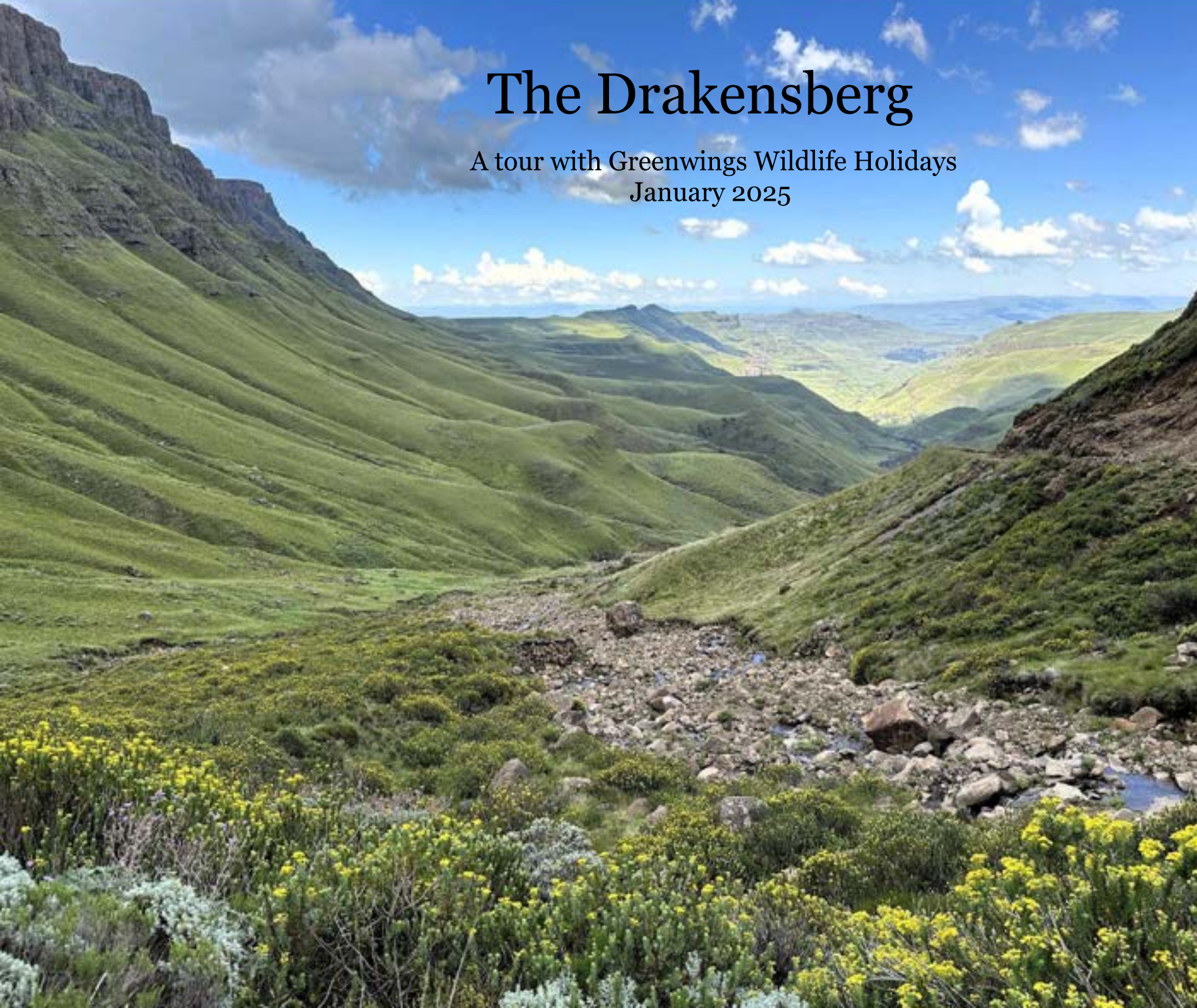

The Drakensberg

A tour with Greenwings Wildlife Holidays
January 2025

The Drakensberg, South Africa
January 2025

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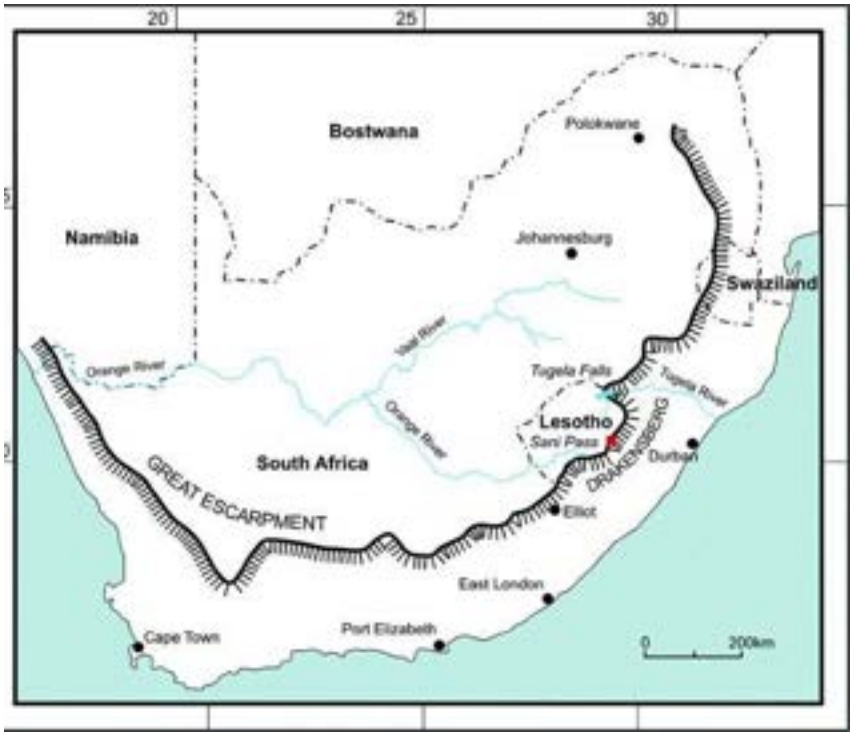
Greenwings Wildlife Holidays currently offers three botanical tours of South Africa. After thoroughly enjoying the Orchids of the Cape Floral Kingdom it was easy to want to return and see more of the spectacular country. Photos of the dramatic scenery and incredible flora of the Drakensberg made that another desirable destination.

The 14 day tour starts south of Durban at the border of the states of Eastern Cape and KwaZulu Natal near Port Edward. From there one heads west to the southern reaches of the Drakensberg and ventures into Lesotho at the Sani Pass. Heading north there are a few overnight stays in the more central reaches of the range until the group crosses into Free State to enjoy the northern part of the Drakensberg. Then it is back to Durban via the Midlands where the trip ends.

Our Greenwings tour group: Gary (Australia), Rick (USA), Alice (UK), Penny and Robin (UK), Frank, leader (South Africa), Anne-Marie (USA), Rupert, leader (South Africa), Joy (UK), Eduardo and Joe (Colombia/USA).

A giant thank you to Frank and Rupert for their help in identifying the many plants that we observed, both while in the field and afterwards via correspondence. Also thanks to Alice for identifying the butterflies and other insects.



The Drakensberg is the eastern portion of the Great Escarpment, which encloses the central Southern African plateau. The Great Escarpment reaches its greatest elevation – 2,000 to 3,482 meters (6,562 to 11,424 feet) within the border region of South Africa and Lesotho.

The Drakensberg escarpment stretches for more than 1,000 kilometers (600 miles) from the Eastern Cape Province in the South, then successively forms, in order from south to north, the border between Lesotho and the Eastern Cape and the border between Lesotho and KwaZulu-Natal Province. Thereafter it forms the border between KwaZulu-Natal and the Free State, and next as the border between KwaZulu-Natal and Mpumalanga Province. The escarpment winds north from there, through Mpumalanga, where it includes features such as the Blyde River Canyon, Three Rondavels, and God's Window. It then extends farther north to Hoedspruit in southeastern Limpopo where it is known as 'Klein Drakensberg' by the Afrikaner. From Hoedspruit it extends west to Tzaneen, also in Limpopo Province, where it is known as the Wolkberg Mountains and Iron Crown Mountain. At 2,200 m (7,200 ft) above sea level, the Wolkberg is the highest elevation in Limpopo. The escarpment extends west again and at Mokopane it is known as the Strydpoort Mountains.

The Afrikaans name Drakensberge comes from the name the earliest Dutch settlers gave to the escarpment, namely Drakensbergen, or Dragons' Mountains. The highest portion of the Great Escarpment is known in Zulu as uKhahlamba and as Maloti in Sotho ("Barrier of up-pointed spears")

Geology
The Great Escarpment is composed of steep rift valley walls formed around a bulging of continental crust during the breakup of southern Gondwana that have since eroded inland from their original positions near the southern African coast, and its entire eastern portion constitutes the Drakensberg. The Drakensberg terminate in the north near Tzaneen at about the 22° S parallel. The absence of the Great Escarpment for approximately 450 kilometers (280 miles) to the north of Tzaneen (to reappear on the border between Zimbabwe and Mozambique in the Chimanimani Mountains) is due to a failed westerly branch of the main rift that caused Antarctica to start drifting away from southern Africa during the breakup of Gondwana about 150 million years ago. The lower Limpopo River and Save River drain into the Indian Ocean through what remains of this relict incipient rift valley, which now forms part of the South African Lowveld.

During the past 20 million years, southern Africa has experienced massive uplifting, especially in the east, with the result that most of the plateau lies above 1,000 meters (3,300 feet) despite extensive erosion. The plateau is tilted such that it is highest in the east and slopes gently downward toward the west and south. Typically, the elevation of the edge of the eastern escarpments is in excess of 2,000 meters (6,600 feet). It reaches its highest point of over 3,000 meters (9,800 feet) where the escarpment forms part of the international border between Lesotho and the South African province of KwaZulu-Natal.

Appearance
The escarpment seen from below resembles a range of mountains. The Limpopo, Mpumalanga, and Lesotho Drakensberg have hard erosion-resistant upper surfaces and therefore have a very rugged appearance, combining steep-sided blocks and pinnacles (giving rise to the Zulu name "Barrier of up-pointed spears"). Who first gave these mountains their Afrikaans or Dutch name Drakensberg, and why, is unknown. The KwaZulu-Natal – Free State Drakensberg are composed of softer rocks and therefore have a more rounded, softer appearance from below. Generally, the top of the escarpment is almost table-top flat and smooth, even in Lesotho. The "Lesotho Mountains" are formed away from the Drakensberg escarpment by erosion gullies which turn into deep valleys containing tributaries of the Orange River. The large number of such tributaries give the Lesotho Highlands a very rugged mountainous appearance, both from the ground and from the air.
The higher parts of Drakensberg have a mildly periglacial environment. It is possible that recent climate change has diminished the intensity of periglaciation.

Composition
The geological composition of Drakensberg (escarpment wall) varies considerably along its more than 1000 kilometer length. The Limpopo and Mpumalanga Drakensberg are capped by an erosion resistant quartzite layer that is part of the Transvaal Supergroup, which also forms the Magaliesberg to the north and northwest of Pretoria. These rocks are more than 2000 million years old. South of the 26°S parallel the Drakensberg escarpment is composed of Ecca shales, which belong to the Karoo Supergroup, and they are 300 million years old. The portion of the Drakensberg that forms the KwaZulu-Natal – Free State border is formed by slightly younger Beaufort rocks (250 million years old) that also are part of the Karoo Supergroup.

The Ecca and Beaufort groups are composed of sedimentary rocks that are less erosion resistant than the other rocks that make up the Drakensberg escarpment. Therefore, this portion of escarpment is not so impressive as the Mpumalanga and Lesotho stretches of the Drakensberg. The Drakensberg that form the northeastern and eastern borders of Lesotho, as well as the Eastern Cape Drakensberg, are composed of a thick layer of basalt (lava) that erupted 180 million years ago. That layer rests on the youngest of the Karoo Supergroup sediments, the Clarens sandstone, which was laid down under desert conditions, about 200 million years ago.

Geography

Peaks
The highest peak is Thabana Ntlenyana, at 3,482 meters (11,424 feet). Other notable peaks include Mafadi ,3,450 meters (11,319 feet), Makoaneng at 3,416 meters (11,207 feet), Njesuthi at 3,408 meters (11,181 feet), Champagne Castle at 3,377 meters (11,079 feet), Giant's Castle at 3,315 meters (10,876 feet), Ben Macdhui at 3,001 meters (9,846 feet), and Popple Peak at 3,331 meters (10,928 feet), all of these are in the area bordering on Lesotho, which contains an area popular for hikers, Cathedral Peak. North of Lesotho the range becomes lower and less rugged until entering Mpumalanga where the quartzite mountains of the Transvaal Drakensberg are loftier and more broken and they form the eastern rim of the Transvaal Basin, the Blyde River Canyon lying within this stretch. The geology of this section is the same as, and continuous with, that of the Magaliesberg.

Mountain Passes
There are at least 14 accessible mountain passes that cross through the Drakensberg plus 20 others that are found in the neighboring mountains of KwaZulu-Natal. The highest points on these roads are from 610 meters (200 feet) in Cecil Mack's Pass to 3314 meters (10,873 feet) at Giant's Castle Pass. Only ten of the passes are tarred, some with deep potholes, while five are just foot paths and the others are gravel roads.

Ecology
The high treeless peaks of the Drakensberg (from 2,500 meters (8,200 feet) upward) have been described by the World Wide Fund for Nature as the Drakensberg alti-montane grasslands and woodlands ecoregion. These steep slopes are the most southerly high mountains in Africa, and being farther from the equator provide cooler habitats at lower elevations than most mountain ranges on the continent. High rainfall generates many mountain streams and rivers, including the sources of the Orange River, southern Africa's longest, and the Tugela River.

These mountains also have the world's highest waterfall, the Tugela Falls (Thukela Falls), which has a total drop of 947 meters (3,107 feet) (Venezuela's Angel Falls is also a candidate for highest waterfall). The rivers that run from the Drakensberg are an essential resource for South Africa's economy, providing water for the industrial provinces of Mpumalanga and Gauteng, which contains the city of Johannesburg. The climate is wet and cool at the high elevations, which experience snowfall in winter.

The grassy lower slopes (from 1,800 to 2,500 meters (5,900 to 8,200 feet)) of the Drakensberg in Eswatini, South Africa and Lesotho constitute the Drakensberg montane grasslands, woodlands, and forests ecoregion.

Flora
The mountains are rich in plant life, including a large number of species listed in the Red Data Book of threatened plants, with 119 species listed as globally endangered and of the 2,153 plant species in the park, a remarkable 98 are endemic or near-endemic.

The flora of the high alti-montane grasslands is mainly tussock grass, creeping plants, and small shrubs such as ericas. These include the rare Spiral Aloe *(Aloe polyphylla)*, which as its name suggests, has leaves with a spiral shape.

Meanwhile, the lower slopes are mainly grassland, but are also home to conifers, which are rare in Africa, the species of conifer found in the Drakensberg belong to the genus *Podocarpus*. The grassland is of interest as it contains a great number of endemic plants. Grasses found here include oat grass *Monocymbium ceresiiforme*, *Diheteropogon filifolius, Sporobolus centrifugus*, caterpillar grass *(Harpochloa falx), Cymbopogon dieterlenii,* and *Eulalia villosa*.

In the highest part of Drakensberg the composition of the flora is independent on slope aspect (direction) and varies, depending on the hardness of the rock clasts. This hardness is related to weathering and is variable even within a single landform.

Fauna
The Drakensberg area is home to 299 recorded bird species making up 37% of all non-marine avian species in southern Africa. There are 24 species of snakes in the Drakensberg, two of which are highly venomous.

One bird is endemic to the high peaks, the mountain pipit (*Anthus hoeschi)*, and another six species are found mainly here: Bush blackcap (*Lioptilus nigricapillus*), buff-streaked chat (*Oenanthe bifasciata*), Rudd's lark (*Heteromirafra ruddi*), Drakensberg rockjumper *(Chaetops aurantius*), yellow-breasted pipit (*Anthus chloris*), and Drakensberg siskin (*Serinus symonsi)*. The endangered Cape vulture and lesser kestrel are two of the birds of prey that hunt in the mountains. Mammals include klipspringer (*Oreotragus oreotragus*), eland (*Taurotragus oryx*), and mountain reedbuck (*Redunca fulvorufula*). Other endemic species include three frogs found in the mountain streams, Drakensberg river frog (*Amietia dracomontana*), Phofung river frog (*Amietia vertebralis*), and Maluti river frog (*Amietia umbraculata)*. Fish are found in the many rivers and streams, including the Maluti redfin (*Pseudobarbus quathlambae*) that was thought to be extinct before being found in the Senqunyane River in Lesotho.

