

MOUNTAIN SPENDOUR/ MONK'S COWL WEEKEND

1-3 March 2024

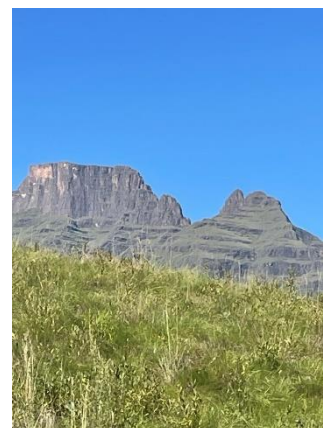
Hike leaders: Rob Mellis

Lizette Gerber

Hike reports: Luis Esteves

Number of hikers: 13

1. Hlatikhulu Forest – Nandi's Falls hike (Saturday 2 March)



Saturday morning, just after 8.00, 13 hikers set out from the Monk's Cowl (Ezemvelo) reception area.

We were soon in a shady indigenous forest and then in open grassland as we made our way down into the Mpopfana (Sterkspruit) River valley.



A short detour took us to the impressive Sterkspruit Falls. From here we made our way along the river bank until we reached the path to the Hlatikhulu forest. At this point, five hikers, led by Rob, continued on the path along the river bank to Nandi's Falls. The rest of us, led by Lizette, did a barefoot crossing of the gently flowing river and then wound our way up the steady grassy incline, stopping at regular intervals to catch our breath and take in the fabulous view.

By the time we reached the forest we were ready for a rest and refreshment stop. This we did next to a gurgling stream in the shade of the magnificent yellow Wood trees. The level path through the forest was full of the sounds of birds, baboons, and water streams coming down from the heights above.

After a couple of kilometres, the path started winding its way down to the Mpopfana River. After crossing it we joined the path going to Nandi's Falls and before long we entered the "enchanted" forest within which the falls are set. There we met up with Rob and his group of hikers and soon found a shady spot next to the river to enjoy a lunch break.



After lunch we made our way back to our vehicles at the reception area – some of the hikers led by Rob took the "high road" along the contour high up the side of the valley and the rest led by Lizette took the "low road" along the river bank.

This was a super hike, enjoyed by all – terrific company, varied terrain and vegetation, and many refreshing streams and pools.

2. The Sphinx – Keartland’s Pass hike (Sunday 3 March)



Sunday morning was misty and cool and 9 hikers, led by Lizette, set out from the Monk’s Cowl reception area up the steady climb towards the Sphinx. Our slow, steady pace paid off – in no time we reached the picturesque Crystal Falls where we stopped for a breather, refreshments (and photos!) Looking back, we were encouraged to see the elevation we had hiked in a relatively short time.

From Crystal Falls it was a short distance to the Sphinx (a scaled-down “replica” of the real thing in Egypt). Since we had made such good time, and the day was still young, and the weather was cool, Lizette, our intrepid hike leader, suggested that instead of returning back to the reception area the way we had come, we continue on from the Sphinx and do the circular route (going to Breakfast Stream, Blindman’s Corner, and down Keartland’s Pass). All being in agreement, we continued on the path upwards, in the mist, until we reached Breakfast Stream where we stopped for a brunch break. By this point the path had levelled off and we continued on through grassland until we came to the Keartland’s Pass turnoff to our right.

A short distance straight ahead Blindman’s Corner and the contour path leading off to Injisuthi and Cathedral Peak was clearly visible. Unfortunately, the spectacular Cathkin Peak, Champagne Castle and Sterkhorn and were enveloped in cloud. No amount of pleading and huffing and puffing were able to disperse those pesky clouds!



All of us, except our leader Lizette, experienced Keartland’s Pass for the first time... and what a super experience it turned out to be! All the way down the steep, stepped descent we had fabulous views of cascading streams, shady forests and the Mpofana River valley spread out below us.

It was midday when reached the foot of the pass and joined the contour path from Nandi’s Falls back to the reception area where our vehicles were parked.

This was a tremendous hike and a fitting end to a terrific weekend. Thank you, Lizette, for your assured lead, and the hikers for being such good company.

