



Slain by the dragon

5 things to know before attempting the Drakensberg Grand Traverse

The Drakensberg Grand Traverse is an epic hike of more than 200 km, from the Sentinel to Bushman's Nek, considered by many to be one of the toughest hikes in southern Africa. Thinking of taking it on? Here's what you need to know.

WORDS SEAN FRAENKEL **PICTURES** BRUCE DAVIS



CROSSING OVER. Many rivers have their sources high in the Drakensberg and crossing them can be tricky. It's worth packing a pair of trekking poles, which will make your life much easier.



ALL IN IT TOGETHER. Sean and Bruce met other hikers on the route and they pitched their tents together one night.



HERE IT COMES. The weather can change quickly at the top. Bruce surveys an ominous mist moving in.

The Drakensberg Grand Traverse starts at the Sentinel car park and heads up to the summit of the Amphitheatre via the chain ladders. From there, the trail hugs the escarpment and heads south to Bushman's Nek, a border-control point between South Africa and Lesotho, offering magnificent views of the major features of the Berg along the way. The trail also summits the highest points in South Africa and southern Africa, Mafadi and Thabana Ntlenyana respectively, at elevations just shy of 3 500m above sea level.

No technical skill is required to complete the hike – the “climbs” are basically steep ascents – but because you have to carry everything you'll need for two weeks at high altitude, it's a very tough challenge and only a handful of hikers attempt it each year.

Let me say upfront that I am not one of those athletes with iron calves who run the Otter Trail for fun. Neither do I have aspirations to risk my life in pursuit of bagging lofty peaks. My physique is more “robust” than “ripped” and I am very fond of my couch!

That said, the Traverse presented a real opportunity for me to test my mental and physical stamina and to be totally self-sufficient. I wanted to eject myself from my daily comfort zone, escape the clutter of modern life, get lost with my thoughts and reconnect with the raw power of nature.

If the Traverse is on your to-do list, here are a few things to keep in mind.

1 Learn how to use a GPS

Previously, my navigational skills were limited to programming my Garmin Nuvi and gesticulating manically at the monotone voice when I missed a turn! I knew I would require much better GPS skills to complete the Traverse, so I did a GPS training course through Bolton's GPS Warehouse (📍 boltonsgps.co.za) in Joburg. My GPS of choice was the Garmin Oregon 450.

I then spent many hours learning the Base Camp software while plotting my course and escape routes using Drakensberg Hiking maps 1–6 (you can download all the necessary software and maps from 📍 garmap.co.za). A useful book for learning compass and map-reading skills is *Navigation Anyplace Wild* by Andrew R Friedemann (📍 mammoth.co.za).

I also downloaded a GPS track of the Traverse from 📍 vertical-endeavour.com – a mountain-climbing forum. The route looked accurate, at least on computer, but my lack of hiking experience, especially with a GPS, proved to be my undoing. I marked out overnight camps spaced 15–22 km apart, which would theoretically allow me to complete the hike in 11 days.

Hikers usually take 14 days, so this was an ambitious challenge in itself, but I also didn't take into account that you don't hike as the crow flies. No, you zigzag down steep descents and weave around obstructions. Over long distances this can have a dramatic effect.

2 Get the right gear

I bought a K-Way Advance 85 backpack, thinking it was an awesome bag. Then I did two training hikes with it and it proved to be absolutely useless. As soon as I started sweating, the shoulder straps would slip and the bag no longer sat comfortably. Cape Union Mart exchanged it without complaint and my new Deuter Aircontact Pro 70+15 proved to be well worth the extra cash.

As far as training goes, my uncle and hiking partner Bruce Davis and I did short hikes with weighted packs over hilly terrain in Table Mountain National Park. It was a good way to test our gear without being too far from home.

I work offshore on a diving support vessel so I had to do most of my training at sea. This consisted of running up and down stairs on the side of the ship. I also did plenty (or so I think!) of squats, lunges, calf raises, crunches, plus some upper-body exercises with free weights.

A few kilometres into the hike, I lightened Bruce's load to help improve our pace, thereby increasing my pack weight to almost 35 kg. It nearly broke me. As a rule, it is recommended that you don't carry more than a third of your body weight.

The tent that Bruce and I shared was a three-man MSR Mutha Hubba, which never let us down. No water came through, even during torrential downpours.

3 Work out the logistics

Arranging logistics for the hike was nearly as tricky as the hike itself! My sister Chantelle was kind enough to take leave so she could drop Bruce and me at the start and fetch us at the end.

We spent the first night at Witsieshoek Mountain Lodge (📍 witsieshoek.co.za) near the Sentinel. En route, we had to make a long detour via the Royal Natal National Park to get our hiking permits. Although you could hike the Traverse without informing the park officials or paying for permits, it would be irresponsible to do so. The permit includes insurance for rescue services. I only paid for four days as the rest of the time we would be in Lesotho. Conservation manager Stephen Richert was very helpful and offered some much-needed tips for hiking in the Berg. Stephen would also be my point of contact for safety purposes. We would keep him updated on our progress (or lack thereof) while we were on the mountain.