The lower slopes of the Drakensberg support much wildlife, perhaps most importantly the rare southern white rhinoceros, *Ceratotherium simum simum* (which was nurtured here when facing extinction) and the black wildebeest (*Connochaetes gnou*, which as of 2011 only thrives in protected areas and game reserves). The area is home to large herds of grazing fauna and antelopes such as eland (*Taurotragus oryx*), reedbuck (*Redunca arundinum*), mountain reedbuck *(Redunca fulvorufula*), grey rhebok (*Pelea capreolus*), and even some oribi (*Ourebia ourebi)*. Chacma baboons (*Papio ursinus*) also are present. Endemic species include a large number of chameleons and other reptiles. There is one endemic frog, the forest rain frog (*Breviceps sylvestris*), and four more species that are found mainly in these mountains; long-toed tree frog (*Leptopelis xenodactylus*), plaintive rain frog (*Breviceps maculatus*), rough rain frog (*Breviceps verrucosus*), and Poynton's caco (*Cacosternum poyntoni)*.

Conservation

The high slopes are hard to reach so the environment is fairly undamaged. However, tourism in the Drakensberg is developing, with a variety of hiking trails, hotels, and resorts appearing on the slopes. Much of the higher South African parts of the range have been designated as game reserves or wilderness areas. 7% of the Drakensberg alti-montane grasslands and woodlands ecoregion is in protected areas. These include Golden Gate Highlands National Park, Sehlabathebe National Park, Tsehlanyane National Park, Malekgalonyane Nature Reserve, Giant's Castle Game Reserve, Loteni Nature Reserve, Natal National Park, Vergelegen Nature Reserve, Beaumont Nature Reserve, and Lammergeier Highlands Nature Reserve.

Of these the uKhahlamba Drakensberg Park was listed by UNESCO in 2000 as a World Heritage site. The park also is in the List of Wetlands of International Importance (under the Ramsar Convention). The Royal Natal National Park, which contains some of the higher peaks, is part of this large park complex. Adjacent to the Ukhahlamba Drakensberg World Heritage Site is the 1900 hectares (4,695 acres) Allendale Mountain Reserve, which is the largest private reserve adjoining the World Heritage Site and is found in the accessible Kamberg area, the heart of the historic San (Bushman) painting region of the Ukhahlamba.

The grassland of the lower slopes has been greatly affected by agriculture, however, especially by overgrazing. Nearly all of the original grassland and forest has disappeared and more protection is needed, although the Giant's Castle reserve is a haven for the eland and also is a breeding ground for the bearded vulture. 5.81% of the Drakensberg montane grasslands, woodlands and forests ecoregion is in protected areas. These include Kruger National Park, Mountain Zebra National Park, Golden Gate Highlands National Park, Camdeboo National Park, Sehlabathebe National Park, and Tsehlanyane National Park.

Human habitation

Towns and cities in the Drakensberg area include, from south to north, Matatiele and Barkly East in the Eastern Cape Province; Ladysmith, Newcastle, Ulundi – the former Zulu capital, Dundee, and Ixopo in KwaZulu-Natal; all of Lesotho, whose capital is Maseru; and Tzaneen in Limpopo Province.

San cave paintings

There are numerous caves in the easily eroded sandstone of Clarens Formation, the layer below the thick, hard basalt layer on the KwaZulu Natal-Lesotho border. Many of these caves have paintings by the San (Bushmen). This portion of the Drakensberg has between 35,000 and 40,000 works of San rock art, and is the largest collection of such parietal work in the world.

Some 20,000 individual rock paintings have been recorded at 500 different caves and overhanging sites between the Drakensberg Royal Natal National Park and Bushman's Nek. Due to the materials used in their production, these paintings are difficult to date, but there is anthropological evidence, including many hunting implements, that the San people existed in the Drakensberg at least 40,000 years ago, and possibly more than 100,000 years ago. According to mountainsides.co.za, in Nd edema Gorge in the Central Ginsberg 3,900 paintings have been recorded at 17 sites. One of them, Sebaayeni Cave, contains 1,146 individual paintings. The website, south Africa.info, indicates that although the oldest painting on a rock shelter wall in the Ginsberg dates back about 2400 years... paint chips at least a thousand years older have also been found. The site also indicates that the rock art of the Drakensberg is the largest and most concentrated group of rock paintings in Africa south of the Sahara, and is outstanding both in quality and diversity of subject.

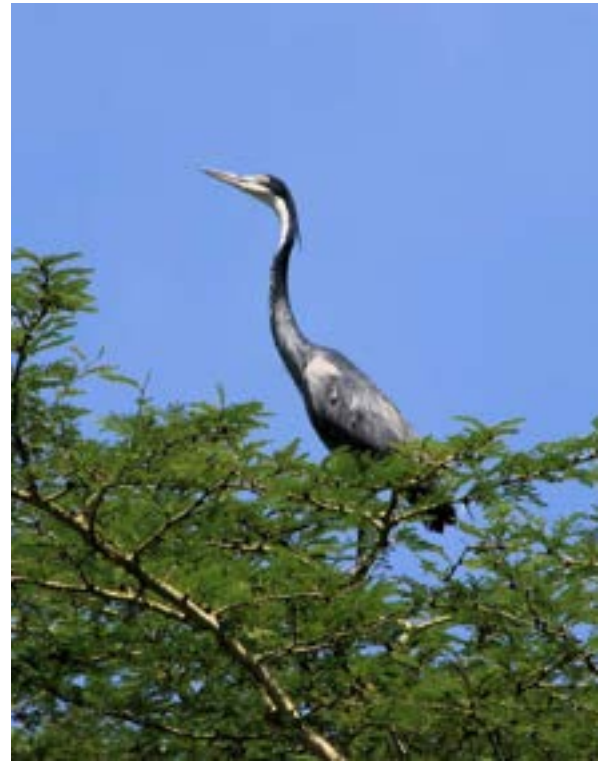
Thank you Wikipedia!

Our tour started along the coast near Port Edward which is at the southern end of KwaZulu-Natal, just north of the state of Eastern Cape. Our base was the Umtamvuna River lodge (upper left). Some of us visited the Red Desert Nature Reserve near the lodge (upper right and lower left). The 11 hectares/27 acres site claims to be the world's smallest desert. Best described as a miniature version of the Arizona Desert, the human high hills and valleys of naked red soil bare stark contrast to to the surrounding lush and tropical vegetation. Archeological artifacts going back millions of years can be found and the locals are pleased this is now an internationally protected heritage site. We found some nice plants though many were introduced species.

Our first group botanizing was in this field along the Indian Ocean at Doc Wilson Point (lower right).

Found near the Umtamvuna River lodge: *Stachytarpheta mutabilis,* Verbenaceae, introduced (upper left); *Lilium formosanum,* invasive, Liliaceae (upper center); *Watsonia* with lunate blister beetle, *Hycleus* species (upper right); *Grevillea banksii*, Australian invasive, Proteaceae (lower left); *Brillantaisia owariensis*, giant salvia, Acanthaceae (lower center); *Protea* species, Proteaceae (lower right).

Alopochen aegyptiaca, Egyptian goose (upper left); *Bostrychia hagedash,* Hadeda ibis (upper right); *Burhinus vermiculatus,* water thick-knee (lower left); *Ardea melanocephala*, black-headed heron (lower center); *Bycanistes bucinator*, trumpeter hornbill (lower right)



Gasteracantha sanguinolenta, shorthorn kitespider, male (upper left); *Graphium antheus*, larger striped swordtail (upper center); *Gasteracantha sanguinolenta*, shorthorn kitespider, female (upper right); *Hyperolius marmoratus verrucosus*, marbled or spotted painted reed frog (lower left); *Precis octavia*, gaudy commadore (lower center); Family Coreidae, tip wilter squash bug (lower right).

Undescribed dwarf chameleon commonly called the "Umtamvuna dwarf" chameleon (left); *Chamaesaura anguina*, the legless Cape grass lizard (upper right);
Spaerotherium giganteum, giant pill-millipede (lower right).

Watsonia densiflora, Iridaceae (left);
Tritonia disticha, Iridaceae (right).

Cyanotis robusta, Commelinaceae (upper left); *Ipomea crassipes,* Convolvulaceae (upper center); *Thunbergia atriplicoflora,* Acanthaceae (upper right); *Hypoxis hemerocallidea*, Africa star grass, Hypoxidaceae (lower left); *Commelina africana,* Commelinaceae (lower center); *Chlorophytum krookianum,* Asparagaceae (lower right).

Aloe maculata, soap aloe, Asphodelaceae (upper left); *Schizocarphus nervosus,* scilla, Asparagaceae (upper center);
Bulbine latifolia, Asphodelaceae (upper right);
Helichrysum species (lower left); *Erythrina humeana*, dwarf coral tree, Fabaceae (lower center); *Hibiscus trionum*, Malvaceae (lower right).

Berkheya speciosa, pretty African thistle, Asteraceae with *Leucocelis haemorrhoidalis on the flower* (upper left); *Aristea* species, Iridaceae (upper center); *Argyrolobium amplexicaule*, Fabaceae (upper right); *Pentanisia angustifolia*, Rubiaceae (lower left); *Cycnium tubulosum*, Orobanchaceae (lower center); *Argyrella canescens*, Melastomataceae (lower right).

Tephrosia species, Fabaceae (upper left); *Helichrysum* species, Asteraceae (upper center); *Ipomoea cairica*, coast morning glory, Convolvulaceae (upper right); *Sopubia simplex,* Orobanchaceae (lower left); *Dianthus zeyheri*, African pink, Caryophyllaceae,(lower center); *Grona afra,* Fabaceae (lower right).

Bordering the Umtamvuna River, the 3,247 hectares (8,024 acres) Umtamvuna Nature Reserve features an interesting stretch of riverine forest and steep rocky cliffs. Established in 1971, the reserve has 14 kilometers (8.7 miles) of trails. The plateau areas consist of grasslands (Pondoland Sourveld), which drop off into Coastal Scarp Forest in the gorge along the river below. Some of the cliff-faces are up to 240 meters/787 feet high, and a colony of Cape vultures is said to nest on them.

Cycnium racemosum, large mountain ink flower, Orobanchaceae (left); *Lasiosiphon triplinervis* , Thymelaeaceae (upper center); *Lasiosiphon anthylloides,* Thymelaeaceae (upper right).

Agapanthus campanulatus, bell agapanthus, Amaryllidaceae (upper left); *Cyperus rupestris*, Cyperaceae (upper center); *Eriosemopsis subanisophylla*, Rubiaceae (upper right); *Psorelea glabra* fountain bush, Fabaceae (lower left)*; Pigea enneasperma*, spade flower, Violaceae (lower center); *Euphorbia ericoides,* Euphorbiaceae (lower right).

Rocky exposures were habitats for interesting plants including some orchids.

Tridactyle bicaudata rupestris, two tails, three fingers orchid, Orchidaceae.

Monopsis unidentata, Campanulaceae (upper left); *Polystachya* species, Orchidaceae (upper right); *Tinnea galpinii,* Lamiaceae (lower right).

Habenaria dives, death orchid, Orchidaceae.

Satryium sphaerocarpum, red-inner Satyre, Orchidaceae.

*Satyrium trinerve, w*hitebract Satyre, Orchidaceae.

Eulophia ensata, sword harlequin, Orchidaceae.

Habenaria pseudociliosa, blackbarred ghost orchid, Orchidaceae.

Protea afra, Proteaceae (above); *Protea roupelliae,* Proteaceae (below).

Bulbine asphoideloides, Asphodelaceae (left); *Schizochilus zeyheri, g*olden splitlip orchid, Orchidaceae (upper and lower right).

The Mpenjati Nature Reserve is located between Port Edward and Margate along the coast on the Mpenjati River Lagoon. The 66 hectares/160 acres reserve is managed by Ezemvelo KZN Wildlife, and consists of a system of interconnecting riverine and floodplain marsh habitats, areas of coastal forest, coastal grasslands and open coastline, as well as the river estuary.

Eulophia angolensis, Orchidaceae, in the grassland of the reserve.

Eulophia angolensis, vlei harlequin, Orchidaceae**.**

Pelargonium luridum, Geraniaceae (left)*;*
Isoglossa ovata, Acanthaceae (upper center); *Polygala myrtilifolia,* Polygalaceae (upper right); *Voacanga thouarsii*, wild frangipani, Apocynaceae (lower right).

Along the beach of the dune forest we found *Dracaena aletriformis*, large-leaved dragon tree, Asparagaceae (upper left); *Aloe thraskii,* dune aloe, Asphodelaceae (lower left and right).

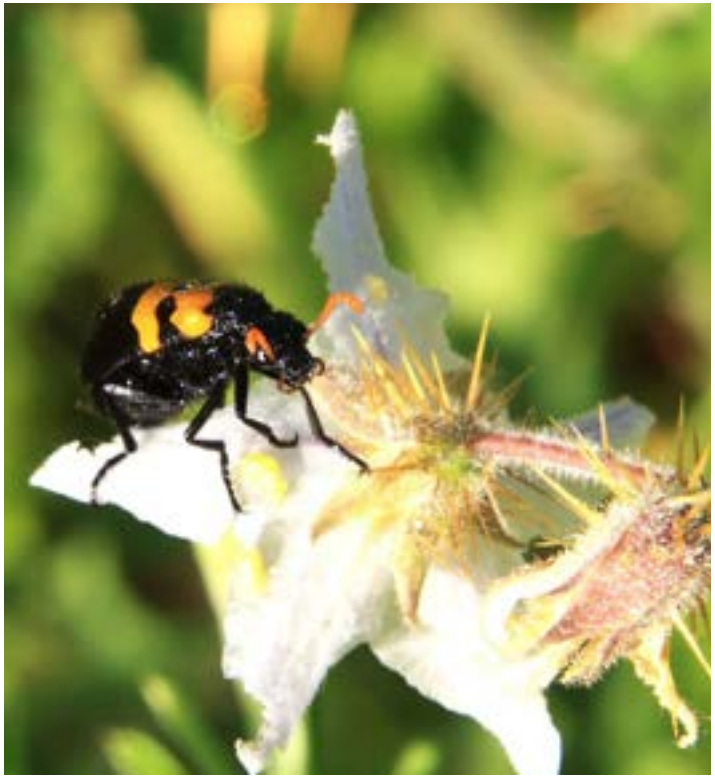
Colored seaweed on the beach (upper right); *Dimorphotheca fruticosa*, trailing African daisy, Asteraceae (lower left); *Gazania rigens*, treasure flower, Asteraceae (lower right).

Eulophia speciosa, golden harlequin, Orchidaceae (upper left); *Ipomoea pes-caprae*, beach morning glory, Convolvulaceae (upper right); *Carpobrotus dimidiatus*, Natal sour fig, Aizoaceae (lower right).

From the coast we headed inland about 300 kilometers to the southern Drakensberg where we stayed at Sani Lodge Backpackers outside the village of Himeville. The Cobham Nature reserve incorporates some of the views seen along the drive.

Hodgson's peaks can be seen from the area around the lodge. The summit is at 3256 meters/10,682 feet.

Zosterops virens, Cape White eye (upper left); *Pycnonotus barbatus*, dark-capped bulbul (upper right); *Passer diffusus*, southern gray-headed sparrow (lower left); blister beetle on nightshade flower (lower center); *Danaus chrysippus*, plain tiger or African monarch (lower right).



We visited the Himeville Nature Reserve which has meadows and two dams which are good for birdwatching. We found some orchids and other plants and animals. *Damaliscus pygargus phillipsi*, Blesbok, a subspecies of Bontebok (left and lower right); Male *Euplectes orix*, southern red bishop (upper right).

Disa versicolor, browning disa, Orchidaceae.

Disa cooperi, tailsup Disa, Orchidaceae.

Eulophia zeyheriana, capebell harlequin, Orchidaceae.

Orthochilus foliosus, leafy harlequin, Orchidaceae.

Polygala crassulenta (left); unidentified composite species (right).

Maloti-Drakensberg Park is a trans-frontier conservation area straddling South Africa and Lesotho. It encompasses a dramatic mountain range featuring sheer cliffs, golden sandstone ramparts, and a diverse range of ecosystems. The park is a UNESCO World Heritage Site, recognized for its natural beauty, biodiversity, and rich cultural heritage, including the largest concentration of rock art in sub-Saharan Africa.

We visited the central part of the park called Garden Castle nature reserve which features the Giant's Castle mountain and a grassy plateau nestled within deep valleys. The reserve covers 35,300 hectares/86,487 acres.

Striga bilabiata, witchweed, Orobanchaceae (left); *Zaluzianskya microsiphon,* Scrophulariaceae (center); *Eucomis autumnalis*, pineapple lily, Asparagaceae (right).

Rhino Peak has an elevation of 3,056 meters/10,026 feet (upper left). We parked at the Mashai trailhead to explore the meadows at the beginning of trails. There was a short downpour so we got soaked.

Whalenbergia species, Campanulaceae (upper left); *Oxalis obliquifolia*, skewleaf woodsorrel, Oxalidaceae (rght); *Crassula vaginata,* Crassulaceae, with *Euphoria kernii* scarab beetle (lower left).

Habenaria laevigata, smooth ghost orchid, Orchidaceae.

Satyrium neglectum, pink candle Satyre (left) and *Satyrium longicauda,* longtail Satyre (right) Orchidaceae. The genus is unusual in that the lip has two spurs extending from the back of the flower while other orchids have just one.

