

The northern Drakensberg's mighty Mnweni Pass is not in a formally protected area, but remains wild and rugged nonetheless.

# NAVIGATING NEVERLAND

17KG, 12 HIKERS, 10 COFFEE RATIONS, THREE NIGHTS, TWO PASSES AND ONE COMMUNITY PROJECT. **DO THE MATHS AND IT SUMS UP THE MNWENI CIRCUIT AS THE MOST SPECTACULAR DRAKENSBERG HIKE**

Words & Photos **Melanie van Zyl**



**R**ustle. Hustle. Boil and bubble. My sleeping bag fizzes against the shiny inflated hiking mat as I wrestle internal debate. Do I kip for another five minutes? I can hear others stirring. Or is it time to get stiff muscles moving again? Actually, I don't need to exit my sleeping bag to simultaneously sip a hot cup of coffee and marvel at the Mnweni Valley. Unzipping the sky-blue 2,59kg tent (every milligram counts), I see I'm not the only one taking advantage of our scenic perch.

I'd just woken up to day three of the Mnweni Circuit, a hike in the northern Drakensberg, that I was doing with 12 others. Someone bolder had already left the safety of Ledges Cave (and their snug sleeping bag) to better soak up the dawn's pastel palette.

The tiny stick figure perched on the precipice of an outcrop which bulged off the escarpment like the bow of a gargantuan ship about to sail down the hilly waves of the rippling valley. Still bleary-eyed, I waved at the figure – a fitting 'Ahoy there!' – before settling into the morning routine: exit sleeping bag, roll up mattress, boil more water for oats and a second coffee ration, get dressed, eat and pack. Rustle. Hustle. Boil and bubble.

A Unesco World Heritage Site and transfrontier wilderness, the Maloti-Drakensberg Park encompasses 12 protected areas. Interestingly, Mnweni does not fall into any of these official zones. Sandwiched by the better-known Royal Natal National Park and Cathedral Peak, this hiking trail is managed by the amaNgwane Tribal Authority, traversing land occupied by traditional Zulu communities and small-scale farmers.

Our three-night, 40km trek had begun at the Mnweni Cultural and Hiking Centre where we met our sprightly mountain guide, and founder of PathFinders SA, Michaela Geytenbeek, alongside the centre manager, Leonard Hlatshwayo. He has worked at the non-profit organisation since 2005 and is one of seven staff mem-

bers directly from the Mnweni community. 'Funds from the hiking permits also help support the creche and school next door,' Leonard told me. 'We have 460 children going to school here.'

With a lopsided smile, Leonard brought out a luggage scale to weigh our bulging backpacks, convincing many of us to recalculate the contents before boarding the Kombi for a lift to the trail start.

We passed thatched huts, goats and gurgling streams, women with laden buckets on their heads, donkeys, dogs and lively children frolicking with friends. Leonard pulled over before a bridge where we disembarked and strapped on our packs, fresh-faced and fully loaded beside the Mnweni River. Clouds hung low, ashen and heavy, so we couldn't see any of the peaks we'd soon summit. Probably for the best. The first thing I'd read about the impending hike was: 'It's not to be underestimated and will require a high level of fitness and hiking competency', Eish.

Fluent in traditional plant and folklore knowledge, local guides and porters can be hired from the Mnweni Cultural and Hiking Centre. However, being a predominantly female group of hikers under the name 'Womxn for Wild', we wanted a swashbuckling gal to take us into the mountains. "They are not strong enough," Leonard said when I enquired whether

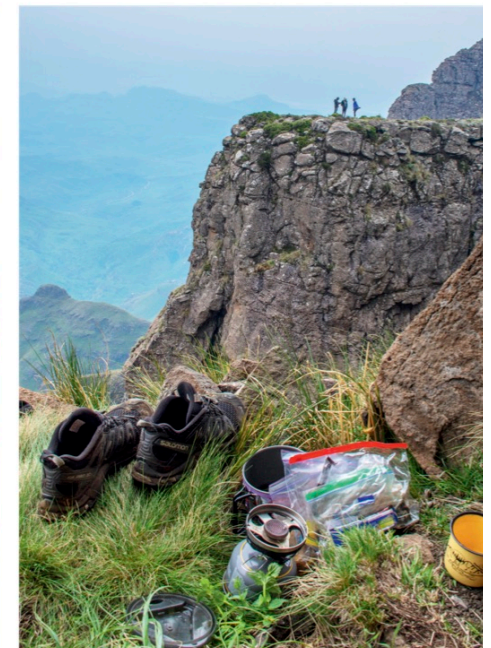
there are any female guides in the community. He'd clearly never seen Michaela and her crew on the ridges and ravines.

During the week, Michaela is a Masters student in sustainable development (focusing on integrating nature into the education curriculum). But you'll find her in the mountains on any given Saturday. She started PathFinders SA in 2017 and qualified as a mountain guide in 2020, specialising in mountain walking. To qualify, Mix, as we called her, had to spend a minimum of 40 days at roughly 3 000 metres leading groups. She's also run this route as a marathon – twice.

**RIGHT, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP** Look closely and you'll see hikers winding all the way down Mnweni Pass; it was shoes off, coffee on for the author, while the more energetic explored around Ledges Cave on day two of the hike; our full 'Womxn for Wild' crew at the end of the Mnweni Circuit, hitching a ride back to the Cultural and Hiking Centre.



