation and along eroded paths. It forms the steeply vegetated slopes below the Clarens Sandstone Formation. The Clarens Sandstone Formation is the most prominent of the sedimentary units exposed in the Drakensberg. The distinctive creamy white cliffs are a characteristic feature of the Drakensberg foothills and the sandstone layer. These beds are about 160 million years old and were originally laid down as desert dunes in a very arid climate during the Jurassic Period.

The Drakensberg basalts, formed from lava flows at the end of the Triassic Period, have shallow acidic sandy soils and dominate the region's geology. The basalt forms plateaus and steep slopes with terraces that provide a foundation for treeless alpine vegetation consisting mostly of tussock grasses, mat-forming plants, and ericoid dwarf shrubs. Rocky mountaintops and precipitous drops, with a few small plateaus, create a variety of habitats with many different plant and animal communities.

The high mountain or alti-montane habitats of the Drakensberg have about 20 vascular plant species in common with the Afro alpine flora of east and northeast Africa. While the number of plant species solely restricted to the high Drakensberg is unknown, 1 750 vascular plant species have been recorded within the KwaZulu-

Natal region of the Drakensberg. Of these, 394 species are endemic to the southern Drakensberg. The highest levels of endemism occur on the highest peaks. For example, *Helichrysum palustre* has been recorded only from the summit plateau of the Drakensberg and the high mountains in Lesotho between 2 300 and 3 400 metres. The spiral aloe (*Aloe polyphyllia*), a spectacular endemic plant of Lesotho, is found only above 2,000 m. The red data-listed Lang's crag lizard (*Pseudocordylus langii*) is described only from isolated areas in the eastern Free State above 3 000 metres.

There are three river frogs that are endemic to fast-flowing streams of the alti-montane grassland. The high alpine moors are home to three endemic lizard species, including one listed in the South African Red Data Book, *Pseudocordylus langi*, that only occurs above 3 000m. This ecoregion also supports important populations of another endangered lizard, Breyer's long-tailed lizard, the main populations of two restricted-range lizards as well as two near-endemic geckos. These lizards also have interesting blood parasites that have only recently been studied. Most of these infections are malaria of the genus *Plasmodium*. Very high blood parasite infections are found amongst high altitude lizards.

There are 25 snake species in the greater Drakensberg region of which three are potentially lethal to humans: the Berg Adder, Puff Adder and the rinkhals. Grass banks next to alti-montane rivers are also home to the recently described cream-spotted mountain snake, being a monotypic genus. The lower areas of this ecoregion, particularly the lowland forests harbour populations of Night Adders, Rhombic Egg eaters and Rhombic Skaapstekers. There are also smaller populations of Sundeval's Garter Snakes and Spotted Harlequin Snakes.

In addition, there are about 299 species of birds recorded in the Drakensberg. The mountain pipit is endemic to this eco-region. Another six species are near-endemic, including bush blackcap, buff-streaked chat, Rudd's lark, orange-breasted rock jumper, yellow-breasted pipit, and Drakensberg siskin. The southern bald ibis, Cape vulture and wintering lesser kestrel are globally threatened bird species that occur in this eco-region.

The area is also home to a variety of hoofed animals which includes the klipspringer, mountain reedbuck and eland. Until recently, the highly threatened Maloti/Drakensburg minnow was thought to be extinct until found at the Tsoelikana River in Lesotho.

Accommodation in the park ranges from luxury resorts and hotels to guest houses, B&B establishments, chalets and caravan parks and there are four golf courses. There are literally thousands of hiking trails, many of the more strenuous ones featuring overnight huts or listed caves. Horseback riding, bird watching, "kloofing" and abseiling are among the other activities offered to visitors.

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