

RNNP Slack Packing

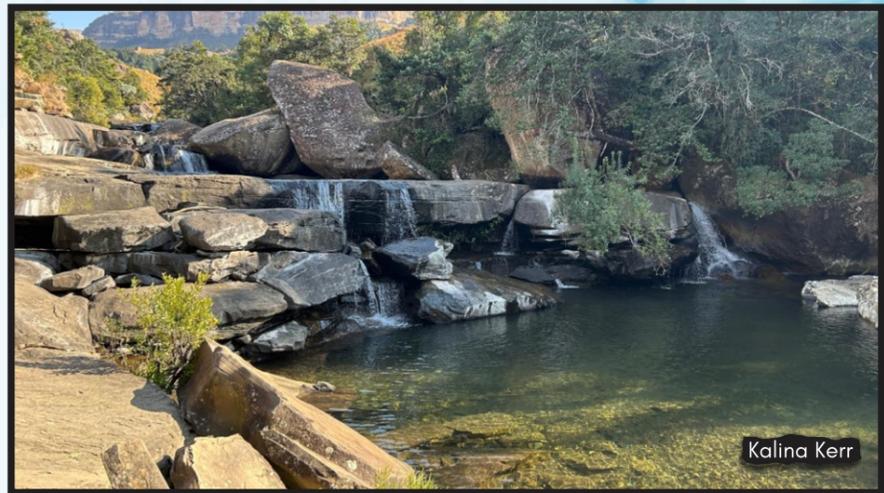
7 to 9 June 2025

Hike Leader: Deon Small
Number of hikers: 7
Distance: 40km
Report by: Deon Small

The Northern Berg, especially the top of the Amphitheatre, is as it should be, is on most people's bucket lists, and for obvious reasons, it is one of the most iconic Berg vistas in the world as well as home to the 2nd highest waterfall in the world, the Tugela Falls.

The idea of doing this iconic trail as a slack packing trip came to pass to make it possible for those who are no longer able to carry a heavy backpack.

Arrangements all fell into place and the only unknown was the upcoming weather conditions that seemed to get worse by the day. The apprehension was very noticeable on everyone's faces. The weather, the unknown of the chain ladders and the question on everyone's mind – "Will I make it?"



Being our first slack packing trip, we could have expected some issues, and there was a bit of a confusion at the RNNP offices as they did not quite know what to do about our slack packing trip starting right here. After the paper work being sorted out, our bags loaded and on their way to the lodge, we started our trek. The pace was steady and the concrete path was easy to follow and navigate. The paved foot path is one of the few in the Drakensberg that is actually wheelchair friendly, and a highway compared to the normal paths you will find in the Berg. We took a short detour to the Cascades, and we found some very tame baboons hanging around the site, I think they were used to people who they know they can get a few snacks from, but we were wise and did not have any food out in the open. These guys are sly and will rob you blind in the wink of an eye.

The path is well marked and in reasonably good condition, we had a relatively easy walk till the last and steepest section to the top of Lookout Rock. We huffed and puffed our way to the top and on reaching the top, we welcomed the rest break and stocked up on some snacks and a few sips of water. Looking back out over a ridge where you can see Snow White, the Crocodile, the Tortoise and the Frog – yes you do need some imagination to see it, and it is always a mystery as to who named the hills we so love to walk in. The weather was warm with some clouds on the high Berg; however, the wind was strong at times and cool to cold, making for ideal hiking conditions. The path snakes up and down, following the Mahai River before we crossed over and followed the path to Gudu Falls and the Crack. The decision was made long ago that we would not go up the Crack, but instead we followed the path up into the Mahai valley and over the falls finally making our way to Gudu Pass.



On our way we could see the path snaking up the valley and we were blessed by some amazing views and on one spot we found a huge rockfall, seemingly it was caused by a lightning strike as there were no signs or water flow that could have caused it. We found the most perfect spot to have lunch, right next to the Mahai River hidden away in the forest. The water, ice cold and refreshing, the fresh mountain air, the rustling of the wind in the trees, reminding us of how fortunate we are to be able to walk in this amazing part of the Berg. Clearly there are still a lot of people who walk this section, as we found a lot of hiker's trash on route, especially toilet paper, that everyone seems to think is not an issue being left lying all over. This serves as a reminder to us all to just carry those little pesky pieces of white paper out in a little baggie.

After lunch, we made our way up the zig-zags and on to the last stretch to Gudu Pass. By now our feet and legs were beginning to complain and even the sight of the end did not make it any easier. The path goes up and up before turning sharply north and then as we crested the last spur, we saw it, Witsieshoek Lodge, right on the edge of the spur, right on the border between KZN & the Free State. All of a sudden everyone had an energy boost, and before long we walked into the lodge. The pain and agony made way for smiles and joyful jublations. After a hot shower and some even had a short snooze, we all met in the dining area, chatting and reminiscing about our day, the experiences, the highs the lows, all over a very well-deserved meal. As supper came to a close, we all slowly retired to our rooms, ready for some well-deserved shut eye.



The wind blew most of the night, the sign of the approaching cold weather, but the sunrise brought the hope of a good day for hiking. As our shuttle was booked for an early 7:30 departure, we had to have a very quick breakfast, so fast that some literally had to swallow now and chew later. The ride in the transfer shuttle was an experience, and after the shaking and rolling, we all felt a lot more secure when we eventually stepped off at the Sentinal car park. I cannot talk for everyone but my insides felt a bit like Mr. Bond's shaken martini.

