

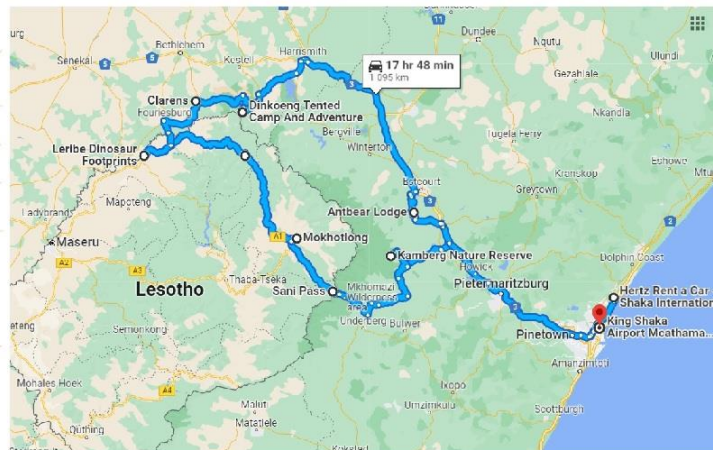
## WINTERY ADVENTURES IN THE DRAKENSBERG & LESOTHO

*I bet you didn't think snow skiing in Southern Africa was even an option. This and more is possible in the highlands of Lesotho and the Drakensberg mountains, so I took a week in August to fit as many wintery adventures and cultural encounters as possible. Here's what I managed to do....*



Crossing the South Africa and Lesotho borders within the invisible boundary of the Maloti-Drakensberg transfrontier conservation area, meant I could treat the whole region as my playground for winter activities and cultural immersion.

A goal of this collaborative transfrontier conservation area, is to make a positive difference in the livelihoods of the custodians of this land. Visitors directly contribute to this every time they stay in a local guest house, hotel or homestay, and hike, bike, fish, pony trek, birdwatch, abseil, rock climb, go white-water rafting, do a guided rock art tour, or go skiing and snowboarding.



Let me set the scene of this most beautiful mountainous land; it is a place of winding roads, infinite vistas, dizzying heights, soaring rock faces, 600 rock art sites, dinosaur footprints and indigenous plants bursting with spring colour, plus all the rugged outdoor pursuits anyone could want.



There's only one commercial ski resort - Afriski in northern Lesotho (between 5-6 hours' drive from either Johannesburg or Durban). It may only have one baby slope and a single medium red run, but I swished along doing inelegant parallel turns, grinning like an idiot at still being able to do this after 30-years. High energy action continues in the summer and Afriski states,

"If you haven't been to Afriski in summer, you only know half the story!" The snowmelt reveals trails for alpine adventure biking, downhill fat-tyre monster rolling (*whatever that is*) and 3.2km of zipline.

But my adventure started with the first test of metal on any Drakensberg-Lesotho exploration at the mother of all South African passes – Sani Pass. While the first 27km is tarred, the upper portion is a series of often icy gravel road hairpin bends – not for the feint-hearted. Snow has actually fallen in every month of the year on this pass, yet this didn't stop spitfire-pilot, car-racing journalist Leicester Symons and friends from making it to the top in VW Beetle in 1956.

'Anything is possible' is a good attitude towards fulfilling that adventurous streak and reaching the South Africa-Lesotho border post at 2,876m above sea level.



### **Enter Lesotho and everything changes**

Despite new Chinese-built tarred roads, some South African stores and WiFi in the surprisingly comfortable guest houses, remote village life seems to have remained in a time warp for hundreds of years. Basotho ponies remain the best form of transport to explore the rugged interior of Lesotho, where there are simply no roads. This Kingdom in the sky can lay claim to the highest valleys in the world and vistas that touch your very soul for their utter beauty.





### Pony Trekking



Every village has sturdy ponies for short or long treks into the mountains but I was rather horrified at some of the tack and condition of the horses. Life is hard for man and beast here. An operator like Malealea Lodge in the west of Lesotho, who run multi-day pony treks deep into the mountain, keep a closer eye on the pony's condition. I remember the sound of pitch-perfect young herd boys, whose voices soared across the valleys. On the third evening, we retired to our mud hut, more definitely in the middle of nowhere than I'd ever been in my life. Washing and drinking water came from a clear stream and a doorless long drop loo-with-a-view serviced the cluster of huts. I had entered this mediaeval world willingly, but did decline a slice of recently slaughtered cow, gathering flies in a corner of the headman's sleeping quarters.





### Rock Art

To try and make sense of rock art reckoned to be 2,000 years old, I try and imagine myself in that moment watching it happen. There are 690 known sites in the Maloti-Drakensberg, and I trekked the 4km uphill contour path in Kamberg Nature Reserve of the central Drakensberg foothills, to the Game Pass rock art site. I was breathless, but expert guide Jeremy Hollmann kept chatting about the subject he's passionate about, the whole the way. This Doctor of Philosophy and Master of Rock Art explained that the 370 fresco of paintings along the rock overhang, in particular the 30 eland, are one of the best examples of San rock paintings in South Africa.



