

Giants Cup Trail

29th April – 4th May 2023

With spaces limited on this hike, it was the quickest on the buzzer, as the long anticipated invitation went out through the Midlands Hiking Club communication channels! With space only for sixteen, the waiting list was extensive, and the lucky sixteen began planning (and training).

The Giants Cup Hiking Trail (GCT) is a 59,3km trail that runs through the spectacular Southern Drakensberg, from Sani Pass to its finish in Bushman's Nek. There are five huts along the trail, which provide a place to rest tired legs and take in the peace and magnificence of the Drakensberg mountains. We had been forewarned that the huts were minimally equipped, but that lends itself to the adventure that is hiking (at least we did not have to carry tents!). Being a member of Midlands Hiking Club, not only provides you with access to places that inspire, but it provides you with hike leaders who have a wealth of experience, knowledge and more importantly on a hike of this nature, the ability to organize things with the precision of a military operation! 16 Hikers, differing levels of experience, a multi-day hike, slack packing, lunch and supper catered daily, logistical delivery challenges – it all came together seamlessly.

Pre-Hike Day

The night before the start of the trail was spent at the Sani Backpackers. We fueled ourselves with cappuccinos and a generous portion of cream scones, before settling down to an evening briefing from our guide and hike leader, Deon Small, from Berg Adventures. In his capacity as a member of MHC, Deon generously offered his services as an experienced Drakensberg trail guide to the club to lead our merry band of hikers through our GCT adventure. We cannot thank Deon enough for his superb guiding skills and for sharing his wealth of knowledge of the fauna, flora and history of the area.

After some unpacking and repacking of our "taxi bags" and our day packs, we settled in for an early night in preparation for the start of our journey at 8am the following day. Sani Backpackers was also hosting many of the runners taking part in the Drakensberg Ultra – a series of trail runs that ranges in distance from 160 to 32km. It was humbling to watch these runners come in to refuel after running much of the trail we would be walking, all through the night. The advantage of walking the trail post run, was that the path had been well cleared in preparation.

Day 1 - Sani Backpackers to Pholela Hut (Cobham)



Day One - 9,82km Ascent 376m
SANI BACK PACKERS TO PHOLELA HUT



We were all up early in preparation for the start of the first day of the GCT. At 8am sharp we hit the trail, following the white foot print trail markers up the first of a number of ascents. Early morning mist cleared as we ascended, taking a slow pace up towards Ndlovini Hill with the Giants Cup starting to emerge from the escarpment above. Along the way we spotted a decent sized herd of eland grazing in the valley below.

From here, as we crossed a sandy plateau the morning mist started to lift. We passed through grasslands and bouldered areas. Rocky cairns dotted the way. Stops along the ridge provided respite and viewpoints of the magnificent Giants Cup nestled in the escarpment profile and back towards the farmlands and dams in the valleys below. They were magical first moments that spurred us onwards and upwards.

A welcome tea break was had at the junction with the Giants Cup Trail path, coming in from the Trailhead. Sadly, at this point one of our hikers twisted his ankle by doing nothing more than standing up and misplacing his step on a tuft of berg grass. Luckily our hike leaders are experienced first aiders and with some strapping and the loan of hiking poles we nursed him along the remainder of the trail to Pholela Hut..

The path then descended from the ridge, with views of Cobham and the Pholela River nestled in the valley below. In the distance we could spot our home for the night, Pholela Hut. Deon guided us to a hidden waterfall, with a glorious swimming hole as our lunch spot. Only one of us braved the water up to ankle depth – but that was for therapy on the twisted ankle!

