

Fall in love at the Drakensberg

 By [Cindy Peters](#)

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Full disclosure: I was born and raised in KwaZulu-Natal, so the province already holds a special place in my heart. Few things get me right in the feels like going home, even though I've now spent half my existence in Cape Town, which some consider the most beautiful city in the world. Don't get me wrong, the Western Cape does indeed hold its own special allure, but there's something so richly authentic about the KZN experience that you carry it with you wherever you go.



Image source: www.pxhere.com

Memories of my youth evoke a sweet nostalgia of afternoons spent lazing along the shores of the Midmar Dam, daytrips to the picturesque Howick Falls, and weekends spent hiking the many trails of the Umgeni Valley Nature Reserve. I took for granted back then the lush greenery of the Midlands, and KZN in general, that I now revel in every time I return.

And then there was the Drakensberg - a three-hour road trip that had our family of five crammed into an '88 Mazda 323, me and my siblings chomping at the bit to throw snowballs at each other. My mum made sure we hiked the length and breadth of the range - every day held a new trail to be explored. With three kids in tow, the more challenging routes, such as the Amphitheatre Hike, Icidi Gorge and The Bell Traverse were, unfortunately, not on the itinerary. All the trails, however, allow you to lose yourself completely in nature and that's what I love most about spending time here.

When you're in the midst of the mountains, surveying your surroundings, you'll suddenly feel all your senses come online - the kiss of sun on your skin, a breeze so foreignly crisp, your heart rises up to your throat, and a serene peace washes over your soul. It's the moment you fall head over heels in love with the Drakensberg.



Image source: www.pixabay.com

Now I know fresh air, sun-kissed skin, and sweat dripping down your brow as you become one with nature is not everyone's flavour of craft gin, so you'll be happy to hear that this mountain retreat offers plenty of other family-friendly activities. I got to sample some of these on a recent weekend road trip to the Drakensberg, journeying from Joburg together with several other South African travel aficionados.

The [Adventure Centre](#) in Central Drakensberg was item number one on our itinerary. Given the options of Scootour-ing 5.4km downhill on steep terrain, King Swinging from a six-metre platform, climbing a tree, or firing little balls of orange paint at scattering humans, I chose to take up arms.



Image source: TourismKZN

Geared up and weaponised, it's a good thing the Adventure Centre puts safety first, as a paintball gun, seemingly benign, is no toy. It has the potential to do some serious damage like take out an eye, for instance, or burst an eardrum. Locked and loaded, we cautiously stepped onto the playing field and, given the go-ahead, frenzy ensued as a bunch of inexperienced shooters attempted a game of capture the flag.

Reaching out to grab it from on top of a beat down old car, I took a bullet to the shoulder and slumped off back to base. We made further attempts, but team yellow got the best of us - twice. Nonetheless, the whole experience was cathartic in a way - it's a thrill taking aim while also trying not to get shot in the face.



Image source: TourismKZN



Image source: TourismKZN

Switching gears, we lunched at the Drakensberg Sun, celebrating the [launch of Tourism Month with Minister Mmamoloko Kubayi-Ngubane](#), before heading off to the [Drakensberg Brewery](#) where brewmaster Nick Roberts tries his hand at expressing the Drakensberg experience through craft beer. On the tasting menu were three ales and one lager: the Champagne Castle Blonde Ale, Cathedral Peak Pilsner, Amphitheatre Red Ale, and the Giant's Castle Stout. While no beer connoisseur myself, I do enjoy the variety that the craft beer scene has added to the drinks menu wherever you go in SA.

My favourite of the four was the red ale - not as bitter as the pilsner, its caramelised, nutty flavour hit the spot in terms of both refreshment and flavour. The stout also made an impression with its strong coffee flavour, but is far too rich for my palate. You won't find these beers far from the confines of the 'berg area though as Roberts likes to keep it local, so it's a definite for the to-do list if you're big on beer.



Image source: TourismKZN

Not far from the brewery is the fairly new [Cathedral Peak Wine Estate](#). An unusual spot to plant a vineyard you might think, given most of SA's wine is produced in the Cape, but owner Mauritz Koster and cellar master Flip Smith are embracing the challenge and, having had a taste of their range, they're certainly succeeding for the most part, even having scooped a gold medal for its Pinotage 2015 along with the Most Innovative Wine Award at the 2017 Michelangelo competition.



