

Berg Break

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By **Brendan Seery**

As I lie on the grass, I contemplate the various battered and painful parts of my body. My back and side are a vivid splash of pain, my bum is aching, a calf muscle is twingeing and the backs of my lobster-red legs are pulsing like a nuclear reactor during meltdown.

Yet, despite this - perhaps because of it - I feel alive. And I'm really enjoying life.

It has just gone 7 pm and the light over the Drakensberg is only now starting to ebb. In the distance, 20km away, the vertical sheer rock faces of the curved Amphitheatre are being swallowed up slowly by grey and angry clouds. The storm marches slowly towards us across the valley, flinging lightning bolts as it comes.

I'm lying shirtless on a towel on the grass - memories of a long-ago youth - and the messenger winds ahead of the rain whip, soothing and cool, across my tortured skin. For a few minutes, the sound of the wind and the clinking of ice cubes in my glass are all there is to be heard. I stay a while longer, feeling the first exploratory droplets of rain on my skin, marvelling in the power of the slowly stalking storm.

To call this place dramatic would sell it short. Magnificent would be close.

Ironically our stone cottage at **Vaughn and Chantal Piccione's Berg House and Cottages** is called Thabela, which, loosely translated, means "bask in the sun"...

Thabela perches just below a ridge in a spot which leaves you feeling as though you are hovering on the edge of the world.

All around, the rolling dales and hillsides are splashed green - a perfect counterpoint to the turmoil in the heavens and to the splendour of the Northern Drakensberg, surely one of the most beautiful places in South Africa.

The reason I'm battered is that we went off with Vaughn on his bakkie, down to the tumultuous Tugela River hundreds of feet below, to go surfing downstream on old tractor tubes. It doesn't look very far and the rapids don't look at all challenging.

Unless, that is, you're close up and then the experience is like being tossed into a washing machine with a solid granite tumble drier.

Earlier on this "holiday", I had taken a spill (courtesy of moss-covered concrete) and badly wrenched my side and pounded my buttock. The 5km, two-and-a-half-hour rough and tumble ride down the Tugela only aggravated those stresses.

To explain: the best way to ride the rapids is on your stomach, because you can hoist yourself higher out of the way of rocks and branches. But that requires bends and stretching of the kind which only reveals its stresses hours after you've finished. And, even then, it still doesn't stop you from being tossed off your tube, or slammed into rocks or reed-covered banks. And believe me, once you get caught up in a stream of fast-moving water, it can get really frightening.

A lot more hectic than you'd think. Even Vaughn acknowledges, when he collects us after we've been on the river for almost three hours (when the trip normally takes about two), that the slightly lower level of the river has made the going a little tougher than normal.

And, of course, we should have started out two hours earlier to avoid the murderous sun in the stifling Tugela River flood plain. (Even Factor 30 sunscreen didn't work...) Afterwards, all four of us complain about our aches, but we agree it was certainly a buzz. Would we do it again? Don't think so...

But, if you're not an adrenalin junkie, there's still plenty to do at the Berg House. You can go on a more sedate horse ride - guided or by yourself. Or you can meander to the top of an even higher hill just behind the cottages and be rewarded with a 360-degree view. You can walk (or jog, as I did) along the road and take in the Berg in the distance and the ribbon-like, innocent-looking Tugela far below.

Less than an hour's drive from the Berg House, there is plenty to do. Into golf? A number of good courses are on hand. Plenty of fishing spots, too.

Well worth a visit is the nearby park of the Ukhahlamba Drakensberg trans-frontier park, part of the Ezimvelo KZN wildlife. This is the home of the spectacular Amphitheatre and starting point for some outstanding hikes. Vaughn recommends doing the Amphitheatre and the Tugela Falls, said to be the second highest in the world.

If you don't want to do something quite that strenuous - and these trips will each take you the best part of a day - then the Cascades Walk from the Mahai campsite in the park is a pleasant alternative. The walkway stretches for just over 2km and, because it is accessible for wheelchairs (something other national parks need to give more consideration to, I think) the walk itself is easy.

The path meanders among the thick foliage alongside a river, which constantly babbles within earshot.

When the broad concrete path terminates at the rocky cascades, you can still walk on, following the stream ever higher. Or you can cool off in the pools of clear mountain water.

Lying here now outside Thabela I remember flopping down at the edge of the pool in the Cascades, enjoying the cool water as it lapped over my painful sunburned legs.

Soon, a combination of rain and cooking duties forces me inside the cottage where, along with the four bedrooms (which sleep up to nine), there is a large open-plan living area.

After supper, when I want nothing more than to stretch out on a couch with my book, I am dragooned into playing rummy - and in life's card game three female voices will always trump a male one, no matter how hard he's braaied, cooked or driven the car!

There's no TV in the cottage, - no point in getting away from it all, only to have it all catch up with you.

The next morning, despite (or because of) my battered state, I'm awakened by birdsong at dawn. Outside on the stoep, sipping tea, I marvel again at the space. An occasional breeze ruffles the silence. The sun is not yet hot. Perfect? It's pretty damned close...

The Berg house and cottages

- Getting there: It is on a 1 650 acre farm, about three to four hours from Joburg. You go via the R74 from Harrismith to Bergville, via the Olivershoek Pass, turn off just after the foot of the pass and go toward the Royal Natal park.
 - Accommodation: Four furnished, privately situated cottages, sleeping from two to nine people. All have fireplaces and fully-equipped kitchens. There is a conference facility for a maximum of 15 delegates.
 - Rates: Self-catering - R225 per person per night. But you can also have bed and breakfast for R325 per person per night or dinner bed and breakfast for R425 per person per night. To put that into perspective, the nearby Royal Natal park charges R460 per person per night for self-catering accommodation. (At the Berg House and Cottages, there are minimum charges and they do have specials, so contact them to chat.)
- Activities (on site or close by): Walking, hiking, climbing, horse-riding, golf, river tubing, mountain biking, bungee jumping, paintball - and (my personal favourite) reading...
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