

Drakensberg

A Greentours Itinerary

Days 1 - 4

Golden Gate NP - Witsieshoek/The Sentinel & Oxbow

After an overnight flight from London, we'll arrive in Johannesburg in the early morning, and will head immediately south to the Golden Gate National Park. This will be our base for the next three nights as we explore the northern reaches of the Drakensberg. This national park spans an impressive range of altitudes and is most famous for its breath-taking sandstone cliffs, visible from our hotel. Here we'll begin our exploration of the flora, both on the grassy and rocky slopes and in the small forest patches. We'll see our first African mammals here too: the park is the best place to see the endemic Black Wildebeest and Blesbok, and we should also encounter Eland, Plains Zebra and more. We have even seen Meerkats near here, and we might also see the Giant Sungazer, a species of lizard that peeks out from its underground burrows. Birds are prolific too: Bearded and Cape Vultures often soar overhead, while the comical Southern Bald Ibis can be seen stalking across the grassy expanses. Our main focus with the flora here will be to use our base to access the high basalt peaks that loom to the south and which are crammed with alpine endemics which should be at their best at this time of year. On one day, we'll drive up to lofty heights where South Africa and Lesotho meet below the Sentinel Peak. One truly feels on top of the world here with sweeping, panoramic views as a backdrop to the floral wonders, such as *Crocospia pearsii*, *Eucomis bicolor*, *Dianthus basuticus* and *Agapanthus* and *Moraea* species. Lanner Falcon often soars overhead. The following day we will do a full day trip to another famous alpine site at Oxbow in Lesotho where the extensive boggy meadows host such specials as *Disa fragrans* and spectacular clumps of *Xerophyta viscosa* are found at the base of cliffs. Ascending Motheng Pass, with its switchbacks and sweeping views, is an experience in itself. As on most days, we'll have a picnic lunch out in the field.

Days 5 & 6

Spionkop, Giant's Castle and the uKhahlamba-Drakensberg Park

After three nights, we'll move down to the central, lower-lying regions of the 'Berg where we will spend two nights in the uKhahlamba-Drakensberg Park at Giant's Castle (depending on conditions, we might also choose to go to Royal Natal instead, where similar species can be found). The rushing rivers here are lined with scrubby forests of *Leucosidea sericea* trees while the grasslands host a suite of orchids and irids, including *Gladiolus crassifolius*. Malachite and Greater Double-collared Sunbirds provide an additional splash of colour, and the endemic Bush Blackcap sings beautifully from the riverside trees. En route to Giant's Castle, if we have time, we plan to visit Spionkop Dam Nature Reserve, where acacia trees become more

prominent as we drop in altitude in this part of Zululand. Bird and mammal watching can be good here, with White Rhino a regular sighting.

Day 7 Howick

Our next destination is the midlands around the town of Howick where we'll spend the night in a small hotel and explore Umgeni Valley Nature Reserve in the morning. This is more than just an overnight stop en route to the southern Drakensberg, and hosts a good selection of lower altitude grassland flora, such as the lily *Brunsvigia radulosa*, *Tritonia disticha* and many *Eulophia* orchids. African Crowned Eagles often soar overhead from the forest patches, causing their Vervet Monkey prey to scatter for cover.

Day 8 – 11(am) Underberg & the Sani Pass

We'll base ourselves in the Underberg area for three nights to explore the gem of the southern Drakensberg: Sani Pass. We'll transfer to four-wheel-drive vehicles and make a full day trip up the pass into Lesotho. The journey will be a microcosm of our whole trip as we ascend through the different geological zones and floras that we have come to know over the last week. The scenery is spectacular as we ascend through the final switch-backs of the final sections of the pass and see the looming basalt cliffs just below the plateau. Here we will scan for the Suicide Lily *Gladiolus flanaganii*, so named to warn plant collectors not to risk getting too close on the slippery cliffs where it grows! Damp bogs on the plateau support a carpet of *Rhodohypoxis baurii*. We'll head further inland to the Black Mountains where a host of endemic *Helichrysums*, *Jamesbrittenia lesutica* and *Gladiolus saundersii* can be located. Sani Pass is also famous in birding circles as it is one of the best places to see the charismatic Drakensberg Rockjumper, and family groups scold one from amongst the boulders. Ground Woodpecker and Drakensberg Siskin are here too, and these are the summer breeding grounds of the Mountain Pipit, whose wintering quarters are still a mystery. Sloggett's Ice Rats scuttle into cover at any sign of Verreaux's Eagle. The following day we will explore the grasslands and forest of lower altitude. Wonderful *Streptocarpus* and *Impatiens* can be seen in the forest understory, a selection of orchids in the grasslands, and the rare Cape Parrot is possible. Thousands of Amur Falcons can often be seen coming to their roosts in the evenings.

Days 11 (pm) - 13 Umtamvuna: Pondoland specials

The Pondoland Centre of Endemism is often overlooked but these ancient sandstone gorges along the south coast have many endemics and specials tucked in amongst their forests and grasslands. After leaving Sani Pass, we'll spend our last two nights of the trip on the coast. Umtamvuna Nature Reserve is one of the best places to access

this special flora, and we hope to encounter species such as *Watsonia umtamvunae* and several species of orchid. Birds might include Cape Vulture overhead, or Narina Trogon in the forest. On the morning of Day 13 we'll make a last few explorations, and then head north to Durban (2 hours) where we'll take a flight to Johannesburg and depart there in the evening on our international flights.

Day 14

Arrive UK/Europe

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