Habenaria lithophila, rock ghost orchid, Orchidaceae (left); *Eulophia zeyheriana,* capebell harlequin, Orchidaceae (right).

We used 4-wheel drive vehicles to drive up the Sani Pass which is a road between Himeville, KwaZulu-Natal and Mokhotlong, Lesotho. The pass traverses the Great Escarpment of southern Africa in its highest region, the Drakensberg Mountains, which reach an elevation of over 3,000 meters/9,843 feet.

The route up Sani Pass starts at 1,544 meters/ 5,066 feet, and climbs 1,332 meters/4,370 feet to an altitude of 2,876 meters/9,436 feet. The steep gravel road has gradients up to 1:3, which can be difficult to drive in bad weather and may be covered with snow and ice in winter. South Africa generally allows only 4x4 vehicles on the road. The pass lies between the border controls of both countries and is approximately 9 kilometers/5.6 miles in length. Caution must be exercised and motorists must be alert while navigating the pass as it has claimed many lives. Occasionally the remains of vehicles that did not succeed in navigating the pass's steep gradients and poor traction surfaces can be seen.

Disa cephalotes, head Disa, Orchidaceae (above and upper right) appears to be a mimic of *Scabiosa columbaria,* Caprifoliaceae (lower right).

Disperis cardiophora, heart-bract Kappie, Orchidaceae.

Helichrysum species, Asteraceae (upper left); interesting caterpillar (lower left);
Pterogodium cooperi, cliff bonnet, Orchidaceae (above).

Harveya pulchra, an uncommon parasitic plant in the Orobanchaceae.

Disa thodei, short pink Disa, Orchidaceae.

Pterogodium leucanthum, milk bonnet, Orchidaceae.

Trifolium burchellianum, Fabaceae (above) with *Popillia bipunctata* beetle; *Diascia integerrima,* Scrophulariaceae (lower left); *Diascia anastrepia,* Scrophulariaceae (lower center); *Kniphofia linearifolia*, common marsh poker, Asphodelaceae (lower right).

Euryops tysonii, Asteraceae with *Melyris natalensis,* groovewing flower beetles.

Corycium (Pterogodium) dracomontanum, Drakensberg bonnet, Orchidaceae.

Disa nivea, snow Disa, Orchidaceae (left)*; Dierama dracomontanum,* Iridaceae (right).

Satryium cristatum, tassel Satyre, Orchidaceae.

Pseudocordylus subviridis, Drakensberg crag lizard (left).

Protea subvestita, Proteaceae.

View of the rim of the Drakensberg Escarpment taken from near the top of the pass, close to the border of South Africa and Lesotho, looking towards South Africa.

Though one is checked for paperwork when leaving South Africa at the bottom of the pass, the official crossing is at the top of the pass meaning that most of the pass lies in South Africa despite appearing to be a no-mans land. South Africa has done some maintenance on the pass over the years but that is hard to tell as the road remains very rough. We were told that historically it is people from Lesotho that have lived in the pass.

Small settlements of circular, thatched-roofed stone-walled structures called rondavels or mokhoros along the road from the border towards Mokhotlong (above and below).

Views from the highest point on the road which has a sign stating that the elevation is 3,240 meters/10,630 feet above sea level.

*Disperis lindleyana, f*orest Kappie, Orchidaceae back at the base of Sani Pass.

From Himeville we headed north to Bergville where we stayed at the Dalmore Guest Farm. Lots of beautiful scenery and plants along the way.

Gladiolus dalenii, Iridaceae.

Monsonia burkeana, Geraniaceae (upper left); *Aristea* species, Iridaceae (upper right);
Moraea inclinata, Iridaceae (lower center*); Oxalis semiloba*, Oxalidaceae (lower right).

Brunsvigia undulata, ruby candelabra, Amaryllidaceae

Balearica regulorum, African crowned crane (left);
Euplectes progne, long-tailed widowbird (upper right);
Euplectes ardens, red-collared widowbird (lower right).

Satyrium hallackii, tall Satyre, Orchidaceae.

Dierama robustum, robust wandflower, Iridaceae.

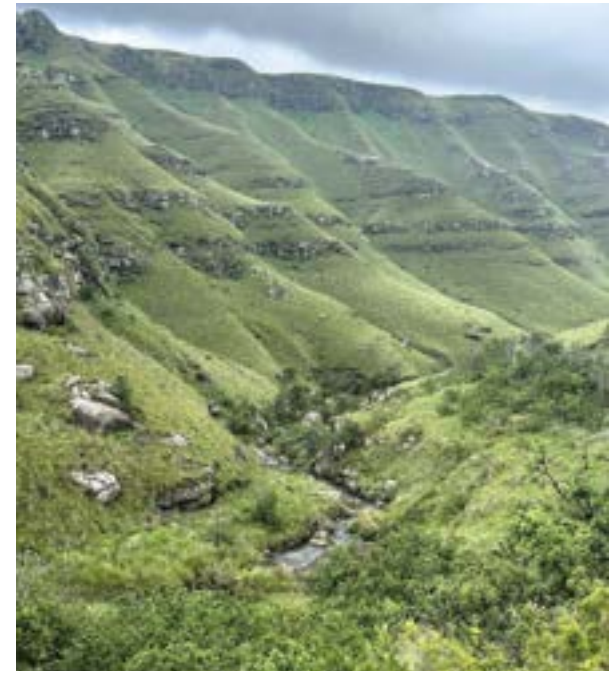
Orchidaceae*: Satyrium longicauda ,* longtail Satyre (left)*; Habenaria laevigata,* smooth ghost orchid (center); *Habenaria dives,* death orchid (right).

Disa versicolor, browning Disa, Orchidaceae.

Disa brevicornis, tropical monodisa, Orchidaceae.

Asclepias macropus, tailed cartwheel, Apocynaceae.

A stop at Highmoor Nature Reserve. Don't feed the baboons!



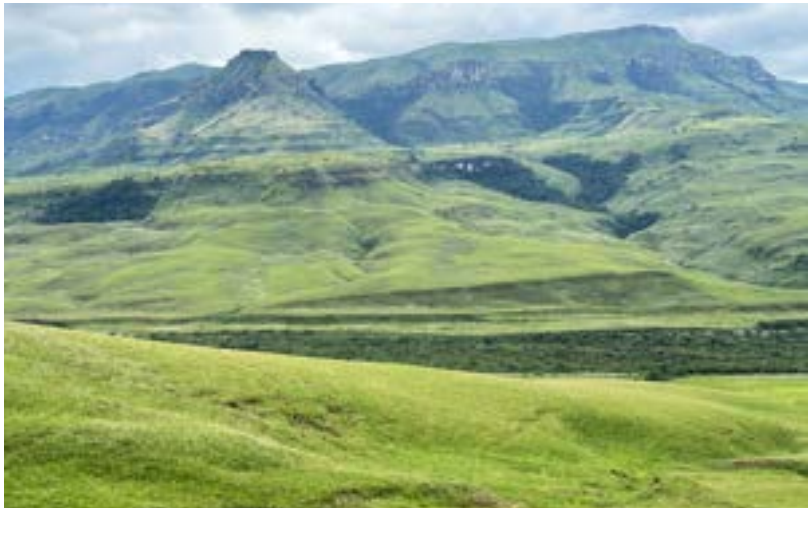
Crassula vaginata, white stonecrop, Crassulaceae (left);
Erica species, heath, Ericaceae (upper center);
Trachylepis punctatissima, montane speckled skink (upper right);
Xerophyta viscosa, Velloziaceae (lower right).

Hesperantha scopulosa, cinnamon-scented evening lily or cliff hesperantha, Iridaceae.

The Ankole is a breed or group of breeds of African cattle, belonging to the broad Sanga cattle grouping of African breeds. It was probably introduced to Uganda between five and seven hundred years ago by nomadic pastoralists from more northerly parts of the continent. It is distributed in much of eastern and central Africa, particularly in Uganda, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Rwanda, Burundi and parts of Tanzania. Dalmore Farm has a small herd of these cows with incredibly large horns.

On this day we headed to the Cathedral Peak area.
Rupert holding a *Chamaeleo dilepis*, flap-necked chameleon
that eagle-eyed Frank spotted on the road.

From the Cathedral Peak Hotel we had wonderful views of the foothills and mountains of the Cathedral range which is at a right angle with the main range of the Drakensberg. Cathedral Peak is a free standing mountain with a height of 3,004 meters/9,856 feet. It is a full day hike so we just botanized for a short portion of the rainbow gorge hiking trail.



Satyrium macrophyllum, largeleaf Satyre, Orchidaceae.

Satyrium cristatum, Orchidaceae.

Chamaeleo dilepis, flap-necked chameleon (lower left): *Agama aculeata distanti*, northern ground agama (lower right).

We departed from Dalmore Farm and drove about 70 kilometers/44 miles to Royal Natal National Park. Despite its name, it is actually a provincial park, not a national park. It covers an area of 81 square kilometers/31 square miles in the KwaZulu-Natal province and forms part of the uKhahlamba Drakensberg Park, a UNESCO World Heritage Site. A main feature of the park is the Drakensberg Amphitheater, a rock wall 5 kilometers/3.1 miles long and up to 1,200 meters/3,900 feet high. Mont-aux-Sources peak, where the Orange and Tugela rivers have their source and the 948 meter/3,110 feet tall Tugela Falls, one of the world's tallest waterfalls, also are in the park.

A troupe of *Papio ursinus*, chacma baboons. It is one of the largest of the old world monkeys. Located primarily in southern Africa, the chacma baboon has a wide variety of social behaviors, including a dominance hierarchy, collective foraging, adoption of young by females, and friendship pairings. These behaviors form parts of a complex evolutionary ecology.

We took this beautiful trail along the river called the Tugela Gorge walk.

Agapanthus campanulatus, Amaryllidaceae (upper left); *Searsia* species, Anacardiaceae (upper right); *Plectranthus grallatus,* Lamiaceae (lower left)*; Gloriosa modesta,* Colchicaceae (lower center); *Begonia sutherlandii,* Begoniaceae (lower right).

Harveya speciosa, Orobanchaceae (left)*; Pelargonium schlechteri*, Geraniaceae (right).

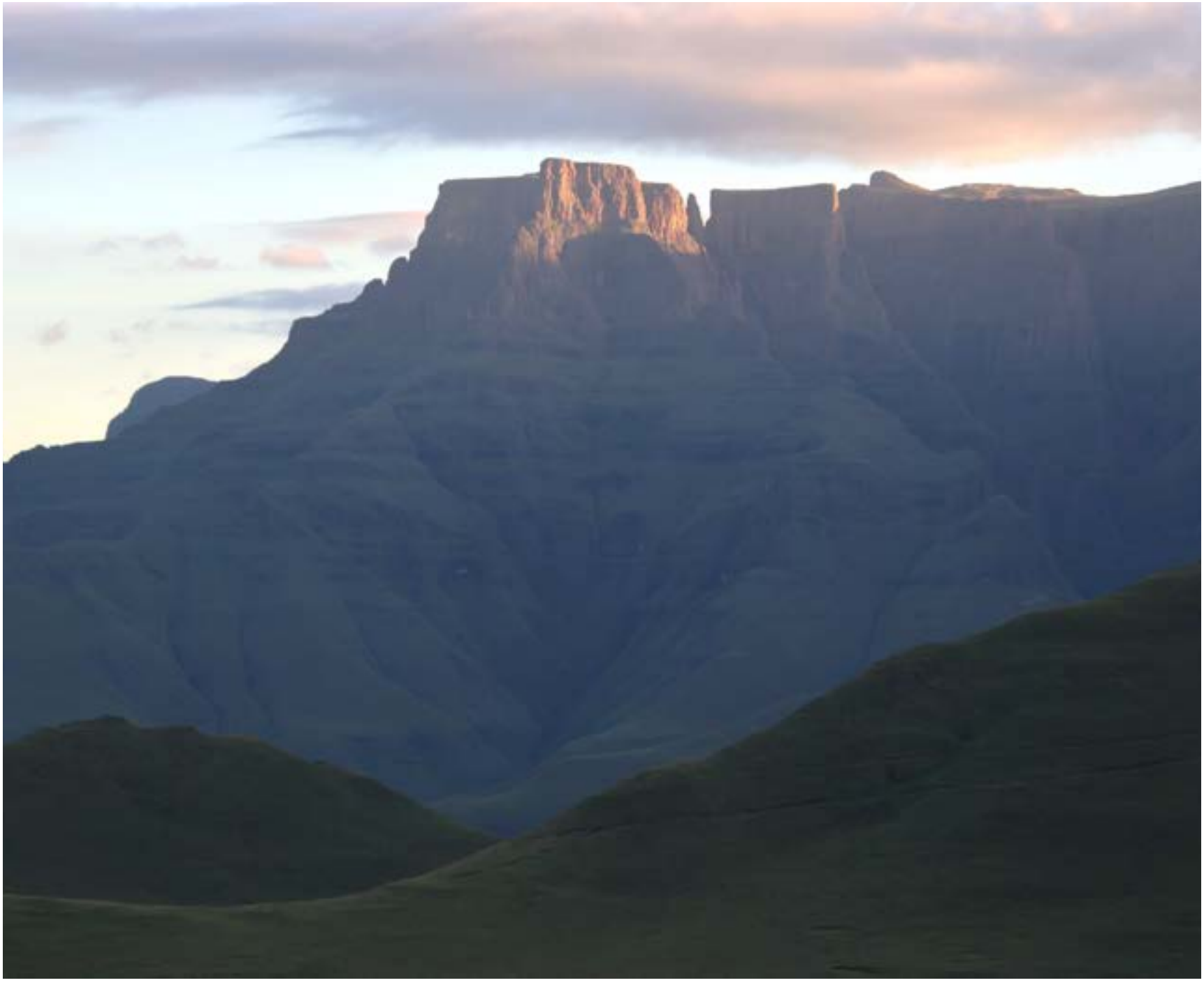
Liparis bowkeri, litter fly orchid, Orchidaceae.

Cussonia paniculata, Mountain Cabbage tree or kiepersol.

The clouds dissipated enough for a fair view of the Drakensberg Amphitheater.
From the park we headed about 220 kilometers/137 miles into Free State and the town of Phuthaditjhaba where we spent the next four nights at the Witsieshoek Mountain Lodge on the other side of the rock formation in the northern section of the Drakensberg.

Another panoramic view of the amphitheater (top) and side view (center) and our lodging (bottom).

Incredible views from around the Witsieshoek lodge. The area is one of the richest alpine habitats in the Drakensberg.



Pterogodium dracomontanum, Orchidaceae (upper center); *Gladiolus crassifolius,* Iridaceae (upper right); *Disa versicolor*, Orchidaceae, (lower center); *Monopsis decipiens*, Campanulaceae with beetle (lower right).

Phymateus stali, African bush grasshopper on an orchid.

Bradypodion dracomontanum, Drakensberg Dwarf Chameleon (left and upper center); speckled skink (upper right) and a pair of weevils, *Bronchus* species (below).

Unidentified milkweed species, Apocynaceae

Berkheya leucaugeta, Asteraceae, at the base of a waterfall.

Disa crassicornis, long pink Disa, Orchidaceae.

Disa crassicornis.

Pterygodium magnum, big bonnet, Orchidaceae.

Pterygodium magnum.

Eulophia ovalis, courting harlequin, Orchidaceae.

Satyrium parviflorum, devil Satyre, Orchidaceae.

Disa stachyoides, wormwood Disa, Orchidaceae.

Satyrium neglectum, pink candle Satyre, Orchidaceae.

Disperis cardiophora, heart-bract kappie or granny bonnet, Orchidaceae.

Satyrium longicauda ssp. *jacottetianum,* Orchidaceae.

Corycium (Pterogodium) dracomontanum, Drakensberg bonnet, Orchidaceae.

Trifolium burchellianum, Burchell's clover, Fabaceae (upper left); *Leonotis leonurus*, lion's tail, Lamiaceae (upper right); *Schizocarphus nervosus*, white scilla or white wild squill, Asparagaceae (lower left); *Zantedeschia albomaculata*, spotted calla lily, Araceae (lower right).

Moraea inclinata, nodding wild Moraea, Iridaceae.

AMS

We hiked to near the base of Sentinel Peak.

From the lodge it is about a 20 minute drive in the off-road vehicle to the start of the trail. The views are spectacular and the truck makes a couple of stops for photos.

Berkheya species, Asteraceae (left); *Indigofera* species , Fabaceae (right).

Berkheya species, Asteraceae (above and upper center);
Agapanthus campanulatus, Amaryllidaceae (upper right).

The trail is also known as the chain ladder trail as there are a series of those from the base of the rock face up to the plateau on top. The trail starts at an elevation of about 2,500 meters/8,200 feet and reaches an altitude of about 3,000 meters/9,840 feet. The trail is about 12 kilometers/7.4 miles round trip and takes an average of 5 hours. The two sections of chain ladders are reportedly 24 meters/79 feet and 13 meters/43 feet in height. We walked slowly to see all of the wonderful wildflowers and stopped well before the base of the monolith.