As we approached the hut, our final piece of navigation was crossing the Timmy Top bridge over the Pholela River and day one's walking was done. We were greeted with a jovial welcome from Nathan of Spirit of Adventure team. He was based at the hut to co-ordinate a school multi day group of 70 girls. Our wounded walker rested and iced his ankle, tended to by the ever so kind nursing sister who conveniently was in residence for the school group. Supper introduced us to the first of our tantalizing meals from the catering of Wild Flower Bakery, in Underberg, professionally delivered along with our lunch and snack packs for the following day. A fire was lit in the lapa and a sharing of old brown sherry set the scene for a debriefing of the day and a briefing of what to expect on day two. The steaming butter chicken curry warmed our souls and ensured we all went to bed feeling that the day had been pretty amazing.

Day 2 Pholela Hut to Mzimkhulwana Hut



Day Two - 9,53km Ascent 356m
PHOLELA HUT TO MZIMKULWANA



Sadly, our wounded walker had not recovered sufficiently to continue on the trail but the morning dawned sunny and after our farewells to new and old friends, we headed off heading towards Mzimkhulwana Hut. Our briefing from the night before had already prepared us for the adventurous day ahead, with the much anticipated tortoise rocks, Bath Plug Cave, a river pool and bunks with no mattresses.

As we ascended from the Cobham Valley, our first stop was a tortoise rocks, which are enormous boulders that look like prehistoric tortoises. Next up was Bath Plug Cave, about 4km into our day. This a cave that requires a little uphill climb off the main path but is worth every extra metre. We found some bushman paintings at the entrance – which for some of our more experienced Berg hikers, was a new discovery. The stream that flows into the cave, disappears through a hole in the floor, ending up a few metres below.

We jumped back onto the trail where a short way further down, a pair of eager eyes spotted another cave hidden just below our path. A quick explore revealed a decent size space, although a little damp – to be known from now and forever as Dusty's cave! As we wound on, we found a spot amongst the proteas for tea and filled our water bottles from the nearby stream. We needed to time our arrival at the Hut, with the arrival of our bags, which were being dropped off at the bridge, about 500m from the Huts, from where we had been told we would have to carry them across.. A thought we were not relishing (the taxi bags are a whole different story) but.... what an amazing sight! From a far off vantage point we could see our colourful taxi bags bobbing along on the opposite hillside, being carried by our wonderful backup crew. What a relief. With that we all relaxed into our last kilometer, looking forward to a chilled afternoon by the river. The hardest of us enjoyed a dip in the comparatively icy waters, whilst the rest paddled our feet enjoying the tingling relief. This overnight stop has no hot water or electricity. Cold showers are best taken early!!!!

The evening adventures began with a lone black backed jackal lurking around the hut looking for its evening, and morning meal. Then we were treated to an evening of star gazing under an almost full moon, led by Deon who shared stories of the stars guiding us across the night sky with his laser pointer. Supper was served, eaten under the stars.

Day 3 Mzimkhulwana Hut to Winterhoek



Day Three - 12,09km Ascent 524m
MZIMKULWANA TO WINTERHOEK



As the magnificent day dawned, we packed our bags ready for their (anticipated) collection. It looked like it was going to be a beautiful day on the trail, and we were certainly not disappointed. There were a few creaky bones from nights spent on camping mattresses and yoga mats, but the sun soon warmed our muscles up and we were off on the 12km stretch of trail.

Our ascent up towards Bamboo Mountain was fueled by the anticipation of reaching Crane Tarn. As we reached the top, the most picture perfect rest spot appeared, with crystal clear water and a magnificent view of Garden Castle. We rested for a while and immersed ourselves in the landscape. The still waters of the tarn also held a message made from submerged rocks – the words Jesus loves U – held meaning for gentle reflection. We packed up our snacks and tea and set off for the long descent to Winterhoek Huts. Leaving the tarn behind us, the Knights of the Round Table were pointed out. One of those views you just have to stand and contemplate.

Lunch was had at the Killikrankie stream, no takers on swimming this time, but lots of foot refreshing going on. It was a pretty warm day! The final leg of the day was a longish descent onto the Drakensberg Gardens Road – hitting the tar for about a kilometer, until heading left to the base of Black Mountain and Winterhoek Huts. We had been warned that the final stretch up to the Huts, held a sneaky uphill that would ensure we would arrive, having forgotten about our exposure to tar!

