

Mnweni Circuit, North-Central Drakensberg



The Saddle viewed from the settlements at Mnweni (Photo: Angus Maclaren, Walks in Africa)

This is an excellent 4-day circuit that commences and ends at Mnweni, one of the least developed valleys in the Northern and Central Drakensberg. “Developed” that is in the western sense - Mnweni is home to the Amangwane Community, a Zulu tribal faction, whose traditional huts and *kraals* occupy the head of the valley, adding to the draw of this very attractive corner of the Drakensberg. Other than the excellent Mnweni Cultural and Hiking Centre, there are no hotels or B&Bs up here, and the area is rarely frequented by day-walkers. For those intending to trek for a few days, spend a few nights out, and put the effort in to make a long climb over two days of the lovely Rockeries pass, the rewards are numerous - the plateau from which the Orange river springs affords many fine views, and as you trek south towards nTonjelana the views over Cathedral peak and the Bell Traverse are impressive. There is a possibility of meeting Basotho herders en route, and experiencing a variety of mountain birds, including the magnificent Bearded Vulture (previously named the Lammegeier, or “lamb killer”), whose wingspan can reach 3m. The vulture colony occupying a series of ledges high up on the escarpment walls, just south of the Rockeries, can be viewed from close proximity, and provides mesmeric viewing.

General background

The Drakensberg escarpment, the so-called “Barrier of Spears”, forms the border between the mountain kingdom of Lesotho and KwaZulu-Natal in South Africa, and rises dramatically from rolling foothills to heights in excess of 3000m or 10,000 feet. While the trek is not technical, it passes over rugged terrain in a pristine wilderness area, and you will be off marked trails except when ascending or descending the major passes. You will experience extensive views of the high Drakensberg and the Maluti Mountains of Lesotho, and have the opportunity to ascend one or two short summits in excess of 3000m as you progress. You will be travelling along the African Watershed where the water in the streams is the purest on the continent!

Grade: Strenuous - this is a medium altitude trek requiring good walking stamina. You should be comfortable covering 10 to 15 kilometres per day over undulating territory between 2500m and 3300m, and making steep sustained ascents and descents on passes that access the top of the escarpment.

Altitude: Trek base at 1270m. Escarpment height ranges between 2900 and 3200m with various 3000m+ short summits.

Style: This is a camping-style trek lead by an experienced, personable local guide, partially supported by porters, and fully supported by vehicles where appropriate at the start and end of the trek.



On the Rockeries Pass (photo: Angus Maclaren, Walks in Africa)

Itinerary

Day 1 - Mnweni towards Rockeries

Starting at the Mnweni Cultural and Hiking Centre at the southern end of the Northern Drakensberg, you will hike for approximately 6 hours today, slowly climbing through the African Desert Sandstone levels, the so-called “Little ‘Berg”. Access to the main escarpment from Mnweni is over a considerable distance from the trail head at Mnweni, and it is not possible to ascend the pass to the top in one day. You’ll follow the Thonyalana then the n’Tonjelan’ Eshonalanga Rivers, crossing the latter several times as you approach the left flank of the Rockeries Pass, and a campsite below the pass at 2200m. *En route* in you’ll get superb views of the distinctive Saddle peak, and the Rockeries themselves.

Overnight in tents below the Rockeries Pass

Day 2 - Rockeries to Source of the Orange River

Today you'll make a stiff but rewarding climb up the Rockeries pass, an ascent of approximately 750m vertical. The path up is a good one, although rocky and steep at times. You'll emerge onto a broad plateau hemmed in by the Mnweni Cutback on the northern rim, and the Rockeries and the north flank of The Saddle on the southern side. An exploration of this area reveals views of some the Drakensberg's most distinctive features, including the Mnweni Pinnacles and Mnweni Needles, the Black & Tan Wall, and even the Devil's Tooth on the Eastern Buttress of the Amphitheatre, a full two days hike away to the north. The plateau is the source of the Orange River, one of South Africa's major water courses that flows eastwards into the Atlantic - yes, you are definitely on the African watershed! Make camp by the Orange river, or opt to sleep in Mponjwane Cave, which has extensive views over the Drakensberg and foothills. Today's hike is approximately 5-6 hours.

Overnight in tents at the Source of the Orange River, or in the valley behind the Saddle peaks

Day 3 - Orange River to nTonjelana

Weather-permitting, it's worth making the climb up to the Cape Vulture colony which lies just to the south of Rockeries Pass. If you are lucky you can see Bald Ibis, Jackal Buzzards, Bearded Vultures and Rock Kestrels here too. You'll then hike up a ridge behind Nguzu Pass to find an amazing natural swimming hole in which to refresh yourselves. Continue hiking along the valley to have lunch with a view of the whole Cathedral Peak range below, with Champagne Castle lying some way off to the south. In the afternoon, continue to the top of the nTonjelana Pass, which you then descend to either Waterfall cave, which can be slept in, or to a camping spot nearby that's suitable for tents.

Overnight in tents below nTonjelana, or in Waterfall Cave

Day 4 - nTonlelana to Mnweni

Final descent and walk-out to Mnweni. After about 6 kms of descent from the cave you will join your original approach route towards the Rockeries, at the confluence of the Ntonjelan' Esonalanga and Ntonjelan' Ephumalanga rivers. The Mnweni Cultural and Hiking Centre lies about another 5kms further on, and you should reach the roadhead there in the early afternoon. Overnight at Mnweni, or drive on to your next accommodation (ideally within 3 hours' drive).

END OF ITINERARY

Important Note

As you will be travelling in a mountain environment, please note that actual travel may alter owing to factors such as prevailing weather conditions and participant acclimatisation. Activities and timings may vary slightly from those outlined, and decisions relating to pace and route will be at the discretion of your guide, who will at all times endeavour to ensure that you meet your objectives safely.



*Approaching the nTonjelana Pass with the Cathedral Peak in the far distance right
(Photo: Lina Börjes, Walks in Africa client)*

Staying in the Amangwane Tribal Area at Mnweni

On the evening before this trek, the opportunity exists to stay in a traditional tribal environment at Mnweni and to experience the hospitality of local African people. The Amangwane are a tribal faction within the Zulu nation, and live on tribal lands in the lower reaches of the Mnweni valley. This valley is not part of the uKhahlamba-Drakensberg Park, which commences at Cathedral Peak, nor does it form part of the Royal Natal National Park, which lies to the north and which encompasses the Amphitheatre. Importantly, there are neither hotels in this valley, nor KZN Wildlife huts, and the only step towards formal tourism has been the establishment of a community run tourism centre (the Mnweni Cultural and Hiking Centre) which is sited at the lower end of the settlement. This tasteful, low-key establishment has self-catering accommodation, and not many beds - indeed, Mnweni is not a place for the masses, and remains comparatively hidden. The Mountain Guide will cater for you if you stay here. Even fewer trekkers come to stay at a traditional Kraal and the experience you will get here is a far cry from the commercial tribal experiences put on for tourists a short coach ride from Durban. You'll have the opportunity to sample some traditional fare and may get the chance to enjoy some traditional Zulu dancing.