Schizochilus angustifolius, alpine splitlip orchid, Orchidaceae.

Disa fragrans, fragrant Disa, Orchidaceae (photos by Gary Yong Gee).

Disperis renibractea, kidney-bract kappie, Orchidaceae.

Lobelia tomentosa, Campanulaceae (upper left); *Heliophila rigidiuscula*, grassland blue cress flower, Brassicaceae (upper right); *Romulea* species, Iridaceae (lower left); *Hesperantha baurii,* flag lily, Iridaceae (lower center); *Romulea* species, Iridaceae, (lower right).

Helichrysum marginatum, everlasting flower, Asteraceae (above);
Berkheya species, African thistle, Asteraceae (upper center);
Dimorphotheca jucunda, delightful African daisy, Asteraceae (upper right); *Berkheya* species, Asteraceae (lower right).

*Rhodohypoxis baurii (*synonym *Hypoxis baurii)* red star or rosy posy, Hypoxidaceae (above); *Roessleria armerioides*, mountain gerbera, Asteraceae (upper center); *Dianthus basuticus,* Drakensberg carnation, Caryophyllaceae (upper right); *Guthriea capensis*, hidden flower, Achariaceae (lower right): this endemic is unusual as it is one of only two plants known to be primarily pollinated by reptiles, specifically Drakensberg crag lizards. These lizards, attracted by the bitter-scented nectar, collect pollen on their snouts as they feed. The nectar is both pungent and bitter, deterring most other animals, but not the lizards.

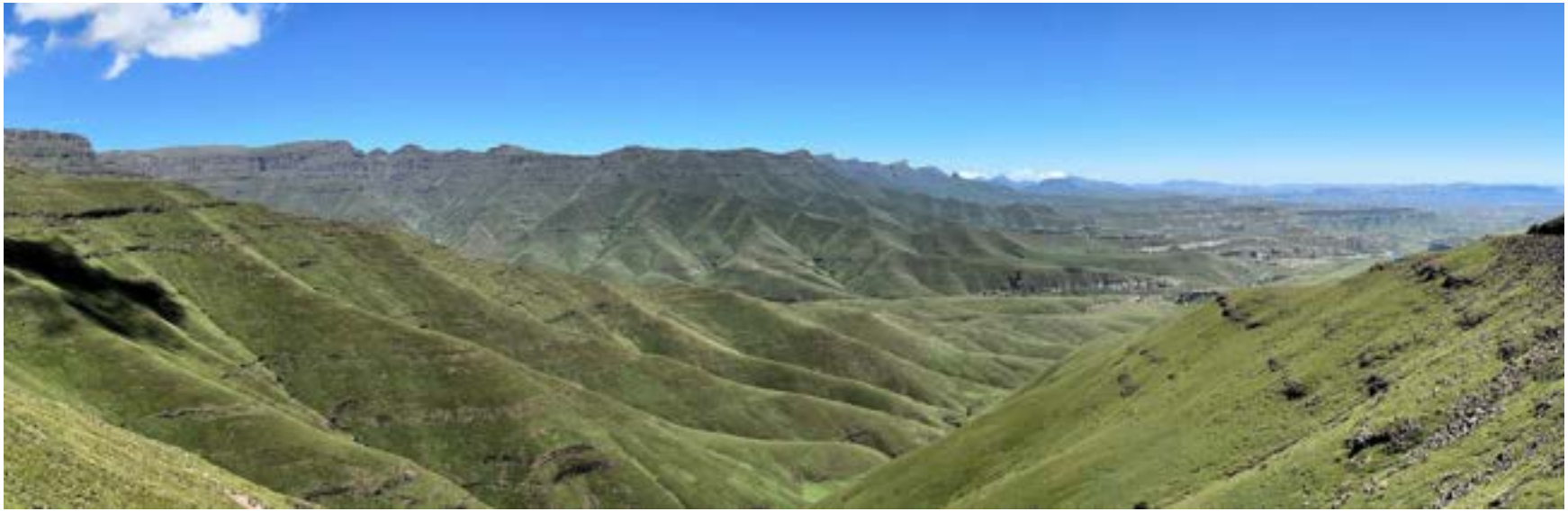
Ornithogalum regale, royal berg lily, Hyacinthaceae (left); *Albuca humilis*, Hyacinthaceae (center); *Kniphofia porphyrantha*, red hot poker, Asphodelaceae (right).

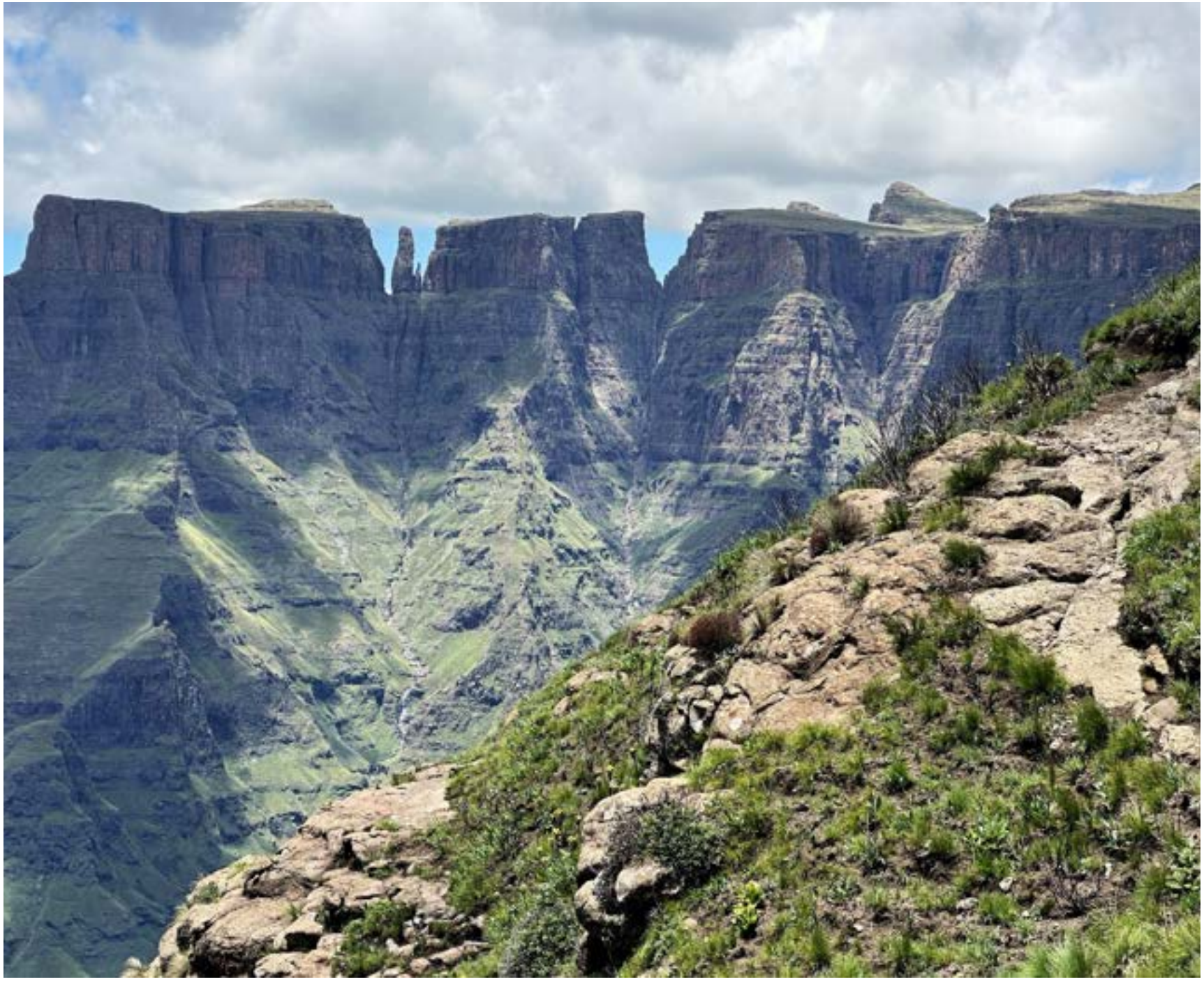
Eucomis bicolor, variegated pineapple lily, Asparagaceae.

Eucomis schijffii, miniature eucomis, Asparagaceae

Eucomis autumnalis, autumn pineapple lily, Asparagaceae.

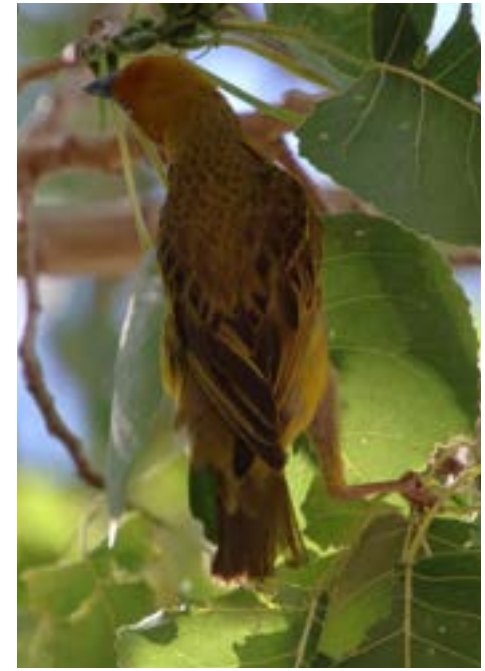
Unidentified grass, Poaceae.





Golden Gate Highlands National Park is located in Free State, near the Lesotho border, about an hours drive from Witsieshoek. It covers an area of 340 square kilometers/130 square miles. The park's most notable features are its golden, ochre, and orange-hued, deeply eroded sandstone cliffs and outcrops, especially the Brandwag rock. Another feature of the area is the numerous caves and shelters displaying San rock paintings. Wildlife featured at the park includes mongooses, eland, zebras, and over 100 bird species. It is the Free State's only national park and is more famous for the beauty of its landscape than for its wildlife. Numerous paleontology finds have been made in the park, including dinosaur eggs and skeletons.

Pelea capreolus, Grey rhebok.

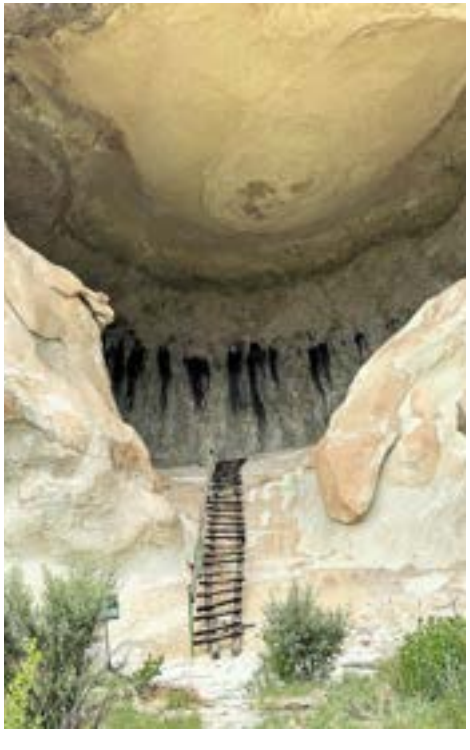


Gomphocarpus fruticosus, narrow-leaf cotton bush, Apocynaceae (above and upper center);
Ploceus capensis, cape weaver (upper right);
Monopsis decipiens, butterfly lobelia, Lobeliaceae (lower right).

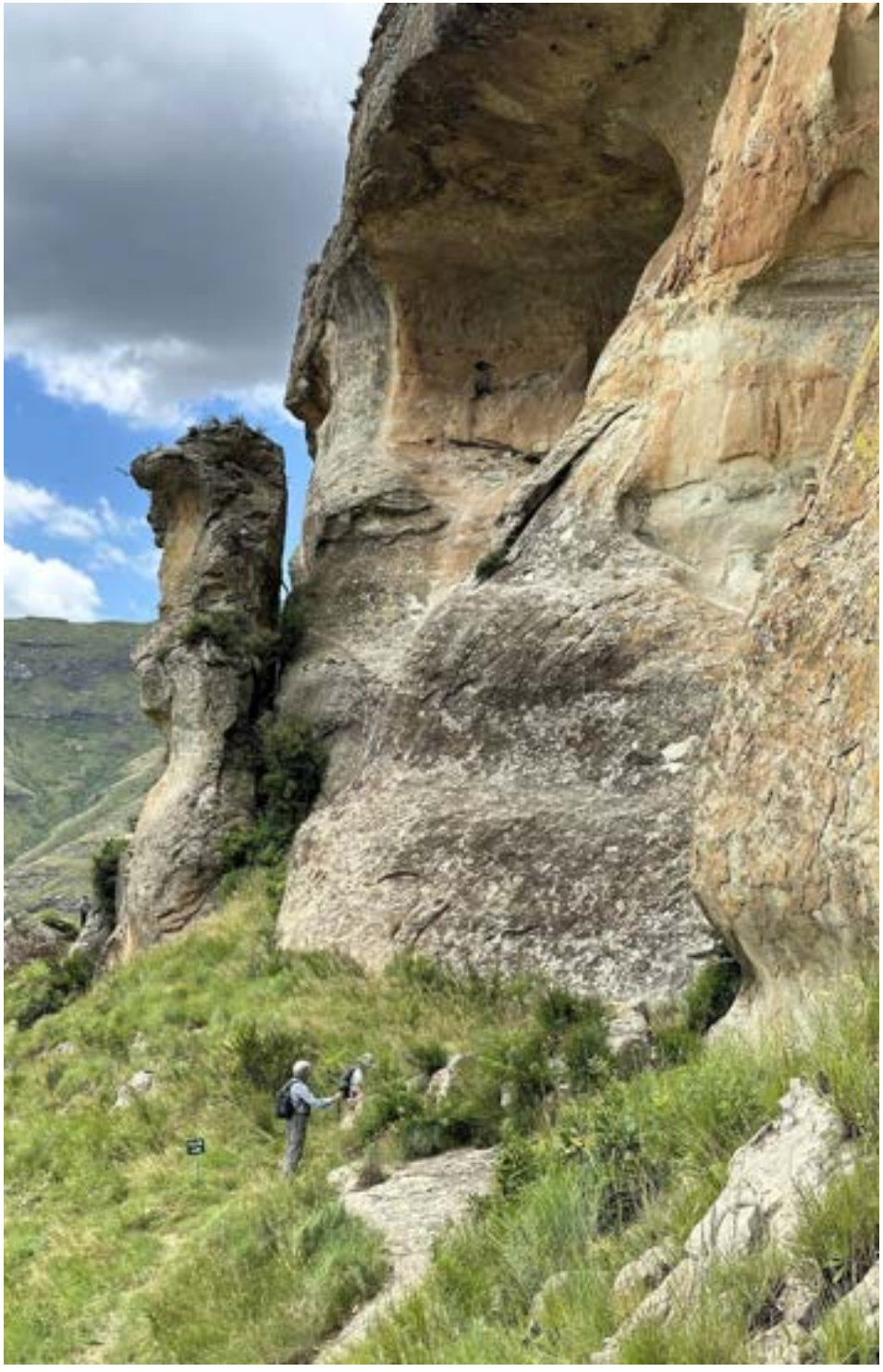
We took the Holkrans trail, a 2.4 kilometer/1.5 mile loop that goes through a gorgeous valley to the base of some sandstone cliffs. From here you take a ladder up to a cave and then another short cliff hanging bridge to another cave. Elevation gain is 150 meters/492 feet The views are wonderful.

NO
GRAFFITI

Some of the caves in the cliffs are reported to have prehistoric drawings but we didn't observe any.



Delosperma species, ice plant, Aizoaceae (left); *Gladiolus crassifolius*, thick-leaved gladiolus, Iridaceae (center); *Gladiolus dalenii,* African gladiolus, Iridaceae (right).



Psammophylax rhombeatus, spotted grass snake or Rhombic Skaapsteker (lower right).

The Brandwag Buttress is the most famous formation in the park. The Brandwag cliffs are made up of the Clarens formation which occurred in the Triassic period, over 200 million years ago. The layers in this formation are 140 to 160 meters/ 460 to 520 feet thick. The name "Brandwag" is Afrikaans for "sentinel," reflecting the rock's prominent position and watchtower-like appearance.

Gladiolus papilio, butterfly gladiola, Iridaceae (above);
Ledebouria species, Asparagaceae (upper center);
Euphorbia clavarioides, lion's spoor, Euphorbiaceae (upper right);
Pelargonium sidoides, African geranium, Geraniaceae (lower right).

Alcelaphus buselaphus caama, Red hartebeest (upper left); *Damaliscus pygargus,* bontebok (upper right)
Antidorcas marsupialis, springbok (lower left); termite hill damaged by an *Orycteropus afer*, aardvark (lower right). The aardvarks primarily eat ants and termites and break into the hills and use their long sticky tongues to collect their prey.

There are two loop roads in the park. These are views along the Blesbok loop which is 6.7 kilometers/4.2 miles long.