As the afternoon progressed into the evening the storm clouds brewed and the wind picked up. We battened down the hatches and enjoyed a convivial evening huddled in the little rondaval that was the communal kitchen. Rob Mellis had been waiting in the wings for this moment, and led a challenging quiz, which allowed us to rest our legs and challenge our brains. As the storm died down we made our way to our beds, grateful for mattresses and preparation for the much anticipated challenge of our ascent up Black Eagle Pass the next morning

Day 4 Winterhoek to Swiman Hut



Day Four - 12,57km Ascent 472m
WINTERHOEK TO SWIMAN'S HUT



Day four dawned a little overcast and chilly, but it was perfect weather to start off the longer climb up Eagles Pass. We took things slowly and made time to appreciate our uphill achievements. It was certainly worth every step (which I think we all found manageable! So do not fear and let this put you off!). Once we had reached the top, there was a long recovery walk along flat plateaus which gave us the opportunity to move from views of one valley to another. Sadly, the clouds were covering the higher berg, but there was still beauty below us. We looked down over Castleburn with a birds eye view of Drakensberg Gardens Hotel with Garden Castle towering above and behind us. Our tea was taken perched on a hillside overlooking farmlands nestled in the valley. What a place to live. The rain held off as we started the slightly rocky descent down towards Drakensberg Gardens and Swiman's Hut.

A highlight of the day was arriving at Swiman hut to find a bath, complete with functional hot water! Eucalyptus leaves were gathered from the garden and soon the hut smelt like an exciting day spa!

As we settled in to recharge our batteries (literally) some sneaky baboons made off with tea and oats from the kitchen. You can never not be alert for wildlife, especially hungry wildlife.

We enjoyed a magnificent sunset and a fire was lit in the fireplace. Our amazing caterer arrived with birthday cupcakes, bottles of chilled sparkling wine and ice cold beers. We had a double birthday to celebrate and enjoyed our last evening together.

Day 5 – Swiman’s Hut to Bushmans Nek



Day Five - 14,23km Ascent 508m
SWIMAN'S HUT TO BUSHMAN'S NEK



We agreed that the final day deserved an early start, so we were all packed and on the trail at 7am. There was some debate about the distance of the day. It ended up being the longest day on the trail, with a distance of 14km.

It was a day of long ascents and descents, but as we worked our way through the valleys towards Bushmans Nek, the scenery continuously changed and the light highlighted every contoured inch of the southern Drakensberg.

We stopped for tea alongside a stream, and refilled our water bottles for the last time before starting the ascent to the final ridge and a visit to Langilbilele Cave. The cave is enormous, sheltered behind a protective rock. It houses bushman paintings, which grounded us back into the history of the region.

As we crossed over the final ridge, we hit a long plateau which provided a continuous panorama of the Southern Drakensberg and allowed us to end the trail under the shadow of some of the most magnificent scenery we had seen. The final piece of the meticulous planning puzzle fell perfectly into place, with our shuttle bus waiting for us, to transport us back to Sani Backpackers Lodge, where the journey had begun.

Thank you to Wild Flower Bakery from Underberg, for catering suppers, lunches and snacks. Thank you for delivering them to our door in the most inaccessible of places. Your food was absolutely divine.

A final and enormous and most grateful thank you must go to Hettie Randall, our planner extraordinaire. Without Hettie's planning and miraculous contact network in the Southern Drakensberg region, this slackpacking route could not take place. She was visibly holding her breath each day that the bags arrived at their designated spots. Hettie ensured we had hot food every night, hot water for coffee and tea and the most delicious lunches and snacks. Thank you Hettie.

For anyone who has not done a multi-day hike before, with some training at altitude, this is a great introduction and of course the slack packing makes it very doable. Watch the hiking fixture lists, because when this appears again you are in for a very special experience.

