

GIANTS CUP TRAIL

27 June to
2 July 2025

Leader: Deon Small

Distance: 58 km

Weather: Sunny and warm but very cold at night with frost in the mornings, a max temperature of between 15 to 20°C.

Number of hikers: Started at 16 and ended with 13

Severity of hike: Due to the total distance, the rating of the trip is difficult.

Report by: Deon Small

The Giants Cup in winter is usually a magical kaleidoscope of colours, golden yellows to chocolatey browns, intertwined with swishes of green here and there, all capped under a winter azure sky. This trip was no different, except for the mountains still showing streaks of the snow from a couple of weeks ago and a fresh, clean crispness in the air.

As we all arrived at Sani Back Packers, our normal meeting venue and accommodation of choice, we quickly off loaded and made a beeline for the communal hall, where we all hoped, a fire would already be roaring away, as it was getting freezing outside. Instead everyone was sitting outside on the veranda enjoying the late afternoon sun. Soon we were all making our way inside, meeting and greeting everyone and chatting away catching up on news and renewing old friendships. Soon the briefing was done and dusted, and supper time arrived followed by the last bit of downtime before bed.



The weather leading up to our long awaited trip, left behind the most perfect hiking conditions, clean skies, cool days, ideal for hiking in, although the nighttime did get well below zero. We met at the reception office and after our customary starting group photo, we set off at a leisurely pace, knowing that we needed to pace ourselves for what still lies ahead. Soon storminess was looming over us, trying to intimidate us with a steep climb to the top that turns out to be, not the top. Huffing and puffing, we made our way slowly up to the top, taking a welcome breather while admiring the perfect views overlooking the expanse of the Drakensberg and The Giants Cup, just a taster of what still lay ahead.



From here the path takes a leisurely meander following the ridgeline, slowly gaining height until the last bit, a climb to reach the junction with The Giants Cup Trail. This is our customary tea stop, ideal as all the climbing for the day is done and from here it's a nice gentle meander till we climb through the sandstone ridge before meandering through the golden grasslands. Unfortunately we also had to say our goodbyes to Neville and Cheryl, who were still recovering from a bout of flu, and did not feel quite ready yet to take on the challenge, but we knew they would be back as Neville still needed to see an Eland up close.

Clambering down the rocks brought back all the childhood memories of playing outside, the difference is that the body now says, "calm down you're not that young any more." We had a few gazelles in our presence that made things look pretty ordinary. On the ridge we spotted a huge herd of Eland, estimated to be at least 50 members strong, grazing without a care in the world, it would not be the last time we would spot Eland, but not in these numbers.

We opted for the "by-pass ridge" route as this takes you past a small waterfall and pool, ideal for lunch. We lazed around on the grass, enjoying the perfect winter sun, with a soothing waterfall whispering us off to dreamland. Our peacefulness was interrupted by a group of day hikers who also wanted to share in the tranquility the waterfall had to offer. However, there was no time to diddle daddle, we had to still walk the last bit to Pholela Hut, our accommodation for the night. En route down, we passed a group of young explorers, who, it turned out, were also overnighing in Pholela Hut, and it turned out that they were a group of family and friends who were staying over for the weekend. Luckily most hikers are like minded and very accommodating and we all got on like a house on fire.

We did have a group of 3 ladies arrive late afternoon . However they opted to return to Himeville and continue the trail the following day – we did not see them again, but they did finish. We unpacked and got settled, warm showers were enjoyed, after which we all lounged around in the sun until it got cold. The temperature dropped dramatically as the sun disappeared behind the peaks, and we all hunkered down in the little dinning/lounge area . Coffee and red wine were consumed to fight off the cold. There might have been something stronger on offer, but what happens at camp stays at camp. We also took this time to toast Bill Small, the pioneer of the Giants Cup Trail, who sadly passed away just short of what would have been his 101st birthday, a true man of the mountains, leaving a mighty legacy.

Supper was butter chicken on rice with sambals, and nothing lifts a hikers spirit like a warm tasty meal to get them ready for the next part of their adventure. After everyone’s fill, people started to filter off to their beds and the cacophony of noise dwindled to a few and then none. Silence befell the rooms and the silence was only disturbed by the occasional stirring in the creaky bunks.