There is intermittent cellphone signal close to the escarpment, but leave your



ONE STEP AT A TIME. To get to the summit of the Amphitheatre, you have to climb the infamous chain ladders. Don't look down!



MAN IN THE MIST. Going down can be more difficult than going up, especially if visibility is reduced.



EXTREME TOOTH BRUSHING. Sean made sure he had the right clothing, as temperatures can plummet at high altitude.



EAT HUMBLE PIE. Seeing this "superwoman" ascend Organ Pipes Pass put city boys Sean and Bruce to shame.

smartphone at home. Buy a basic handset capable of calling and sending text messages, as the battery lasts much longer and it will serve you better in an emergency.

I gave Stephen a copy of my route cards, which I had diligently prepared. Route cards should have hiker info, waypoints and emergency escape routes marked, plus contact details for your next of kin.

Make sure to inform the relevant authorities when you have finished your hike! If rescue services are dispatched because you didn't check in, you can be held liable for the expenses incurred.

4 Choose hiking partners wisely

As night shed her velvet cloak and changed into a flowing gown of green and brown, fringed with shimmering diamonds of ice, I let rip inside the tent with my morning expulsion of noxious gas. Well, at least that's one way to get us both out of the tent!

My advice to anyone attempting the Traverse is this: Do it with people you know and trust. Respect your own limits and those of your teammates. The hike is hard and if you want to do it in a short period, everyone must share the same mindset.

My hiking partner was my uncle Bruce who, at 64 years old, puts "youngsters" like me to shame. Bruce and I climbed Kili together in 2009 and that's where we got our Swahili nicknames: Babu (Grandfather) and Bongzi (Fat Boy). You can guess who is who!

Despite his fitness, the hike was tough on Bruce. On the third day I could see that he was struggling. I offered him the chance to take an escape route down the Ntonjelana Pass while I pushed on and tried to finish the hike alone. Sensibly, he told me that I was being stupid. Hiking solo in the Berg is never a good idea. Even if you think you're faster than your companions you're probably not. Stick together and make decisions as a group.

I have to admit that I did lose my sense of humour with Bruce the following day. He had found a second wind and wanted to detour to a viewpoint on the escarpment, which would put us off course by a kilometre or so. This doesn't sound like much, but when you're carrying a heavy pack at high altitude and you're way behind schedule, it's a recipe for heated tempers.

Nevertheless, I bit my tongue and we made the detour. Bruce was lucky the view was worth it and he did offer me a gingerbread man as a peace offering!

5 Listen to your gut

One of the traits of a good hiker is to know when to call time out. This is one of my weak points. On the fourth day, after reviewing my maps and GPS, I had a restless night. Heartbroken, I knew that we would never reach Bushman's Nek in eight days' time. Even reaching the Sani Pass would be an achievement. I knew then that we would have to take one of our escape routes down the escarpment in the next few days.

On the fifth day we met a group of three young hikers who warned us that they had received a severe weather warning. Apparently heavy snowfall was expected. Their goal had been to do a mini-Traverse, following a similar route to ours but ending at the Sani Pass. But with the weather warning in mind, they had decided to descend earlier via the Organ Pipes Pass. Bruce and I decided to do the same. Now at least we had a valid reason to get off the mountain!

The following morning, while we picked our way down this treacherous pass, a Basotho woman appeared out of the blue. She was carrying a big candy-striped bag on her head and she'd fixed a parcel to her back with a blanket. On her feet was a pair of Crocs. It was only 9.30 am and she was nearly at the top of the escarpment. No words can express the hardship this woman must have faced, yet she greeted us with a magic smile and an enthusiastic wave before continuing on her way.

Thinking of that brave woman put everything into perspective. Obviously my goal was to make it to Bushman's Nek, but there's no shame in ending the hike where we did. Part of completing a strenuous journey is not reaching the finishing line; the personal growth you gain gives you better insight into your good qualities and those that require some work.

There's something else, too: In the other hikers Bruce and I encountered, I saw a kind of calmness and contentment that you don't normally see in people. And sometimes, while waiting for Bruce against that magnificent backdrop of mountains, when all I could hear was the sound of my breathing and the wind in my ears, I think I caught a glimpse of that inner peace.

Despite not finishing the Traverse, Sean and his sponsors (trailandtar.co.za) raised more than R10 000 for the Emma Animal Rescue Society (tears.org.za)



THE WORLD AT YOUR FEET. If time (and weather) is on your side, pause to take in views like this one from the escarpment between Cleft Peak and Castle Buttriss.

THE TRAVERSE BY THE NUMBERS



- 8 000** Total metres ascended during the hike
- 3 000** Average hiking altitude, in metres
- 230+** Total distance of the DGT, in kilometres
- 28** The number of climbs in excess of 200 m
- 14** Average number of days it takes to complete