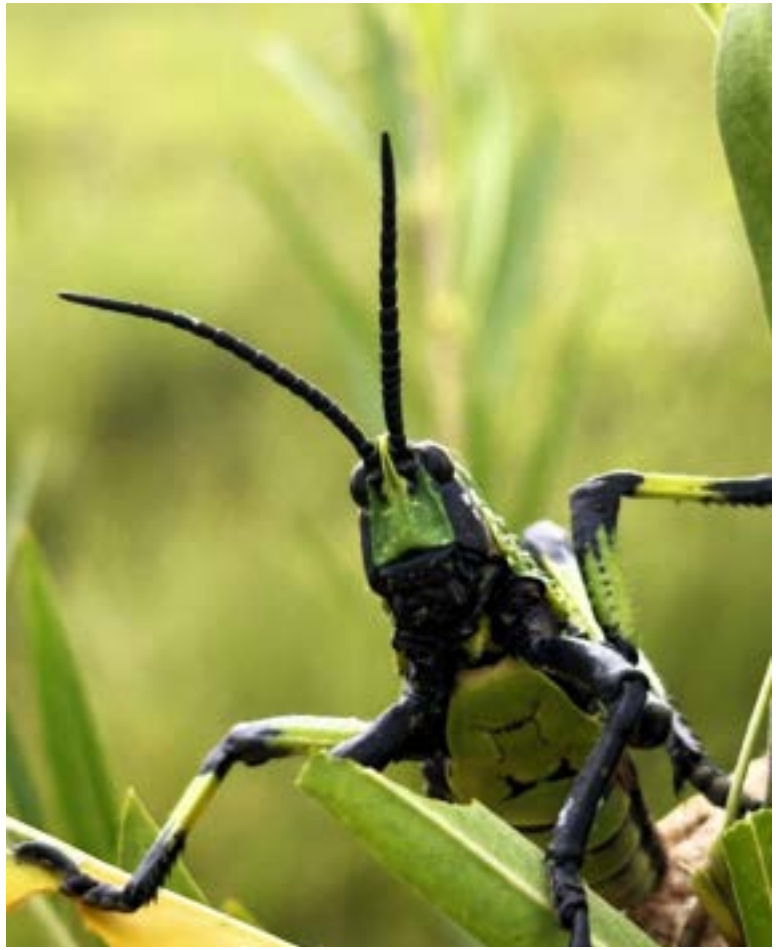
Mushroom Rock formation.

Panoramic views from the Oribi loop which is 4.2 kilometers/2.6 miles long. On this loop is a feeding station for the rare bearded vultures (or lammergeier, *Gypaetus barbatus)* and endangered cape vultures (or cape griffon, *Gyps coprotheres*) where carrion is placed near a blind so visitors can observe the birds.

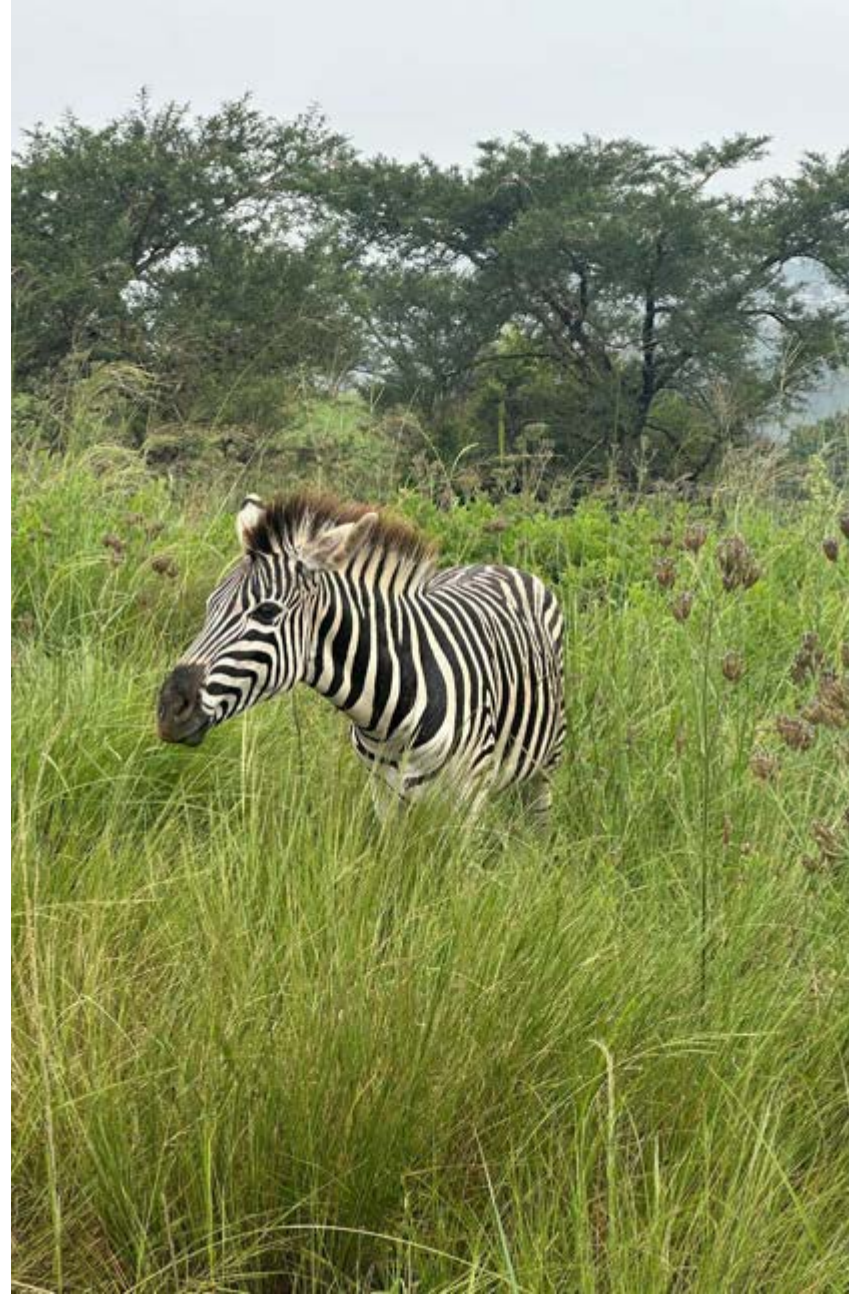
From the Drakensberg we ended the tour with a night at the Old Halliwell Country Inn (upper right) in Howick which was about 320 kilometers/200 miles east. Tree aloes (*Aloe ferox*) along the highway (upper left).
The uMngeni Valley Nature Reserve in Howick (below) is a 759 hectares/1875 acres preserve created in 1976 along the valley created below Howick Falls on the Umgeni River. It protects a variety of habitats including dense riverine thickets, open woodland, thorn-veld, grasslands and towering cliffs. Several large mammals live here as well as 270 species of birds.

A few of the wildflowers found in the reserve include Verbena (upper left), a vetch (upper right), *Leonotis* (lower left) and the leaves of the *Brunsvigia* plant (lower right).

Close by we found *Indigofera* species (above); *Knifophia angustifolia* (upper center); an unusual caterpillar (upper right) and *Junonia orithya*, the blue pansy butterfly (lower right).



Phymateus leprosus, leprous grasshopper (above and upper right) are a toxic milkweed grasshopper; ticks waiting for a warm blooded animal to walk by (lower right).



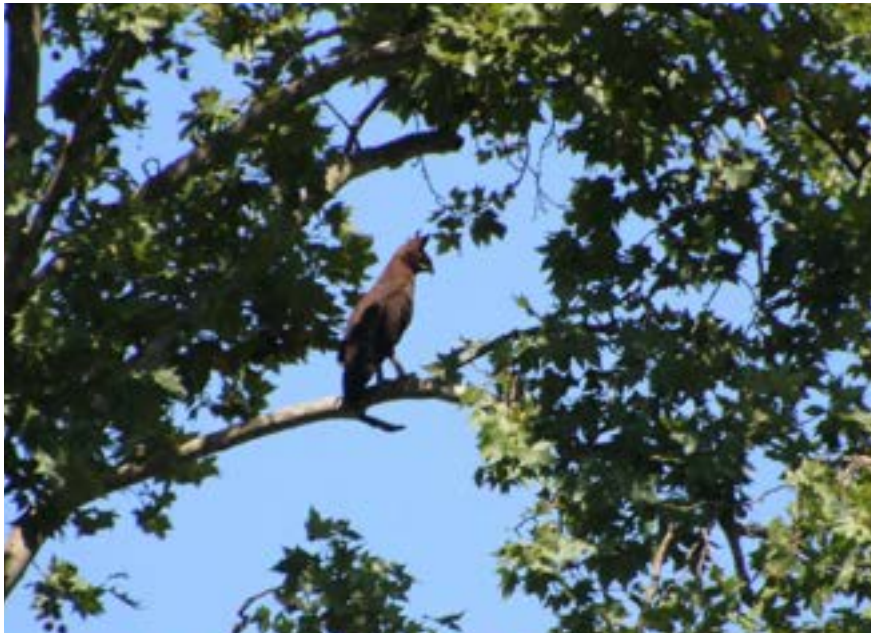
Burchell's zebras and wildebeests graze in the park on this rainy day with beautiful Howick Falls just visible in the background. The falls plunge 111 meters/364 feet over dolerite cliffs into the gorge.

Disa patula, broad or lurelip Disa, Orchidaceae.

Satyrium longicauda, Longtail Satyre, long-tailed Satyrium, or blushing bride Satyrium, Orchidaceae.

Observing insect life at night, often with a light set up by Joe and Eduardo (upper left and lower right); *Heniocha apollonia*, Apollo marbled emperor (lower left); *Nudaurelia wahlbergii*, Wahlberg's emperor (upper right).

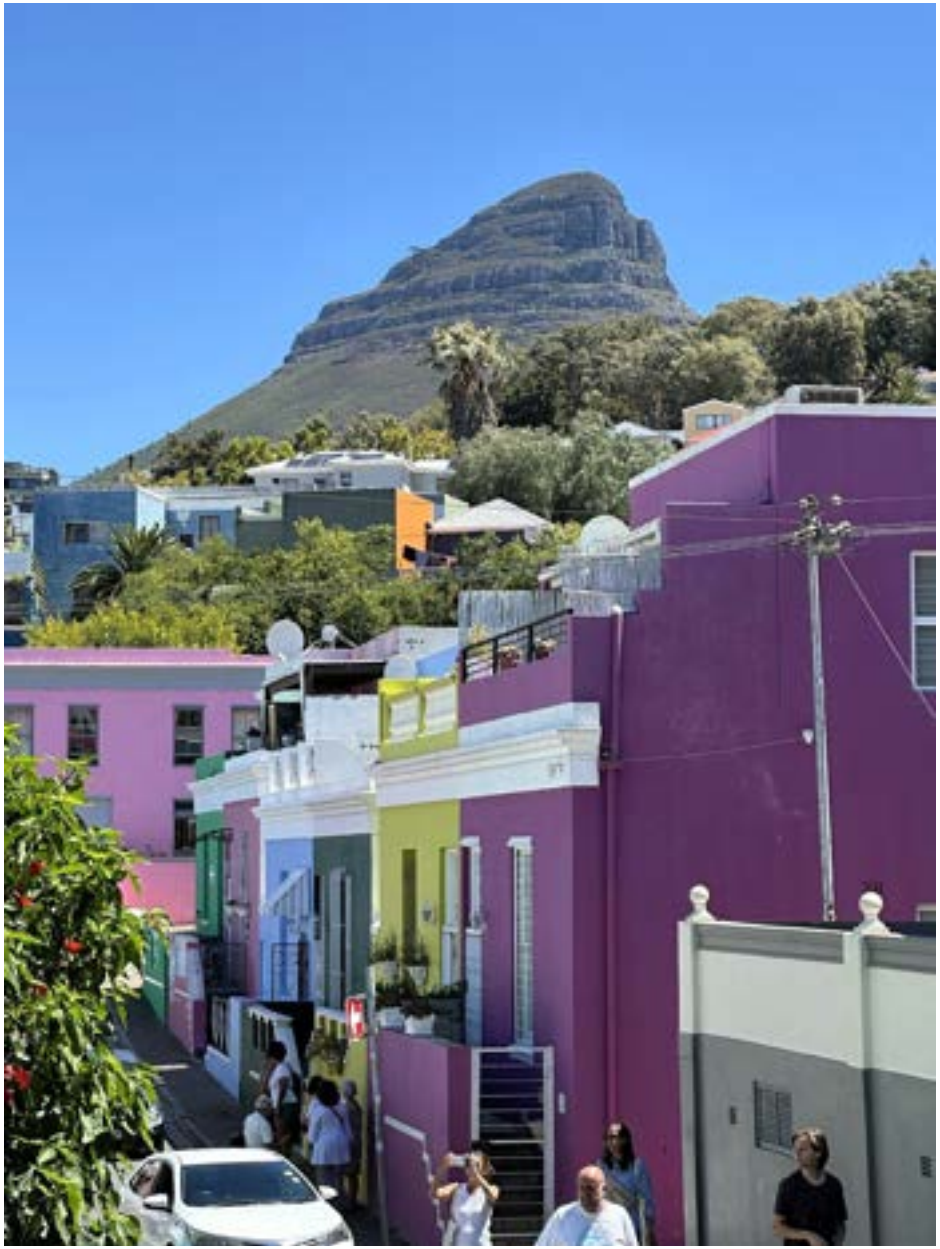
KwaZulu-Natal National Botanical Garden in Pietermaritzburg was established in 1874 and contains plants from eastern South Africa as well as from the Northern Hemisphere. The century old lane of London plane trees (right) and the Dorpspruit river (above) are features of the park. Forested hillsides, foot paths, lawns and flowerbeds continue to show the aesthetics of its Victorian and Edwardian origins. More than 115 butterfly species and 180 bird species have been recorded here, largely due to the diversity of habitats in the garden.



A river crab, long-crested eagle (*Lophaetus occipitalis*) and a hadada ibis (*Bostrychia hagedash*) as well as a *Hypolimnas anthedon*, variable diadem butterfly and a *Kniphofia* or torch lily.

Downtown Cape Town

On our way home we stopped in Cape Town for a couple of days. The city is the second largest after Johannesburg, with a population of just under 5 million. The city is known for its harbor, its natural setting in the Cape Floristic Region, and for landmarks such as Table Mountain and Cape Point.



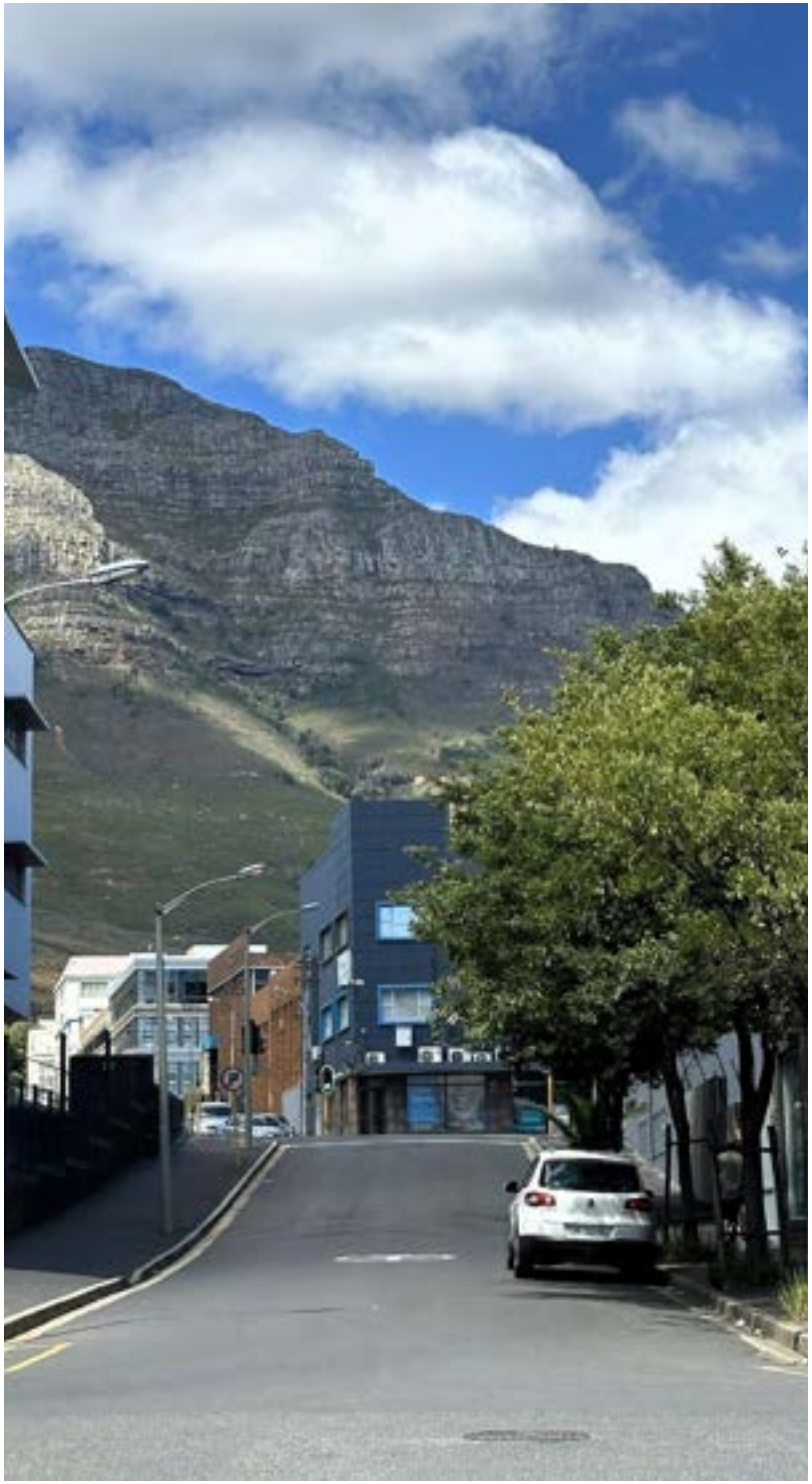
The Bo-Kaap is an area of Cape Town, formerly known as the Malay Quarter. It is a former racially segregated area, situated on the slopes of Signal Hill above the city center and is a historical center of Cape Malay culture in the city. Bo-Kaap is known for its brightly colored homes and cobblestoned streets. According to the South African Heritage Resources Agency, the area contains the largest concentration of pre-1850 architecture in South Africa, and is the oldest surviving residential neighborhood in Cape Town.