Deon Small



Alan Blundell



Deon Small



Nozie Sapepa



Alan Blundell



Kalina Kerr



Libby Deysel

Sunday morning was supposed to be a slow start, however a few hikers did not get that memo and were up early getting ready to go. The walk to Mzimkhulwana hut is only 8.8km, so it is an easy day and justifies a later start at 8:30. Slowly the slumber was broken with shuffling and people trying to be quiet, not wanting to evoke the ire of the group being accidentally woken up way too early. Soon bodies started to emerge from the rooms, shivering, sleep still fresh in their eyes, seeking out a fresh cup of coffee, trying to make sense of this madness, getting up even before the birds. In a blink of an eye, it all changes, the quietness gave way to a storm of noise, even Peter who had tried to sleep in and fight against all this noise, had to give in and rose to join the mad scurrie to get packed.

I enjoyed looking at what people were having for breakfast, from the plain oats to the most exotic mixes, tea's and coffees, all enjoyed, all well discussed and justified, but I did not spot a full English Breakfast, now that would have gone down quite well on a Sunday morning.

Now hikers are a peculiar breed, you tell them to be ready at 8:30 and by 8:00 they start looking at you, "when are we leaving?" I tell you they can be slave drivers! We roped in one of the hut occupiers to get our morning photo and we set off. The start was a cold one, the frost was still thick on the ground as we walked through the Ouhout Trees, lovely in summer, a curse on a freezing winter's morning, but soon we turned up onto the climb, slowly but surely snaking our way up the base of the hill. Halfway up we had a quick stop to admire the view and the first layers started coming off, soon the second then the third. The climb is gentle for most of the way, and before you know it, you reach Tortoise Rocks. This little feature not only looks like individual tortoises, but from a distance it looks like each little one makes up one big tortoise on the ridge.

Our aim was to reach Bath Plug Cave, have tea and climb to view the rock art that's left in the cave, unfortunately the few paintings still visible, are fading very quickly. Soon they will just be a memory, lost over time together with their creators, and only the thoughts of those who have had the opportunity to view them will be left. The cave itself is big with a hole in the centre of the cave giving the cave its name, with a small waterfall and stream at the far end, making it ideal for an overnight shelter. Unfortunately this cave cannot be used to overnight in, due to its paintings.

We pushed on, and it is at about this time that the wheels started to come off for me, I had been suffering from a slight tummy bug, and now started to show signs of the flu. My pace slowed and I managed to get the group to the lunch stop but here my battery was flat. I had to rest and slept for the lunch break. I did not feel better and had to temporarily hand over the reins to Hettie who asked Peter to step in. The rest of the trail down to the hut is easy to follow and I was lagging behind but made it into camp not far behind. Thankfully there were a number of trail angels, and before long, Rebecca had me dosed up and soon I started to feel better.

Mzimkhulwana Hut, in its heyday, had hot water, mattresses and was very cozy. However, lack of maintenance has led to it being a fraction of its former self and it now only sports cold water and no mattresses. It is still a wonderful hut to stay over in even with all its faults. We all settled in and seeing that we were the only group in camp, we could take over all the facilities. Although everyone was not too keen on cold showers, everyone had a cold shower, and it might sound strange to have a cold shower in winter, but it is really refreshing and revitalizes the aches and pains in the body. Supper was chicken potjie and cous-cous and was again a welcome meal keeping the cold at bay. While we waited for everything to heat up, we enjoyed plenty of red wine and Old Brown Sherry, and this was needed, as the dining area is outside, we had to somehow fight off the ice bears that were threatening to pull us off into the darkness. Once supper was being served the smells must have also woken the jackal up who were howling away far off in the dark night. To say it was cold, would be an understatement, and supper was a very quick affair, by 7 most people were in bed and silence fell over camp.





One thing about trail huts, is that one person starts to move around, no matter how hard they try, the sound travels, and the more you try to be quiet the more noise you seem to make. The sky was just beginning to get colour, with Venus shining bright in the early morning sky. I found Felicity in the kitchen getting water on the boil and soon everyone started to come and look for some hot water for coffee. The little section of grass in front of the hut was white with frost and the air so cold, even your words seemed to freeze mid-sentence.

All packed up and bags safely stashed in the room, we set off on one of the prettiest sections of the trail. Again, the start is a gentle climb with short sections of intensity, and then it's over. Luckily the amazing views and beauty makes up for the slog. The one section of the valley was a range of colour, emerald green, white frosted paths and all framed by golden yellow grass. On reaching the final climb to Crane Tarn, our planned tea stop, we saw smoke rising above us, and soon we could see the team burning the fire breaks from Crain Tarn up Bamboo Mountain. This would also mean the end to clear skies and smoke free days. We slowly made our way down the Killie Cranky valley and followed the new section added that takes you around the spur and then down to the Mlambonja River. The two new suspension bridges make it possible to cross the rivers without issue even in flood and from the top of the ridge you have some spectacular views over the peaks keeping guard over the valley.

