

THE DRAKENSBERG AMPHITHEATRE ASCENT VIA THE CHAINLADDERS

Experience the summit of the Drakensberg Amphitheatre, in the KwaZulu Natal Drakensberg of South Africa, this will be without a doubt, one of the highlights of visiting South Africa. The Berghouse and Cottages provides accommodation, a guide and packed lunches which makes for a spectacular day in Africa. Even if one is not so fit, the first kilometre of the walk provides the most breathtaking views in South Africa, this area has been rated as one of the 30 most scenic hikes in the World, and is truly a "World Class Experience" not to be missed.

For a person of average fitness this is the easiest hike to access the top of the Drakensberg Amphitheatre. It takes approx 2.5 hours to reach the summit along reasonably maintained paths This is considered to be one of the greatest views in the world. Breathtaking views of the scenery of the Amphitheatre, with the Tugela River plummeting approx 900m down and into the gorge below, it is truly spectacular and an experience that will live with you for the rest of your days. All the peaks are named. These peaks were created by an outpouring of lava that dates back to the time when all the southern continents were joined to form the enormous mass known as Gondwana, approx 140 million years ago.

From the car park a broad cement path leads up to "zig zag" the northern flank of the Amphitheatre called the Sentinel (3165m). A rich assortment of grasses and wild flowers occur on the slopes, view the Bearded Vulture, Cape Vulture as well as the Black Eagles and Jackal Buzzards as they soar in the skies above. From the base of the Sentinel, peer over the edge to the left and see the Tugela Gorge in the Royal Natal National Park in the distance below. Due east lies the Tooth and Tooth Pick, a completely isolated pinnacle of rock, between the Eastern Buttress (3047m) and the Inner Tower (3044m). The distance as the crow flies between the Inner Tower and Beacon Buttress is approx 4km. Enjoy this spectacular view before the path follows a contour to the right and around the back of the Sentinel and Beacon Buttress (3121m) to the famous 'Chain Ladders'. Two ladders of 40 metres and 20 metres each, allows easy access to the Amphitheatre plateau above. From the top of the Chain Ladder the edge of the Escarpment lies approx 2km to the East. The source of the Mighty Tugela River slips over the Escarpment to plummet, in 5 massive leaps, of over 900 metres to the valley gorge below – this is the second highest waterfall in the World. The best position from which to appreciate the magnificent views of the falls is from approx 200m to the south of the waterfall itself, from what is known at the "Window Crevice". From the top of the Chain Ladder follow the path along the stream for 500m then turn to the southeast and follow the rising slope to the top of Crows Nest ridge and to the edge of the Escarpment and the Window Crevice.

Head back along the Escarpment lip, for approx 200 odd meters to the Falls and enjoy a well deserved lunch after taking a dip in the "Jacuzzi" a pothole in the Tugela stream some 20m from the waterfall, caution should prevail as this stream can flow strongly! Do so at your own discretion and risk. Whilst looking out across Kwazulu-Natal from this elevated 3000m position, you will notice the Woodstock Dam in the East and the Sterkfontein dam in the North East, whilst the Mount Aux Sources appears directly behind you in a North Westerly direction towards the Maluti mountains.

This is known by some as the continental divide with the Orange river tributary arising out of Mount Aux Sources and flowing aprox 2000km's to the Atlantic ocean and the Tugela river arising from the opposite side, flowing aprox 750 km's to the Indian ocean. In total five rivers have their source here. They are the Tugela, which plunges over the Amphitheatre wall; the Bilanjill which flows into the Tugela just below the escarpment; the Khubedu which joins the Orange River some sixty kilometres south; the Khubela joining the Khubedu some 11 kilometers from its source and the Elands river which flows into the Free State.

Important to note:

Alpine conditions at this altitude. Warm clothing essential, even if you are experiencing a heat wave from where you come from. It has been known to Storm, hail, rain, snow all in a day. Rain proof gear are an essential item, drinking water for the trip up (500ml/person min), extra food for an emergency, as well as a basic medical kit.