Image source: TourismKZN

Up and at 'em early the next day, more extreme activities were on the cards - this time at [All Out Adventures](#). With many options, ranging from bubble soccer to flying trapeze, I chose the zip line - the scariest part of which is the climb up a 21-metre makeshift spiral staircase around a rather skinny tree that tends to gently sway at the slightest of breezes. With sweaty palms and a rapidly rising heartbeat, the 175-metre cable slide to a second tree-top platform is well worth the climb. Another 125-metre slide from there and you're back to sweet terra firma and raring to go for the next thrill.



Image source: TourismKZN

Another round of paintball got me a few stinging bumps and bruises, but the most hair-raising of all was the 17-metre free-fall and swing from a tree top suspension bridge. Having done the bucket-list bungee from Bloukrans Bridge years ago, I'd told myself never again. But, arm rather easily twisted, I YOLO-ed myself into doing it. While it wasn't the seemingly endless death-drop that was the Bloukrans, this certainly got me screaming bloody murder. Never again! Maybe.

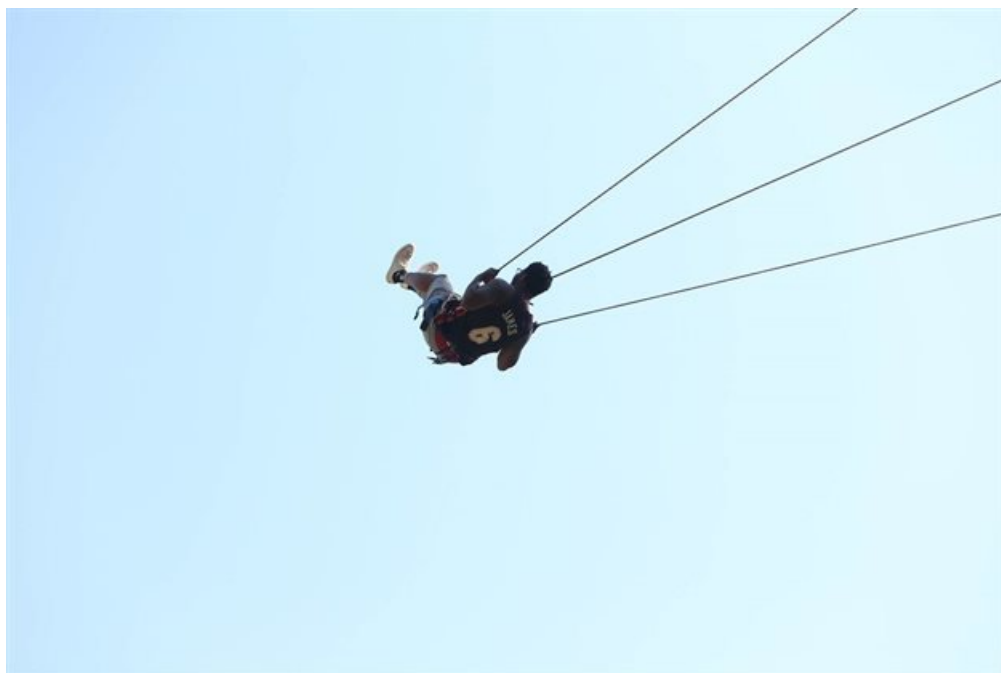


Image source: TourismKZN

Unknowingly, having opted to take on this dance with death, I missed out on what I believe was a rather tranquil horse ride back at our digs at the [Alpine Heath Resort](#). Instead, those of us left behind were rounded up and delivered to the luxury family-owned [Cavern Resort and Spa](#) where we were treated to a delectable lunch-time buffet. It's a stunning spot with gorgeous views - perfect, I imagine, if you're in need of an uplifting getaway.



Image source: TourismKZN

The Alpine, too, offers a similar retreat from the everyday grind, but has a slightly more laid-back atmosphere with boeries on the braai from around midday, and music to varying tastes drifting through the resort. There's no chance of falling prey to boredom at the Alpine Heath, with plenty of sporting and downtime facilities available, but if you're like me and need some alone time every now and again, there are also short trails attached to the resort that offer a bit of refuge.

I stole a quiet moment on one such trail on my final afternoon in KZN, revelling in the sunset, letting the tunes fade to the background, and taking a final sip on that fleeting feeling of being utterly in love at the Drakensberg.

View the gallery from the media trip [here](#).

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