Giants Cup Trail 12-17 April 2024

Report by Dawn Mackie Norton

Friday 12th April - Sani Backpackers

We arrived at Sani Back packers after a relatively quiet drive through Underberg and Himeville and just in time for Happy Hour at the Sani Lodge Backpackers bar.

We were 16 Hikers including Deon our Leader from Berg Adventures and Hettie our amazing Chair Lady and organizer. Those that had booked for dinner in the restaurant were treated to good home cooking and then after a quick briefing from Hettie and Deon we were off to bed to be prepared for the morning.
Sani Lodge Backpackers never fails to impress. As the Daily Maverick wrote 'it is a jewel right in the Drakensberg Mountains'.

Saturday 13th April – Pholela Hut

After a good night sleep, with the younger members of the group on the top bunks and the older members on the bottom bunks to allow toilet breaks, we awoke to an overcast morning but perfect for hiking. The kettle was already boiled and the gas showers hot so we all started the trail refreshed and ready to go.

Once we were all packed and the bags safely stashed at the reception and the cars parked at the back of the lodge we set of on our 5 day Giants Cup Trail.

The pull out from the Lodge to where the path jouned the Giant's Cup Trail, was challenging. We contoured through to Cobham, and despite the weather forecasting rain we were lucky enough to enjoy cool and cloudy weather perfect for hiking.

The group slowly got to know each other and after dropping down to the Pholela Valley we came across a herd of Eland who we understand come each day to feed on the farmers Rye crop close to the camp. Something the farmer was clearly not too happy about but we enjoyed the siting.

As we neared the Chain ladder bridge to Pholela we again saw the difference between the older and younger generation as those in their more senior years carefully traversed the bridge and our younger members decided to bolder hop across the river.

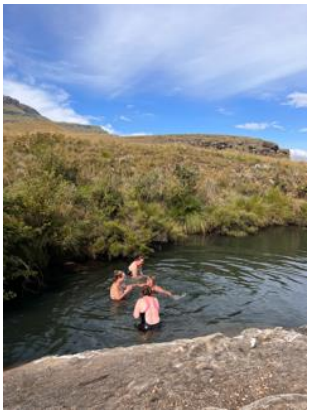
Pholela Hut is an old farm house with electricity and hot showers and the last hut with such luxuries for a few days. Dinner arrived around 5:00pm and comprised Butter Chicken, homemade bread and rice together with our lunch packs for the following day. Thank you *Wildflower Bakery Co.* from Underberg for the most yummy and filling food.

Total distance covered today was 12.8k.

Sunday 14th April - Mzimkhulwana

The Group continued to be punctual and were all up and packed to leave at 08:00.
Hettie was on the ball sorting out issues behind the scene that made all our journeys smooth. Hettie does to put these hikes together. A BIG THANK YOU from all of us for her dedication to perfection.

Shortly after leaving Pholela Hut, the trail ascended to a plateau. The climb-out of Pholela is worth it with spectacular scenery and fine views of the Giant's Cup. At the top of the climb the path took as past the Tortoise rocks and onto Bath-plug Cave where we stopped for a short lunch break.



As we descended towards the hut we saw the Siphongweni River which flows very close to the hut and into a beautiful freshwater pool. The pool is sometimes referred to as Huberta's pool after the famous hippopotamus that got a wonderlust (nut never actually visited this pool). With no electricity or hot water many of us took a refreshing dip before returning to the hut for another awesome dinner delivered by Wildflower Bakery.

This hut was the most basic of all the huts but still in a beautiful setting and had water and ablutions so we couldn't complain. As we settled down for the night we heard the sound of Jackals close by.

Total hike today was 8,8kms.

Monday 15th April – Winterhoek Hut rondawels.

A quick team photo in the morning and off we set for Winterhoek Hut.

After crossing the suspension bridge over the Mzimkhulwana River we climbed up to a plateau then descended through the saddle (nek) between the Big and Little Bamboo Mountain with the freestanding Garden Castle in front of us.
The path along Killiecrankie Stream was pretty, passing a couple of waterfalls as it descended the valley.

The foot bridges had been refurbished which we presumed was for the Giant's Cup Uncut a non-stop traverse of the entire Giant's Cup Hiking Trail in one day!!! Not for me.
The scenery continued to be rolling hills and rock formations. Autumn was in full swing with beautiful colours as we approached the hut.

A short walk on the tarred road and sudden, steep hill at the end of the day, was quickly forgotten as we made our way down towards the stunning location of the Winterhoek Hut rondawels located beneath Garden Castle next to some large oak trees.

Still no hot water but at least there were mattresses for tonight and the food soon made us all warm up and the conversation flowed.

Todays hike was 12kms.

Tuesday 16th April – Swiman Hut

Day 4 started with an ascent of more than 300m in the first 4km. As with the previous three days, we were rewarded with spectacular views at the top of the hill be it somewhat cloudy.

Heading towards Swiman Hut, we were treated to great views of the impressive Rhino Peak (3051m).

We had been very fortunate with the weather, but no multi-day hike is complete without a bit of rain so on the jackets went for fear of heavy rains that we could see in the distance. Ten minutes later the jackets were off again. We could hear the thunder roaring in the distance so we pushed through to the hut for Lunch.

Swimans Hut is newly refurbished and has hot water so we all took it in turns to get a good shower and settle down for dinner in front of the fire.

Day 4 was 11.8 km's.

Wednesday 17th April – Bushmans Nek and Home

As we started day 5 we were all sad that our hike was nearing an end but glad that our group had all bonded well together and many new friends made.

After a steady climb up to about 2100m ASL, we reached another plateau which seemed to be the theme of the hike. The legs were now tired so we took it slowly as we headed to Langalibalele Cave for a short Lunch Break.

The storm from the previous night had blown over and for the first time we had beautiful blue skies.

The chatter was plenty on what we would do when we got home and good friendships had been made on this hike. A special award this day went to Sylvia who kept us all amused with her garden stories among other things.

The final day was 12.3 km's and it wasn't long after we arrived at Bushmans Nek. Our transport arrived and we were taken back to Sani Pass Backpackers to bid farewell to each other and head home.

This was an awesome multi day hike which I would recommend to everyone. The daily distances are not too long and the scenery stunning. Hettie's organisation was top class and Deon our leader was professional and well informed with lots of information regarding the area and the fauna. Thank you all for making such wonderful memories.