Once on the bottom of the of the valley, we crossed the bridge, and stopped for lunch, by now everyone was needing a break. Shoes off, feet soaking in the cold water, preparing them for the last haul up and over the last little hill before dropping down into the valley for the last time. Once you round the last corner, Winterhoek Hut comes into sight, a collection of huts nestling in-between some old Oaks trees. The huts are in desperate need of TLC; the roofs need re-thatching and just some paint and maybe an upgrade here and there. Here are also only cold-water showers, and if you arrive early, you can still have time to heat up in the sun.

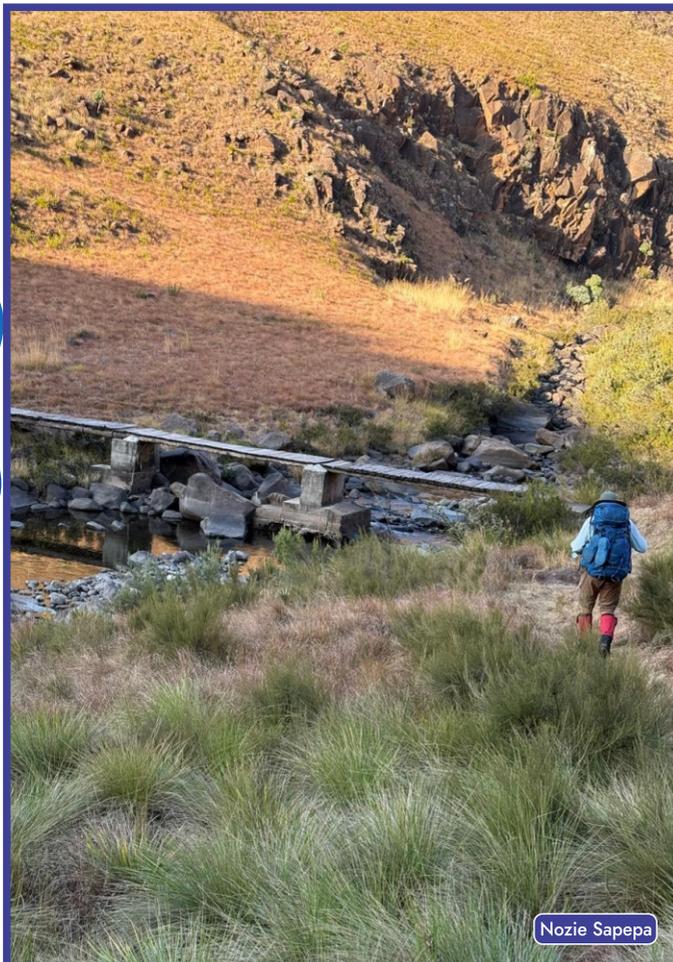
Fortunately, we had a kitchen where we could all hide away from the cold, as it started to get cold quickly just as the sun dipped behind the mountains. Supper was welcomed with open arms, the warm meal hit the spot and we could feel life returning to our bodies. Everyone was tired and weary and our beds were calling and once you stepped out of the 'kitchen', you did not hang around as the icy air was ready to freeze you on the spot. Soon everyone was in bed and the busy day slowed down to a crawl as we all dozed off.

I think most of the group dreaded waking up early, especially on the day we had to ascend the dreaded BLACK EAGLE PASS. One by one the huts came to life and head lamps were flashing through the windows, red, white then red again and a lot of rustling. It was a very frosty morning and when the sun eventually decided to show up it bathed Garden Castle in subtle orange hues framed by the blue early morning sky.

Camp was broken up and gear packed up, as breakfast was being eaten and water bottles filled. We made sure that all the bags were packed away and hope that we would not have any issues we had yesterday with pots going missing and items not delivered. The most stressful part of the whole trip is the logistics part and the behind the scenes planning and directing. All the preparations were done by Hettie months in advance and on the day it all gets directed by one or two people, and we are totally dependent on their action, whether we get our bags and our food or not. Luckily people are prepared to go the extra mile and it all worked out, except for a few very tense minutes.

There is no water on the pass so everything needs to be carried with you, adding extra weight to your pack. Yet again we were a little bit early on our start, and as it was a tough start, it would not matter to much. The pass is named after Black Eagles, that used to breed on the cliffs meters high. Unfortunately, we did not see them, but the hope still lives that they someday will return to grace the skies high above the pass. We were however blessed by the Cape Vulture colony that has their nests high on the cliffs, starting to look for their thermals before heading off to go feed.