With our last paperwork sorted, we set off towards Sentinal Peak, keeping guard over the entry into the mountains and the bridal path cutting up into its side, ever higher and higher. Do not be mistaken by the newly paved path, it gives just a false sense of security as we would soon be facing the all-dreaded nemesis, THE CHAIN LADDERS. I think out of the whole walk the Chain Ladders are the most daunting part of the whole walk for most taking on the challenge. We did however have a chat the night before, if the wind was too strong, we would rethink the Ladders and look at the Gully. The wind was strong with the occasional strong gust, and I opted for the safer option and took the gully up.



The Gully is an eroded river bed, offering an "easier" option to the top, but it is an almost 200m climb, that feels like it's never going to end. Over the years, the rain has been eroding the gully to the point that there is no, to very little soil left and basically just rocks left. The rocks form steps, however if you are blessed with long legs, no problem, short legs, you will need a bit of help here and there. We started off in high spirit and soon we were splitting up into small groups, each tackling the section bit by bit. Soon I could see the top and even though I was doing my best to encourage the ladies, they were not too impressed with my jubilation and if looks could kill, I would have been a corpse. The last stretch, just before the top is the worst, it is loose soil with rocks ready to roll down with the slightest touch. However the view from the top made up for all the hardship, and I was soon forgiven for making them climb up this hectic, "Where's the Path" gully. (Some words cannot be repeated and need to be experienced).

The views from the top of the escarpment are some of the best in the Berg, overlooking the great Amphitheatre wall, to the Devils Tooth and The Eastern Buttress. Being on top at just over 3100 m, we could not, not go down to the Tugela Falls, the 2nd highest waterfall in the world. We did not stay long as the weather was changing and we needed to get back down to the car park. We had a very quick lunch and made a hasty retreat down the mountain. We decided to go back down the gully, and it took us just over an hour to get back to the path. The ladies did very well, going up and down in one day, that is an achievement of note and they needed to be awarded a special "Klipspringer" award for their efforts.



We were a bit slow on our descent and unfortunately missed our designated shuttle, however the next one was due to arrive at 4. We all huddled in the office as the weather started to move in. The clouds rolled in from Lesotho and we could see the rain falling over the peaks coming closer, and within a few minutes we were engulfed with small hail and graupel (spongy hail) with an almighty wind threatening to blow every one away. The shuttle arrived just in time and we managed to get back down to the lodge, still shaken, but not stirred.

The hot showers were the most desired items back at the lodge, and the best way to defrost from our ordeal. We all met up in the lodge's lounge, and we toasted, discussed and boasted the days success over some Glühwein. We all made it, and everyone was in high spirits and totally invincible. The later the night got, we decided not to ponder too much over the current weather conditions, but to face tomorrow as it comes, whatever gets thrown at us, we would be able to conquer it.

It rained for most of the night with a very strong wind driving the rain sideways against the windows. We woke up with it still raining and the wind howling. We met at the reception to enjoy a relaxed breakfast and discuss our options. Breakfast was a joyous occasion with hearty meals being enjoyed and plenty of coffee and tea, we were doing a bit of carbo loading for the cold and rain that was to follow. We were drawing out our breakfast so as to get a bit of a lull in the weather, and soon the rain eased up. Bags packed and luggage loaded, we made our way to the start of the trail. The clouds briefly lifted to expose the snow on the Sentinel and the Amphitheatre wall. After a quick photo opportunity, we got going, tracking back to the RNNP main camp. The moisture on the dry grass was bringing out all the amazing winter colours, hues of yellow, red and brown being broken up by patches of bright green and the dark grey and black of the cliffs and the white sandstone rides all around us. Beauty engulfed.

We were blessed with only a bit of rain at the start, and soon we were drying up and the skies lightened as the sun was fighting to break through. The air was clean from the rain and visibility great, and we could see for miles. Way in the distance we could see Cathedral Peak and even Monks Cowl before everything disappeared again behind the wall of clouds. As we walked further down the Mahai Valley, we spotted a small group of Mountain Rhey Buck, sprinting up the hill as if it's an easy feat for them. We were spoilt on this trip with a number of Eland sightings, and on our way back we walked into a small heard of 4 beautiful animals, hiding in the Mahai Cave area. We were lucky to see another few animals later just before Lookout Rock, where they were also taking refuge in a bushy section away from the rain and cold. The number of Eland sightings being spotted have dwindled in the Northern and Central Berg areas, so it was a real treat for us to have been so close to these majestic animals.

As we reached Lookout Rock, we started to hear the thunder rolling over the hills and through the valleys, and soon we had a few drops and then a few more, and soon we heard and felt the small pellets of hail hitting our rain jackets. Instinctively we sped up, trying to limit our time in the rain without going so fast that we would slip and fall down the mountain. Just as soon as it started it was over and gone, and it even started to clear a bit, but not enough to show us the high Berg for the last time. We reached the Mahai camp site, not a person in sight, and we all walked down the road back to the cars, our hearts happy and full of joy for the mighty feat that we just achieved.

This was by no means a walk in the park, however, not having to carry a full backpack makes this an ideal trip to visit this part of the Drakensberg where memories are made. I am really impressed with the ladies not only going up but also coming down the Gully in one day, a real achievement. The weather was not the best at times, but it could have been a lot worse and every one enjoyed not only the views and the great vastness of the Drakensberg, but the friendships that were made over the few days. A special thanks must go out to our transporter, Tau, who made sure our luggage arrived on time every time, and then of course the Witsieshoek Lodge staff, the service and hospitality was above everyone's expectations and they made us feel welcome and well looked after. To the team: you were amazing, tackled the mountains as if it was a walk in the park, even though you might not have thought so at the start, you are all queens of the mountains.