The area is traditionally a multicultural neighborhood, and 56.9% of its population identify as Muslim. The Nurul Islam Mosque, established in 1844, is located in the area (upper right).

The Castle of Good Hope is a 17th century bastion fort in Cape Town. Originally located on the coastline of Table Bay, following land reclamation the fort is now located inland. The fortress housed a church, bakery, various workshops, living quarters, shops, and cells, among other facilities.

In 1936 the Castle was declared a historical monument (now a provincial heritage site) and following restorations in the 1980s it is considered the best preserved example of a Dutch East India Company fort.

The Cape Heritage Museum within the fort provides an inclusive narrative of South Africa's history, highlighting the interactions among different communities such as the Khoi, San, and Dutch, through various epochs including colonialism and apartheid. It aims to offer a balanced reflection on the nation's diverse heritage and complex past



We visited the Woodstock neighborhood and had a guided walk highlighting the street art and culture of the city.

The area has an eclectic, ever-evolving mix of street art from top international street artists. The above works are from artists from France, Spain and Italy . The sugar bird, African penguin and the protea (upper right) are all symbols of Cape Town. Some artists are compensated and others just paint for the love of it. After a period they may be painted over and a new masterpiece will appear.

LOVE
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ALL WE NEED IS LOVE

LUVBUZZ
STUDIOS

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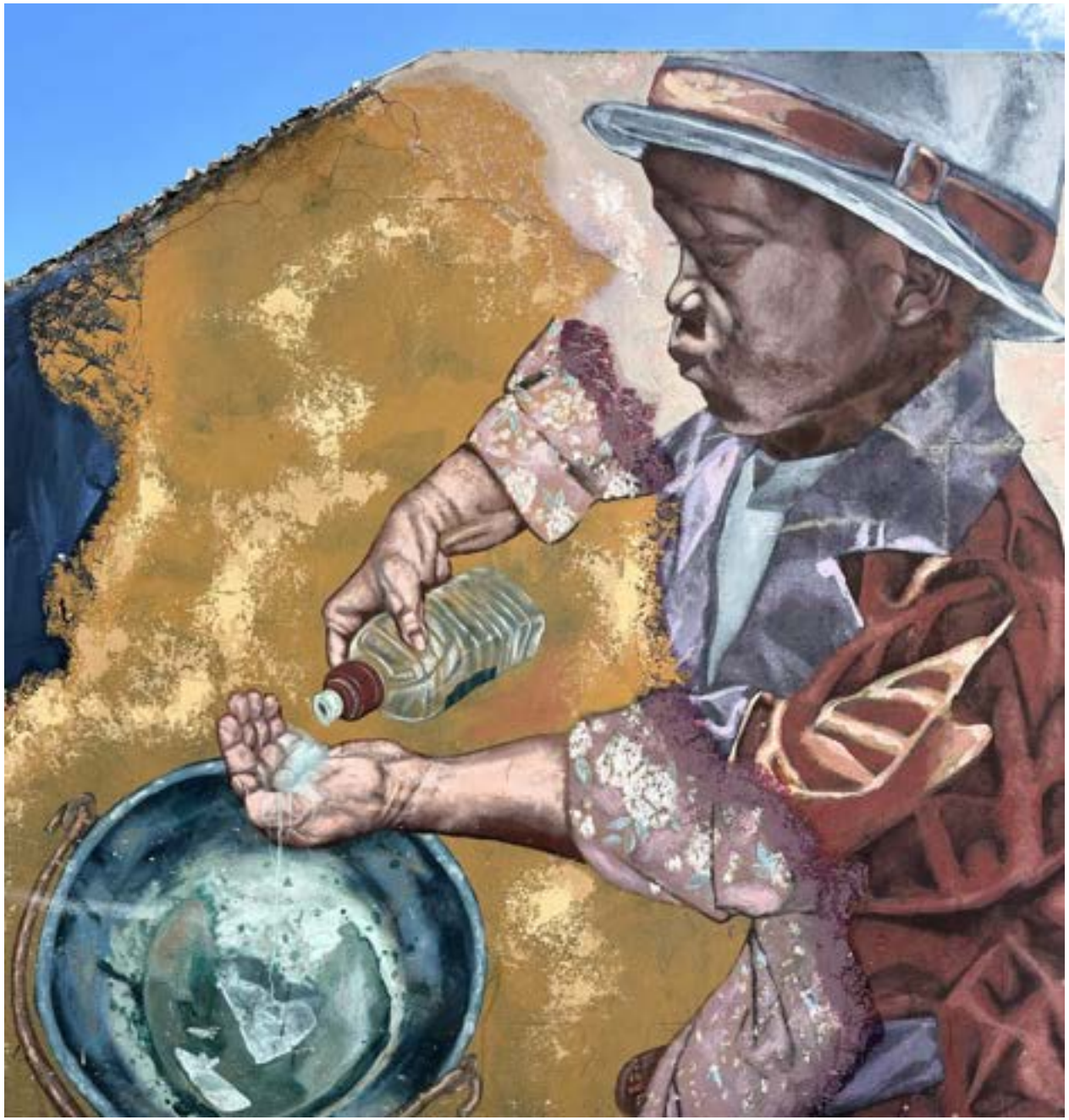


This mural and two on the next page were created during the pandemic and show the preciousness of water and the mood of the time.

NO
PARKING

The Cape leopard is no longer found in the area but is depicted on a building (upper left); the artist Eyekco from the Eastern Cape made this mural in 2019 depicting three generations and representing the fear of losing species (lower right).

Table Mountain is a flat-topped mountain forming a prominent landmark overlooking the city of Cape Town. Table Mountain is home to a large array of mostly endemic fauna and flora. Its top elevates about 1,000 meters/3,281 feet above the surrounding city, making the popular hike upwards on a large variety of different, often steep and rocky pathways a serious mountain tour which requires fitness, preparation and hiking equipment. Or one can take the cable car which rotates through 360 degrees during the five minute ascent or descent, giving a panoramic view over the city.

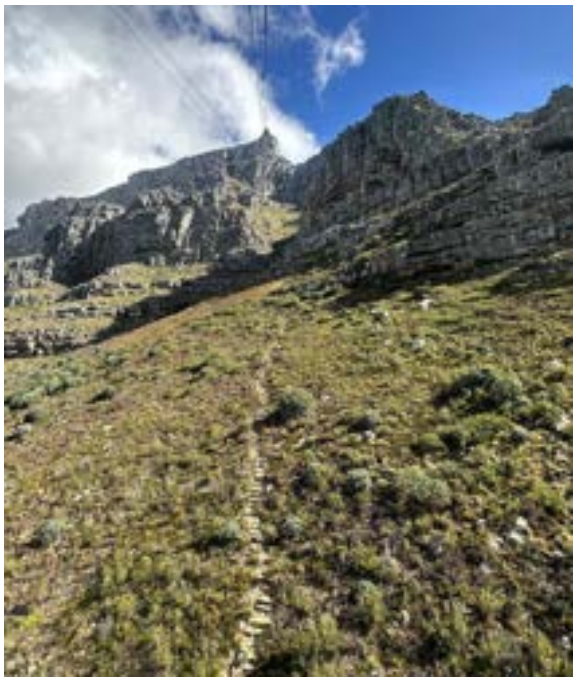
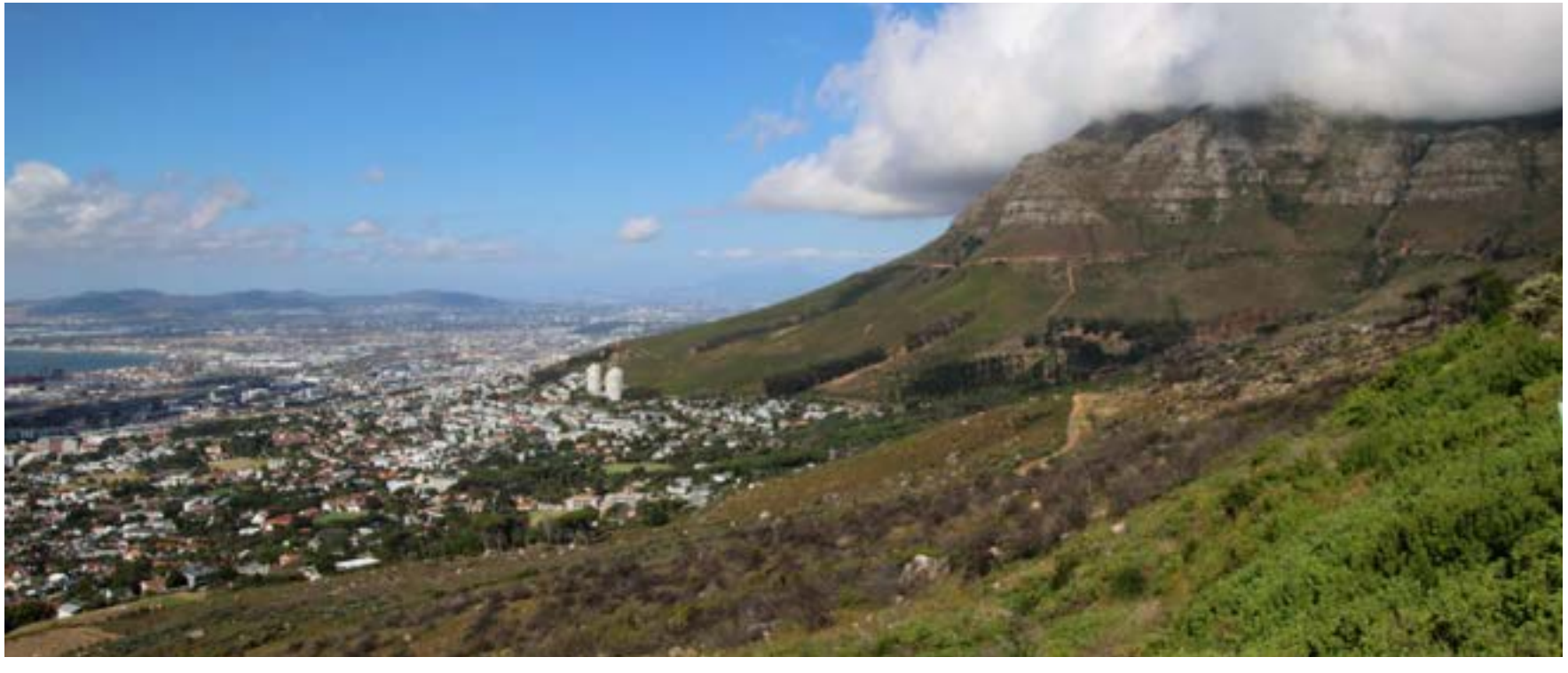


Table Mountain National Park is the most visited national park in South Africa, attracting 4.2 million people every year for various activities. Lion's Head is adjacent to the plateau.

Views of the city from the top of the mountain. The mountains form a natural amphitheater around the harbor.



We unexpectedly used the same guide, Hendre, on the mountain as we did on our visit in 2022.

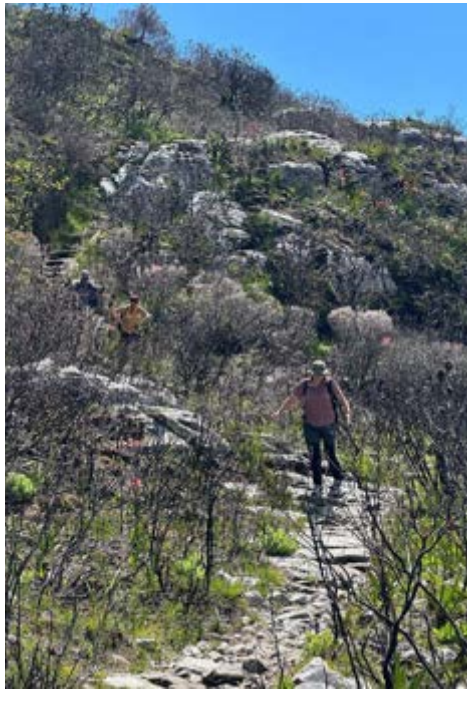
The main feature of Table Mountain is the level plateau approximately three kilometers/2 miles from side to side, edged by steep cliffs.

Most visitors stay close to the cable car station though some venture a bit further on the plateau and navigate the terrain with the secure chain banisters (above). The top of Platteklip Gorge (upper center) , supposedly the easiest of the challenging routes up the mountain.

The rock hyrax, *Procavia capensis*, is also called dassie, Cape hyrax, rock rabbit and coney. Along with other hyrax species and the sirenians, this species is the most closely related to the elephant. Hyraxes typically live in groups of 10–80 animals, and forage as a group. Having incomplete thermoregulation, they are most active in the morning and evening, although their activity pattern varies substantially with season and climate.

The highest point on Table Mountain is towards the eastern end of the plateau and is marked by Maclear's Beacon, a stone cairn built in 1865 by Sir Thomas Maclear for a trigonometrical survey. It is 1,086 meters/3,563 feet above sea level, and about 19 meters/62 feet higher than the cable station at the western end of the plateau.

Table Mountain is home to a large array of mostly endemic fauna and flora including 8,200 plant species, of which around 80% are fynbos (Afrikaans for 'fine bush').



Anthobaphes violacea, orange-breasted sunbird, male (above); *Promerops cafer*, cape sugarbird (below).

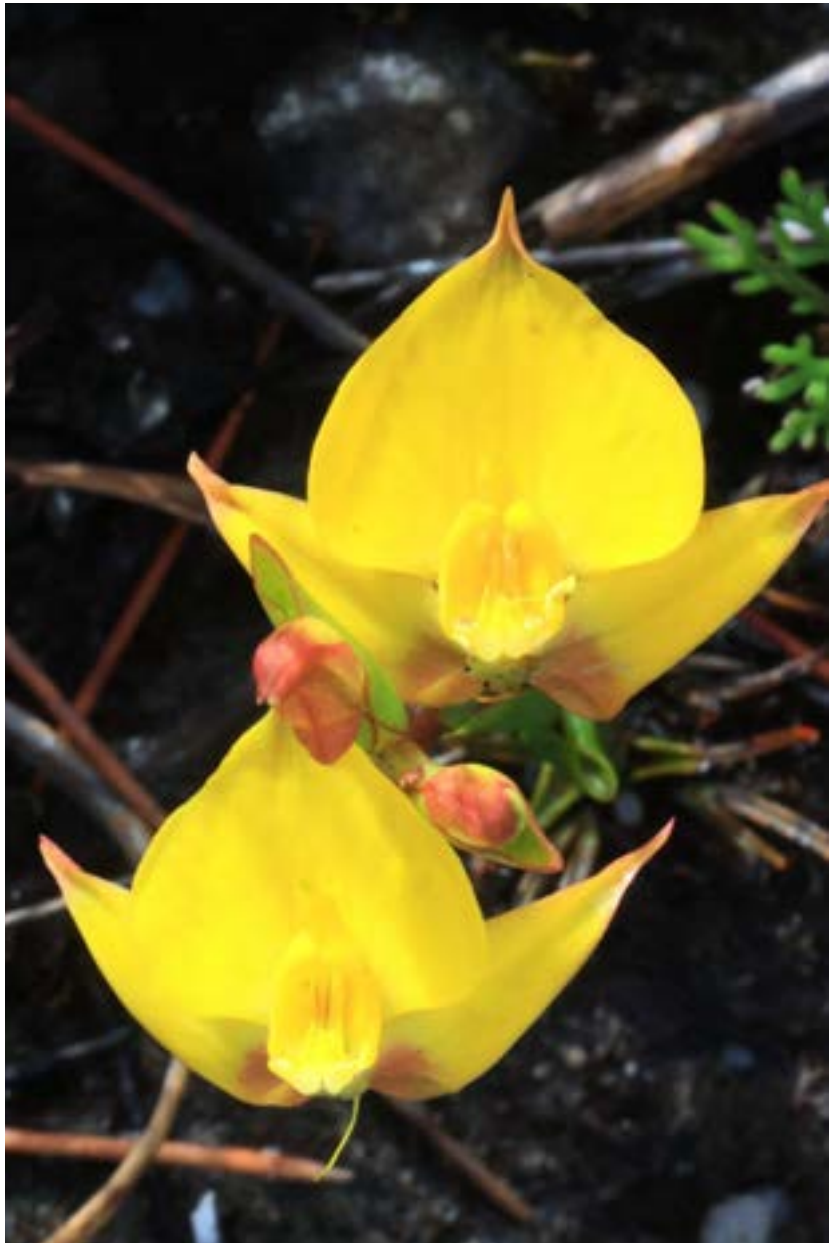
Watsonia tabularis, Iridaceae, the Table Mountain watsonia, is a common Iris family flower seen here (above).
One of the ice plants which is in the Aizoaceae family (upper left).
Drosera cuneifolia, Droseraceae, the table mountain sundew (lower left) is a carnivorous plant.