### Dinosaur Footprints

Tsebanang Makibi is the devoted protector of the Subeng Stream dinosaur footprints site and hopped around pointing out the prints, admitting, "Even me, I don't know the real truth about this place." My brain was having trouble computing a timescale of hundreds of million years, so I sat on a rock and stared across the ancient subtropical floodplain, trod by five different types of dinosaur.





### **Shocking Free State Roads**

Tripping between South Africa and Lesotho is easy and I exited in the north of Lesotho and made it in time for lunch in the epitome of laid-back chic, Clarens. I'd started this adventure in Durban, but wasn't intending the direct 4.5-hour drive back - I still had some escapades left. Little did I realise it would require negotiating the shocking roads of Qwaqwa in the Free State.

### **Sotho Culture**

My destination was Bothobapelo Country Lodge. These borderlands at the western exit of Golden Gate Highlands National Park are still very much Basotho domain and this place champions Sotho culture with traditional food, frothy beer and dancing.

I encountered what I called the "*chicken dance*" all through Lesotho, and stood fascinated as the feathery bottom-bustle is gyrated suggestively at the audience.





Men stood around in mokorotlo (Lesotho conical straw hat) and Basotho blankets. Each blanket design has deep cultural significance, telling stories of strength, courage, fertility and growth. Besides its practical value, it is symbolic of Basotho national identity.



### Dinokeng Adventure Camp



Less than 1 kilometre down the road by pony is Dinkoeng Tented Camp and Adventure, owned by superwoman entrepreneur Felile Molefe. School and incentive groups come here for all sorts of soft adventure and team building. There's quad-biking, a rather flimsy climbing wall, hiking, pony trekking, and what turned out to be the most competitive of all, archery.

It wasn't until I found the huge wooden deck outside the two self-catering rooms that I noticed we were well over 2,000 metres above sea level.



### **Hike the Mountains with Zee Ndaba**

Another formidable woman based in the Maloti-Drakensberg transfrontier conservation area is the first Level 4 black woman mountain guide, Zee Ndaba. "I'm a fat woman," she giggles, "which makes the less fit feel comfortable and the stronger think they can outwalk me. But they don't realise I've got stamina for Africa!" Hike with her amongst the big-sky landscapes and peaks of the Drakensberg Royal Natal National Park. Zee has been roaming these mountains since she was a child, "I like to think the mountains know my name."





### **Eccentric Art in the Natal Midlands**

On my return journey towards Durban it just had to stop at quirky to the core, Antbear Lodge, in the Natal Midlands. Owner Andrew Attwood, is unknowingly eccentric and understates the obvious when he says, "I just make things."



In fact, everything, both functional and whimsical, has been crafted in his wood studio; from door locks and hinges, to candelabras and every table, chair and item of furniture in the main house, restaurant and cottages dotted through the grounds. It's a fitting start for a journey through the famous arty Midlands Meander.

### **Lest we forget**

There was just one more stop before reaching Durban. The Nelson Mandela Capture Site. A place that tells Mandela's story, with the power to bring me to tears. I sobbed. Then I walked the path to see the incredible sculpture unfold to form that face we all love and shall never forget.





## Transformative Power of Travel

It's a rare journey that has transformative powers to make me see the world differently, but my week-long round-trip in the Maloti-Drakensberg, did that. The combination of glorious surroundings, an assortment of activities and immersion into the rituals and traditions that bind the Basotho culture, proved the kind of magical mixture that travelling truth-seekers are searching for.



### What to bring home with you...

A Lesotho straw hat, anything mohair from Leribe Craft Centre and a Basotho blanket. Or order one when you get home from [www.lovejacaranda.co.za](http://www.lovejacaranda.co.za) or [www.thulathula.com](http://www.thulathula.com). Plan your journey with Roof of Africa Tours, Wild Routes Africa and More Tours & Travel in Lesotho.

### Contact Info:

- Sani Mountain Lodge and Highest Pub in Africa <https://www.sanimountain.co.za/> Premier Resort Sani Pass <https://www.premierhotels.co.za/hotels/kwazulu-natal/sani-pass/>
- Mants'ebo Guest House <https://www.facebook.com/profile.php?id=100057569074435>
- Bird Haven Guest House <https://www.birdhavenleribe.com/>
- Little Switzerland Resort <https://www.lsh.co.za/>
- Afriski <https://afriski.net/>
- Maleala Lodge <https://malealea.com/>
- Kamberg Nature Reserve <http://www.kznwildlife.com/Kamberg.html>
- Bothobapelo Country Lodge <https://www.facebook.com/BothobapeloOfficialPage/>
- Dinkoeng Tented Camp & Adventure <https://dinkoengtentedcamp.co.za/>
- Antbear Lodge <https://antbear.co.za/lodge/>
- Zee Ndaba <https://www.facebook.com/zee.ndaba.1>
- Wild Routes Africa <https://wildroutes.org/>
- Roof of Africa Tours <https://www.roofofafricatours.com/>
- More Tours & Travel <https://m.facebook.com/people/More-Tours-And-Travel-Pty-Ltd/100057537515418/>