Soon we were on the steep sections and once we reached the top and turned back to see where we came from, we couldn't believe how far we had come. I might be speaking for all when saying, that some of us did not believe that we would be able to come this far, and soon this marvelous trip will be over. This section of the trail is dry and hot, and we did not spend long pondering on it and started to move on to our planned tea spot. This area is a bit cooler and offers some protection from the heat, but in this amazing weather we were actually looking for the sunny parts as there was still lots of ice in the foot paths.





Our plan was to follow the ridge down and then join the other ridge overlooking Fairways and then on to our end zone, Swiman Hut, however it was hot and we were tired, so when the option got suggested to trek down to the Club House, all tiredness disappeared and a very different group of hikers were on trail. Soon we made our way down this most impassable steep slope, I mean if you would lose your footing, you would literally role down the hill straight on to the 19th hole and land on a stool. Luckily for us we did not have any such incidents and made it safely down. Once our orders were placed, we settled on the outside veranda, I don't think they would have approved of 14 stinky hikers sitting in the pub area. We took our time to enjoy every sip, dreading the prospect that we still had to walk to the hut, but first we would walk to Hippo Pools, as we might just be lucky to spot some Drakensberg Mermaids. Let me just say we were a bit disappointed there were none spotted. The ladies did enjoy their now customary foot spa by soaking their tired feet in the cold water, having their own spa day per say.

Swiman Hut is most probably luxury when compared to the others, hot water, bunk beds, electricity and most importantly as fire place. Once we arrived and unpacked, the shower roster (very unplanned if you ask me) was drawn up, of course all the ladies jumped the cue and almost used up all the water. Luckily for me this is not my first rodeo and have learnt that you let everyone shower first and when everyone has finished, you give it a half hour and you have the shower to yourself. You can have a 10- or 15-minute shower and no one will actually complain about it.

Supper was quite a festive affair, with mash and braised beef short rib and a fresh broccoli type salad and of course some goodies to drink with supper. The fire was going and warming up the lounge that for tonight also doubling up as the dining hall. It was a very festive meal with a lot of laughter and chatting. There were even some s'mores doing the rounds for an after supper treat for those who wanted to satisfy their sweet tooth.

Soon everyone saw the time, it's already 7, but actually felt a lot later, and people started to make their way to their beds, as tomorrow was going to be an early rise for all as it was going to be a long day, but we have the extra challenge of our shuttle picking us up at 1pm. By 7:30 most in bed and I could hear a few die-harder's, chatting in the lounge but that soon died down and an eerie quiet filled the hut.

Rise and shine time was 5:00, and compared to other mornings, we were all up and about. Breakfasts were eaten, gear packed up and everything cleared up and cleaned to the best of our ability with what we had. Bags packed for the last time in the lounge and the next time we would see them it would be back at Sani Back Packers.

We unfortunately had to say our farewells to another team member, Allan, who decided not to finish with us as he felt he would keep the group back due to our time limit which was set to be at Bushman's Neck at 13:00 for the shuttle. It was unfortunate, he did manage, though, to make plans with Esti to go walking in the reserve and spend the day exploring so it was not a total loss for him. We set off just before 7:00 and we got to the ridge just as the sun started to rise over the valley colouring everything with gold. The sky was filled with mares tails, signaling the approaching cold front, again we were reminded of how lucky we were with our weather window.

We were blessed with some good wildlife sightings, and on the grassy plains, we spotted 5 Black Wildebeest grazing in the fresh morning air. On this trip we saw Eland, Mountain Rhey Buck, Reed Buck, even a few Dassies, Cape Vultures, Black Eagles close to Cobham and 3 Bearded Vultures. But we did not have time to waste and soon we were heading down to the Toll Bridge, a quick break and then the nemesis, the climb out to Langalibalele Cave. To be honest, it's not that difficult, just long with steeper sections in between and one little climb and before you know it, you're done and at the cave. We had a nice break as we were right on time for our shuttle.

Today we were not as blessed as the other days with clear blue skies, everyone was burning fire breaks and soon the sky was filled with thick blue smoke. From the top of the last ridge, we had our last proper view of the high peaks, the Devils Knuckles and Sehlabathebe way in the distance. Soon we dropped down to Bushman's Neck and all of this beauty was just a memory, forever etched into our minds. The last ridge leads down to the border post and the red earth path turns you back to the Bushman's Neck out post, and then at last the end is in sight. Soft grass has never felt this good and we all took our bags off. We just flopped down glad to be off our feet and knowing that we made it. The challenge was real, the experience intense, the memories – priceless. You can look at the pictures, however to experience the Drakensberg, but you need to be here, to taste, to feel and to experience the pain, the agony, the joy of saying; "I have done it".