Schizaea pectinata, Schizaeaceae, the toothbrush fern, is prominent after fires (above).
Crassula coccinea, Crassulaceae, red crassula (lower left) thrives on the rocky slopes of the mountain.
Erica abietina, Ericaceae (lower right) is a heather endemic to the Western Cape.

Gladiolus monticola, Iridaceae, mountain paitned lady (above and upper center);
Erica plukenetii, Ericaceae (upper right);
bracts of a *Salvia* (? *aurea*), Lamiaceae (lower right).

Disa cornuta, golden orchid, Orchidaceae.

Disa bivalvata, two-folded orchid, Orchidaceae.



Disa tenuifolia, the yellow Disa, Orchidaceae.

Orthochilus aculeatus, harlequin orchid, Orchidaceae.

Disa uniflora, red Disa, also known as Pride of Table Mountain, is a showy orchid that blooms under waterfalls, along streamlets and seeps on the top and upper slopes of Table Mountain and the Back Table, in January–March. It was our goal for this day and we were not disappointed.

Habitat of *Disa uniflora*.

Frank took Rick, Gary and Anne-Marie on a week long pre-tour mostly along the coast of KwaZulu-Natal starting in Sodwana Bay in the north. We then headed south to Hluhluwe, including Hluhluwe–Imfolozi Park. We then visited iSimangaliso Wetland Park and stayed in St. Lucia where we took a boat ride on Lake St. Lucia. Finally we headed all the way south past Durban where we met the Drakensberg tour group in Port Edward. A really wonderful week concentrating more on fauna than flora though we did find a few orchids that we wouldn't see in the mountains.

Along the way from Durban to Sodwana Bay we stopped at Umlalazi Nature Reserve in Mtunzini. The reserve was established as a protected area in 1948 and covers 1,028 hectares/2,540 acres. It is home to the rare palmnut vulture and has a large forest of Raffia palms (*Raphia australis*) with the largest leaves of all palms, up to 25 meters/82 feet long and 3 meters/9.8 feet wide (lower left). A golden orb-weaver spider (lower right).

Some beautiful butterflies including the Natal pansy, *Junonia natalica* (upper left) and the dark blue pansy, *Junonia oenone* (upper right). *Physcaeneura panda*, dark-webbed ringlet (lower left) and *Melanitis leda,* Common Evening Brown (lower right).

Frank with *Voacanga thouarsii*, wild frangipani flower eyes; *Ipomoea* species, morning glory, Convolvulceae (upper right); *Wahlenbergia* species, capebells, Campanulaceae (lower right).

More flora and flora around Sodwana Bay and the northern coast. *Graphium porthaon,* coastal swordtail (upper left); *Stephenia natalica,* Natal acraea (upper right); *Euxanthe wakefieldi,* forest queen (lower left) and *Danaus chrysippus*, plain tiger (lower right).

Brachythemis leucosticta, Southern banded groundling (upper left); *Trithemis arteriosa*, female red-vein dropwing (upper right); *Nesciothemis farinosa,* Eastern blacktail (lower left)*; Anax imperator,* young male emperor (lower center); *Orthetrum julia*, young female Julia skimmer (lower right).

Gloriosa superba, flame lily, Colchicaceae.

Commelina species, Commelinaceae (upper left); *Scabiosa* species, Caprifoliaceae (upper right);
Carissa macrocarpa, Natal plum, Apocynaceae (lower left); *Hypoxis* species, Hypoxidaceae (lower right).

Grewia occidentalis, crossberry, Malvaceae (upper left); *Strychnos spinosa,* monkey apple or natal orange, Loganiaceae (upper right);
Xylotheca kraussiana, African dog rose, Achariaceae (lower left);
Asystasia intrusa, Chinese violet or creeping foxglove, Acanthaceae (lower center); *Gladiolus crassifolius*, Iridaceae (lower right).

Ipomoea species, morning glory, Convolvulaceae (upper left); *Cyperus niveus*, snow white sedge, Cyperaceae (upper right); *Commelina* species, day flower, Commelinaceae (lower left); *Capparis tomentosa*, wooly caper bush, Capparaceae (lower center).

Dung beetle, one of 800 species (upper left); *Acrida acuminata*, common stick grasshopper (upper right);
Solanophila paykullii, nightshade ladybeetle (lower left); *Milabris oculata*, Cape Mountain Rifles blister beetle (lower right).

Guttera edouardi, southern crested guineafowl (upper left); *Cephalophus natalensis,* red forest duiker (upper right); *Chlorocebus pygerythrus*, vervet monkey (lower left); *Phacochoerus africanus*, common warthog (lower right).

Chamaeleo dilepis, flap-necked chameleon (left and upper right);
Pelomedusa galeata, cape terrapin (lower left) .

Sodwana Bay features a unique landscape of forested sand dunes which are home to a variety of vegetation, including over 175 species of trees, some of which are quite large. The Wild Fig tree is a notable example, lining the banks of rivers like the Pongola and providing habitat for monkeys, birds, and other wildlife.

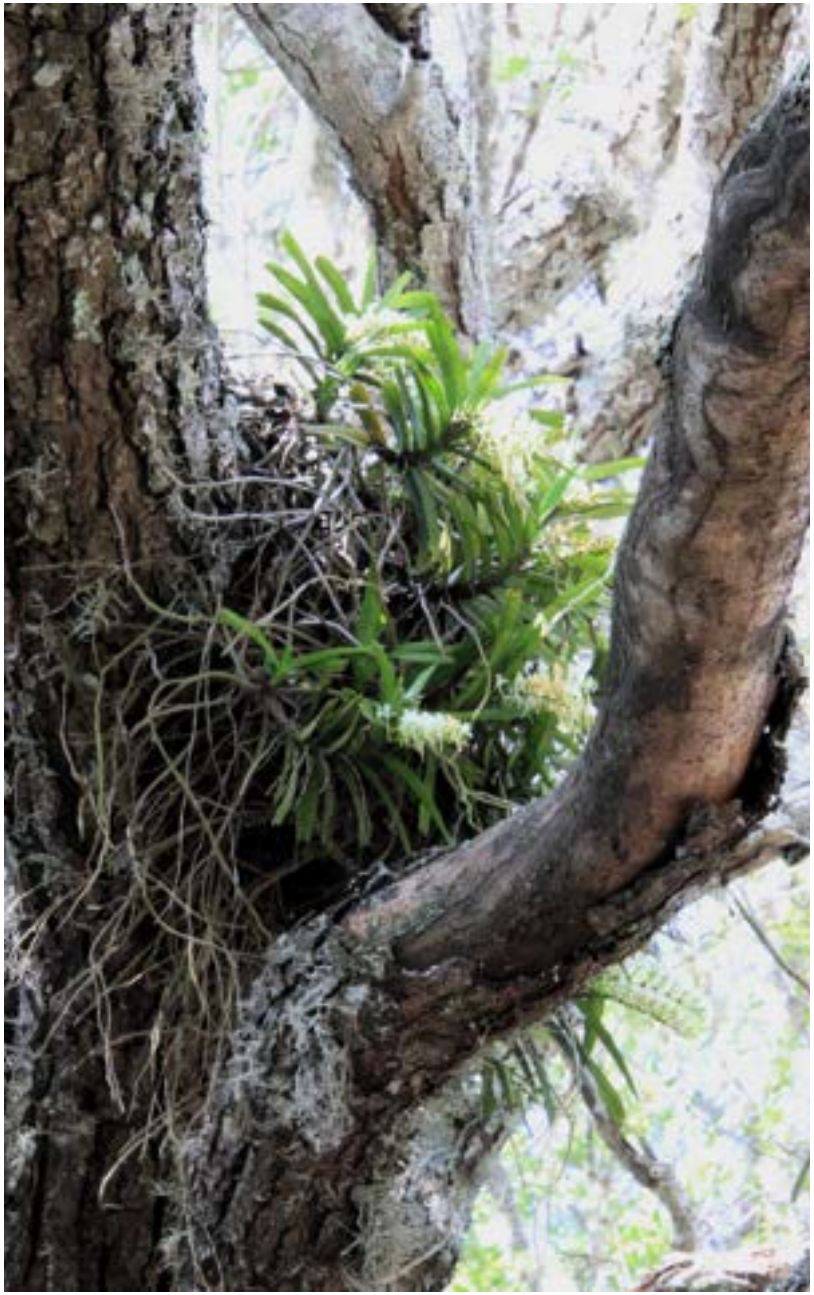
Thousands of pink ghost crabs, *Ocypode ryder*, run along the beaches and then disappear into the Indian Ocean.

Elisolimax flavescens, African banana slug (left);
unidentified skink (upper center);
Hemidactylus mabouia, tropical house gecko (upper right)
Anax imperator, adult emperor (lower right), caught in my flashlight.

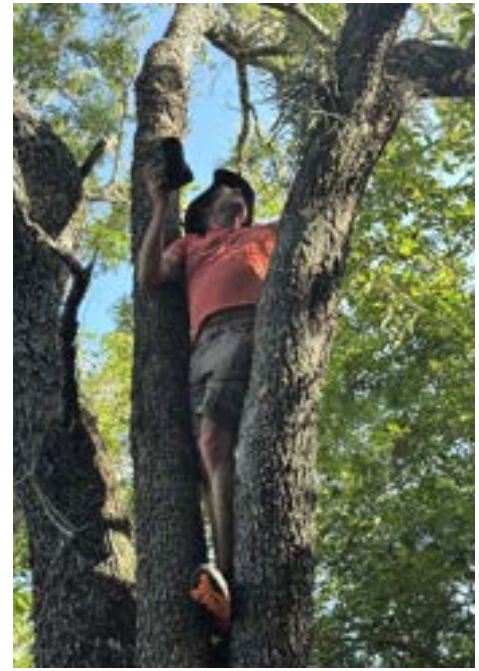
Frank surprised us with a young flap-necked chameleon that he found on his night walk and saved for us.
A blooming Sansevieria (*Dracaena* species) plant (lower left).

We visited False Bay Park near Hluhluwe which protects the western shores of the freshwater bay, False Bay, and is situated near the coast of northern KwaZulu-Natal. False Bay is connected to Lake St. Lucia and both are included in the iSimangaliso Wetland Park. The park is known for its diverse habitats, including sand forests, woodland, and open savannah, as well as excellent bird watching and game viewing opportunities. Here we observed common warthogs (upper left) and handsome male nyala (below). A brightly colored and certainly irritating caterpillar, maybe *Lophonotidia melanoleuca*, black panther, appears to warn potential predators to stay away (upper right).

Gardenia cornuta, Rubiaceae (upper left); roadside botanizing under a tree full of orchids (upper center); interesting bark (upper right); beautiful patterns called feeding galleries made by wood boring beetles (lower right). The larva grows with time as it starts near the center and then works its way outwards as it eats, getting larger as it goes.



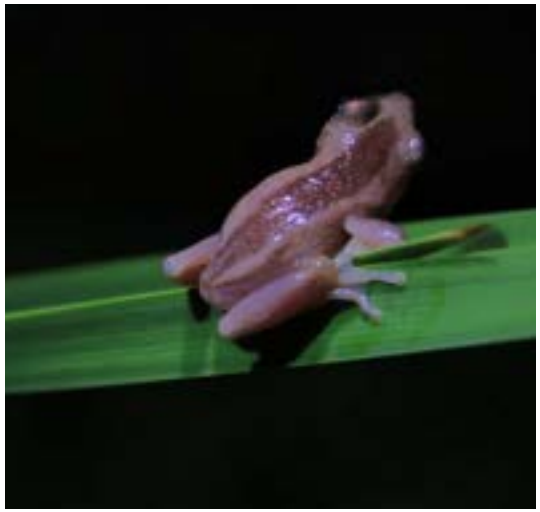
Hundreds of plants of *Cyrtorchis praetermissa*, the overlooked Cyrtorchis, Orchidaceae, decorated the dry forest.



Both Frank and Gary are happy to climb up a tree to photograph an orchid! *Polystachya* species high in a tree (upper right).

Especially after raining, the roadside wetlands are a riot of tree frogs. The sounds can be deafening. Frank is a pro at spotting and catching them so we drove around in the dark to observe them. *Schismaderma carens*, African red toad (upper left); *Kassina senegalensis*, bubbling kassina (upper right); *Leptopelis mossambicus*, brown backed tree frog (lower left); *Chiromantis xerampelina*, southern foam nest frog (lower center); *Xenopus laevis*, African clawed frog (lower right).

Hyperolius tuberilinguis, tinker reed frog (above).



A walk in the sand forest by our lodge, Mazuri Bush Cottages. *Ocium obovatum*, cat's whiskers, Lamiaceae (upper left);
Zonocerus elegans, elegant grasshopper (lower left and above).

The view and some animals from our lodging near Hluhluwe. The scorpion was in Anne-Marie's room! *Opisthacanthus asper*, docile tree scorpion (left); a young *Chamaeleo dilepis*, flap-necked chameleon (center); *Crotaphopeltis hotamboeia*, herald snake (right).

We spent a day at Hluhluwe–Imfolozi Park, formerly Hluhluwe–Umfolozi Game Reserve, the oldest proclaimed nature reserve in Africa. It consists of 960 square kilometers/371 square miles (96,000 hectares/2,372,211 acres) of hilly topography 280 kilometers (170 miles) north of Durban in central KwaZulu-Natal. It is known for its rich wildlife and conservation efforts. Operated by Ezemvelo KZN Wildlife, the park is the only state-run park in KwaZulu-Natal where each of the big five game animals can be found. Thanks to conservation efforts, the park now has one of the largest populations of white rhinoceros in the world, although this population remains severely threatened by poaching. Throughout the park there are many signs of stone age settlements and iron smelting sites. The area is claimed to have been declared a royal hunting ground for the Zulu kingdom in the time of Shaka (1816-1828).

A herd of African buffalo, *Syncerus caffer,* visit one of the watering holes. The two Umfolozi rivers run through the park and divide it into separate areas.
The park ecosystems are threatened by the proximity of coal mines, with ongoing applications for prospecting and mine expansions on the western and southern edges of the park.

Burchell's zebra, *Equus quagga burchellii* (upper left); young impalas, *Aepyceros melampus* (upper right);
African buffalo, *Syncerus caffer* (lower left); Southern white rhinoceros, *Ceratotherium simum simum* (lower right).

Male impala (upper left); African buffalo and Burchell's zebras (upper right and center left); a herd of impalas (center right); a male nyala, *Tragelaphus angasii* (lower left) and female nyala (lower right). This park is one of the world's top spots for viewing nyala. It is also a prime birding destination and is home to 340 bird species.

The park is the birthplace of rhino preservation, having been responsible for breeding the southern white rhinoceros back from near extinction in the first half of the 20th century. There are reportedly 1,600 white rhino in the reserve. Despite the efforts, including removing the valuable horn, poachers still kill many rhinos, 228 in 2023. Drone surveillance and infrared cameras have resulted in capture of some poachers.

Giraffa camelopardalis, northern giraffe.

White rhinos (upper left); common wart hogs, *Phacochoerus africanus* (upper right); African bush elephant, *Loxodonta africana* (lower right); African woolly-necked stork, *Ciconia microscelis* (lower left).

The Hluhluwe area produces most of the pineapples of South Africa, particularly the queen variety (or Queen Victoria) which is small but extremely sweet. It is best eaten fresh as it does not can well. Queen pineapples are more tolerant of diseases and cold temperatures than other types of pineapple. It takes 18 months to grow the fruit for harvest and they are offered year round. This variety is also popular in India and the Philippines.

Near our lodging was the Zulu Croc reptile park where we had a private behind the scenes tour of the snake house with one of Frank's herpetology friends. A rinkhals, *Hemachatus haemachatus*, also called a spitting cobra (lower center) and an eastern green mamba, *Dendroaspis angusticeps,* another highly venomous snake (lower right).

The main attraction is the Nile crocodile, *Crocodylus niloticus,* native to freshwater habitats in Africa, where it is present in 26 countries. The adult male Nile crocodile is between 3.5 and 5 meters (11 feet 6 inches and 16 feet 5 inches) in length and weighs 225 to 750 kilograms (496 to 1,653 pounds). Females are 30% smaller.

Lesser masked weavers, *Ploceus intermedius*, were nesting in typical large colonies in the park. They usually live near water and often with other species such as the village weaver or red-billed buffalo weaver.

A male constructs more than one nest and hopefully his mate will be happy with one. They are made primarily from grass and reeds, an intricate structure with a bottom entrance and a short tunnel.

We stopped at a fruit stand and were treated to a pineapple lollie. The skin is removed and the leaves are the handle. Incredibly sweet and juicy!

We headed back east to the coast near St. Lucia for more wildlife sightings but not as much botanizing.

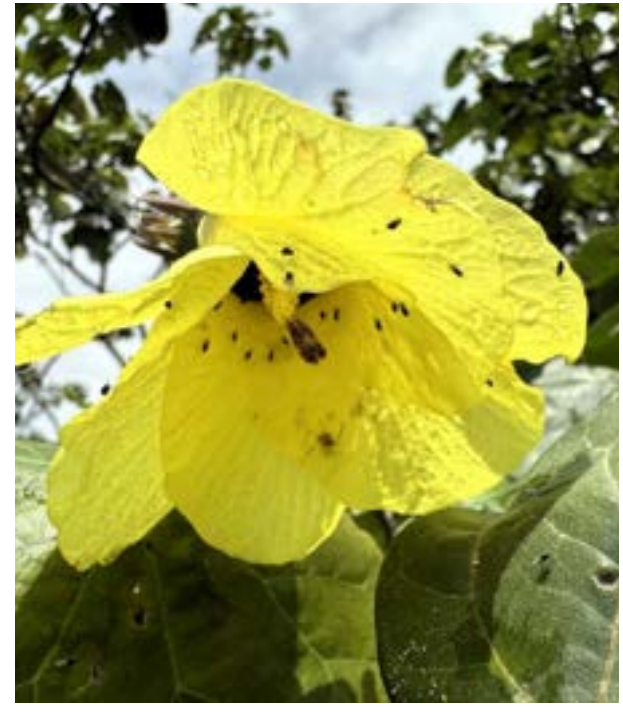
Running up the north of KwaZulu-Natal along the coastline to Mozambique, visitors will find one of the most beautiful and diverse landscapes in the world, the iSimangaliso Wetland Park. Stretching across 332 000 hectares/79,000 acres of pristine coastline, coastal sand dunes and plateaux, the iSimangaliso Wetlands incorporate the vast Lake St Lucia, as well as South Africa's largest freshwater lake, Lake Sibaya.

The reserve's undulating plains find their highest points in the monstrous coastal sand dunes dotted along the landscape, with the two highest points being St Mary's Hill that rises to 138 meters/453 feet above sea level near the north-east tip of Lake St Lucia and Nyathikazi at 159 meters/522 feet above sea level, near to Lake Bhangazi South.

The iSimangaliso Wetland Park was listed as South Africa's first World Heritage Site in December 1999 in recognition of its superlative natural beauty and unique global values. Since 1 August 2019, the park's marine protected area (MPA) expanded significantly, with the result that the World Heritage Site is now 1,328,901 hectares (3,283,786 acres or 5,131 square miles) in extent (marine and terrestrial combined). The Park is now South Africa's second largest protected area after the Kruger National Park, incorporating the country's largest MPA – also the only Transfrontier MPA as it joins Mozambique's protected waters. The Park contains three major lake systems, eight interlinking ecosystems, 700 year old fishing traditions, most of South Africa's remaining swamp forests, Africa's largest estuarine system, 530 bird species and 25,000 year-old coastal dunes – among the highest in the world. The name iSimangaliso means miracle and wonder, which aptly describes this unique place.

Aside from the magnificent natural beauty of the surroundings, the highlight of the iSimangaliso Wetland Park is the sheer richness and diversity of the African wildlife found within the reserve. Considered the richest mammal conservation area in South Africa, iSimangaliso is home to 115 mammal species, many of which have been reintroduced in recent years, as they were absent due to hunting in the past.

Kosi palm, *Raphia australis*, Arecaceae (upper left); the foothills of the Lebombo Mountains (upper right);
Hibiscus tiliaceus, sea hibiscus or coast cottonwood, Malvaceae (below).



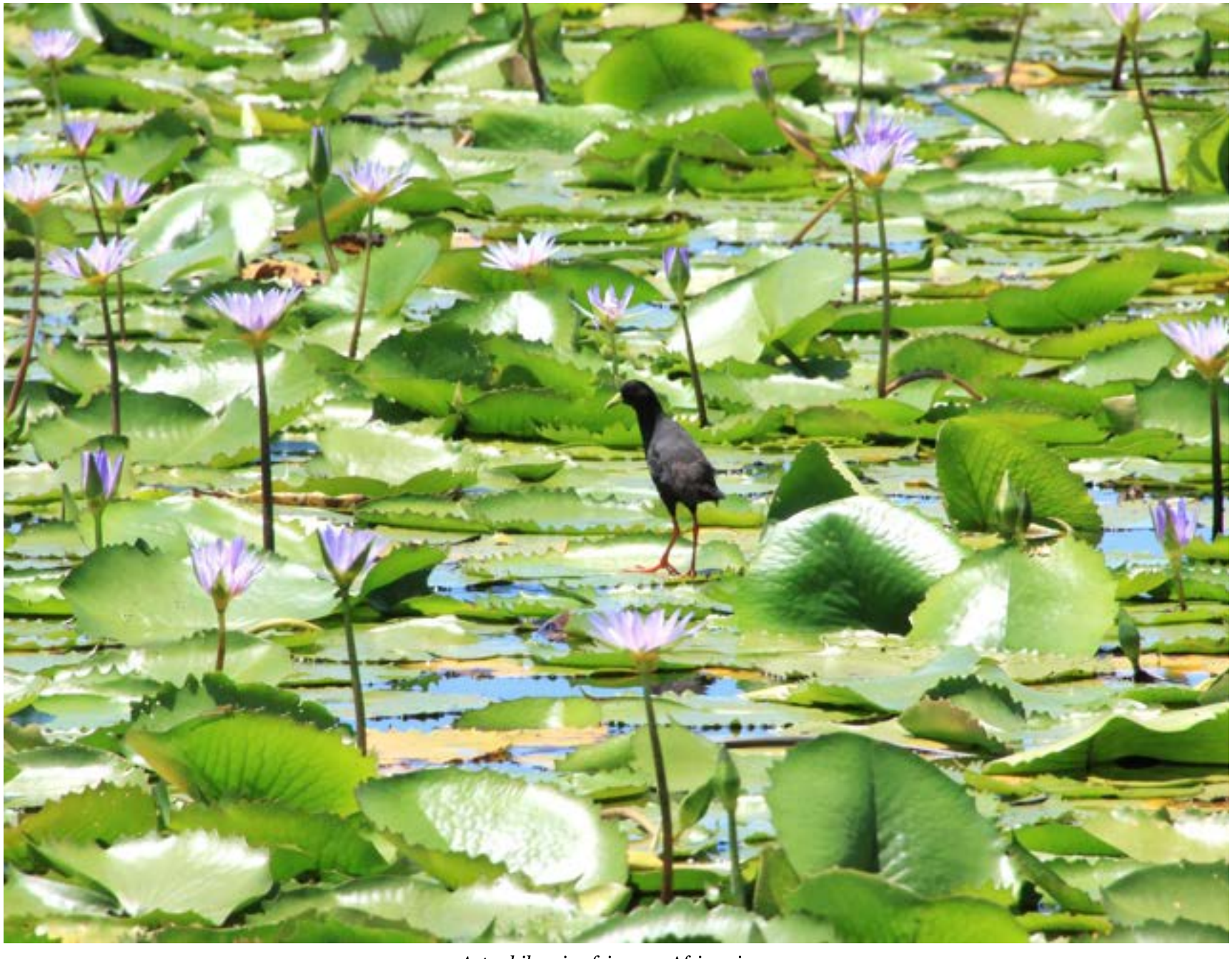
Loxodonta africana, African bush elephant.
This lone male was quite aggressive and we had to back up for about a kilometer as he asserted himself. He finally entered a side path and disappeared.

Kobus ellipsiprymnus, waterbuck.

Giraffa camelopardalis, northern giraffe (upper left); *Connochaetes taurinus*, common or blue wildebeest (upper right); *Redunca arundinum,* southern reedbuck (lower left)*; Kinixys* species, Hinge back tortoise (lower right).

Tragelaphus strepsiceros, Greater kudu, female.

Centropus burchellii, Burchell's coucal (upper left); *Plectropterus gambensis*, spur-winged goose (upper right); *Merops persicus*, blue-cheeked bee-eater (lower left); *Milvus aegyptius*, yellow-billed kite (lower right).



Actophilornis africanus, African jacana.

On a boat ride along the shores of Lake St. Lucia we spotted *Ploceus subaureus,* yellow weaver or African golden weaver (upper left and right, on nest); *Amblyospiza albifrons*, thick-billed weaver (lower left); *Ploceus xanthopterus*, southern brown throated weaver (lower right).

There are about 800 hippopotamuses, *Hippopotamus amphibious*, in the park, making it the largest population in South Africa. Hippos are among the most dangerous animals in the world due to their aggressive and unpredictable nature. They are threatened by habitat loss and poaching for their meat and ivory (canine teeth).

Lots of hippos on beautiful Bhangazi lake. There are also many Nile crocodiles here, the largest freshwater predator in Africa. There are over 1,200 adult crocs in Lake St. Lucia alone, giving the park the biggest population in South Africa. The park has a total of 109 types of reptiles including 51 species of snakes.

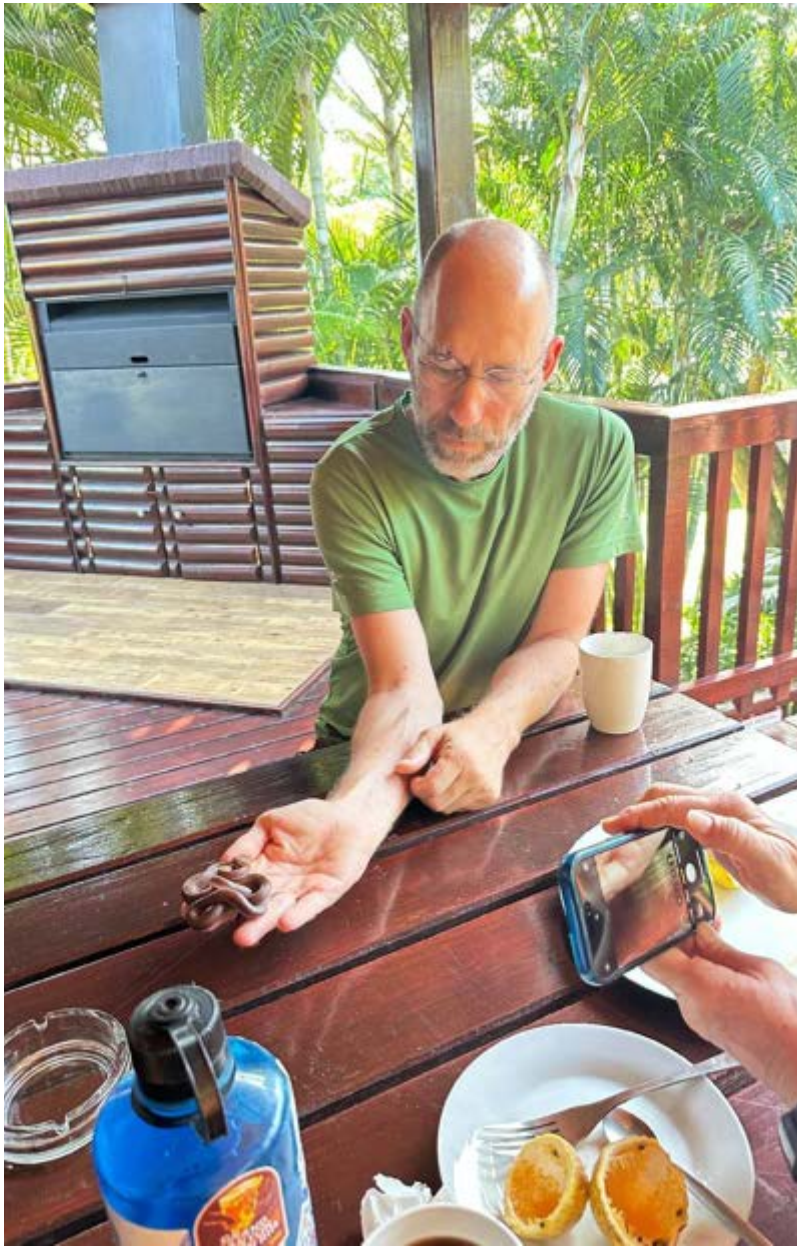
An uncommon sight of a hippo out of the water during the day.

Cape Vidal, Indian Ocean, Isimangaliso Wetland Park.
Chlorocebus pygerythrus, vervet monkey (lower right).

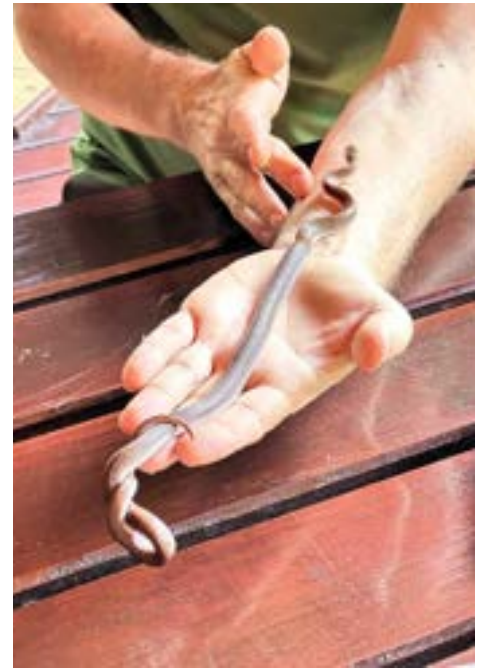
Hippos are common around St. Lucia and at night they often walk through the town to forage in gardens. They usually get a police escort to keep cars and people from getting injured.

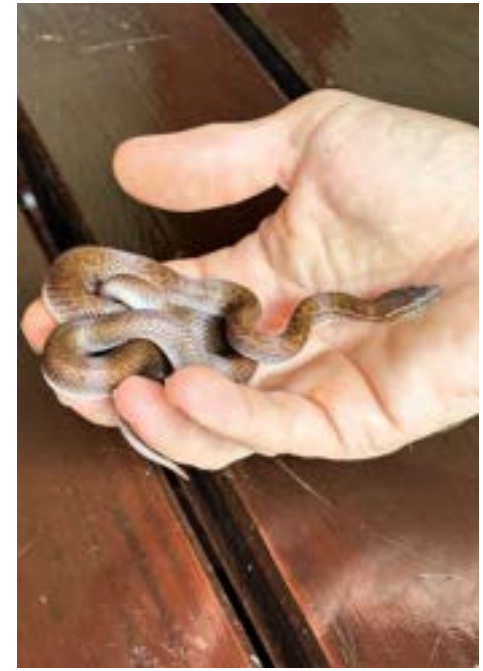
Ruellia species, Acanthaceae (upper left); *Berkheya* species , Asteraceae (upper right);
Tricliceras mossambicense, Passifloraceae (lower left); leafless orchid, possibly *Microcoeli*a (lower right).

Cyrtorchis arcuata, curved bird orchid, Orchidaceae.



Frank with a *Boaedon capensis*, brown house snake at our lodging in St. Lucia.





Our last stop before meeting the group in Port Edward was at the Dlinza Forest which is a subtropical forest or Coastal Scarp Forest in Eshowe, Zululand. It is one of the most important forests in southern Africa from the aspect of unique biodiversity. It contains rare birds, chameleons, snails, butterflies, moths, frogs, and beetles. Dlinza is the home of more than 65 species of birds, including the endangered spotted ground thrush which breeds here, rare Delegorgue's pigeon, magnificent purple-crested turaco and Narina trogon. First of its kind in Southern Africa, the boardwalk winds through the forest canopy and ends up on a tower overlooking the Dlinza Forest. The Boardwalk takes you 125 meters (410 feet) through the forest understory to a 20 meter (66 feet) high viewing platform which emerges above the canopy of trees. The reserve covers 250 hectares (620 acres) with it's highest point at 500 meters (1,600 feet) above sea level. Because it is cooler here, Zulu kings often stayed here and the forest served as a hideout during some of the Zulu wars.

Ansellia africana, leopard orchid, Orchidaceae (upper left); *Bulbophyllum scaberulum*, scabby orchid, Orchidaceae (above and below).

Frank finds snakes so often, this time an Eastern Natal green snake, *Philothamnus natalensis*.

blurb