(Photo Carmen van der Westhuizen)







**LEFT, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP** A view of Mnweni village from the Cultural and Hiking Centre; Angie Slabbert crosses one of the many streams that lie en route to the Drakensberg escarpment; the route on day one follows the Mnweni River for most of the way.



We'd barely walked 3km over the emerald slopes (always keeping the Mnweni River in sight and sometimes removing our boots to cross it) when I was already grateful to have a captain. One of our party choked (thankfully just on an awkward squirt of water from the bladder) but, equipped with Level 3 First Aid, Mix promptly jumped to her rescue. Then there were the cattle tracks and myriad paths meandering everywhere – there are no marked trails in Mnweni.

Just 10km into our hike a storm stirred the sky and Chichi Bushcamp, our overnight abode, was still a good 5km further on. No matter, Mix shepherded us to another scenic campsite wedged between the Rwanqua and Mnweni streams. We snapped our tents up in a hurry and had barely battened the hatches before a hailstorm erupted. Oh the joys of walking on the Berg in the height of summer!

Mnweni means 'the place of fingers' in isiZulu and refers to the pointed rock spires that shoot into the heavens. The next morning, we finally saw them in clearer weather. Our target for day two was roughly 8km, but with a daunting altitude gain of 1 095 metres. I put my head down and willed my legs up the Mnweni Pass. And up. And up... and up the seemingly insurmountable mountain. The trail was loose and steep, and we had to scramble on all fours sometimes. I felt a swell of relief for hiking poles and their aiding stability. I'd often stop to catch my breath and try to distinguish the ant-like hikers trudging below. It was hard to grasp the hallmarks of a 1km ascent but my iPhone health app broke it down into identifiable terms later – 141 gruelling floors.

I've never savoured lunch more than atop Mnweni Pass. Wildflowers flickered in the wind all around us and I smugly admired the tower we'd just conquered between chews. Later, we filled our water bottles from one of the sources of the Orange River on the plateau top and sipped our way to nearby Ledges Cave, smack on the border of Lesotho and South Africa. Access to the spectacular overhang required a rather hairy descent, but we all revelled in the setting once safely in the cave.

With a relaxed afternoon to spare, we got to know

each other better. In 2018, I had won a competition to work remotely from Sicily with digital nomad company Find Your Pack. While I was there in Palermo, I made two excellent South African friends who now sat beside me. Carmen van der Westhuizen is the co-founder of our joint (ad)venture Womxn for Wild, and Lauren Melnick is an equally avid traveller and blogger for Wanderlust Movement.

Since Italy, we'd explored Cape Town together and driven to a music festival in the Okavango Delta. The decision to tackle this specific hiking route was made on Instagram. When presented with hiking options, my (incredibly valid) concerns on trail difficulty were vetoed by Lauren and Carmen thanks to dramatic pictures of Mnweni they'd seen while scrolling, most of them snapped by Mix's friend, and our new trail companion, Graeme Holliday.

Our entire group of (majority millennial) hikers had landed on this journey together via social media. Dineo Zonke Maduna joined us from Nelspruit, Jina Min came from Joburg and Lauren Holland drove north from Howick. These days many trips and adventures are booked purely to post on the 'Gram, and it can undoubtedly be a toxic

platform. Only very rarely does digital networking really foster such authentic connections. Maybe I'm just one of the lucky ones.

The Mnweni Circuit is not an easy trail. There were tears. There were welts. There was sunburn and burst water bladders. But I couldn't have braved it with a better crew – who captured the pertinent moments. Dineo filmed herself weeping while walking down Rockeries Pass on day three, Carmen posted snaps of blisters nursed by cold beers, while I tried to share the realities of facing a hail storm while smooshed into the tiny sky-blue tent with all our gear.

Three years ago, I didn't know any of these people and this hike wasn't on my radar at all. A literal neverland. Now I count 11 new, very intrepid, friends. Isn't it ironic that an online platform got us into the wild without a speck of Wi-Fi for kilometres? It's all about balancing screen time with green time, I guess. ▶

**WILDFLOWERS**  
flickered in the  
wind all around us and  
I smugly admired the  
**TOWER WE'D**  
**JUST CONQUERED**



TRAVEL **Drakensberg**

A series of staggered hills lie ahead of hikers just starting on the first slope of Mnweni Pass.



**ABOVE** Ledges Cave offers just enough width to pitch your tent and walk around it - although most of the party slept out on their hiking pads.

**RIGHT** A hard-earned rest to savour the achievement at the top of Mnweni Pass.





PROFILES

**DINEO ZONKE MADUNA**  
@dineo\_zonke

Being around nature brings me a lot of joy. It makes me feel free and more alive. Camping at Ledges Cave was a unique and unexpected experience, something I'll remember forever. I tackled this trail because I needed the challenge. I wanted to meet new people and witness the Drakensberg's breathtaking views. Although I knew the hike would be challenging, I did not expect it to be that tough. It was a lot like life: we all move through it differently and face many challenges but you keep going, appreciate the beauty and make the most of the experience. No one was coming to save me. I had to trust myself and keep going, no matter how tough it was.

**trail tip** Don't overthink it. Our bodies are capable of doing the unthinkable, just trust yourself. Make sure you pack enough food, snacks that you enjoy because you'll need all the energy you can get.

**icoffy or filter coffee?**  
icoffy

**what treat you really needed?**  
chocolate

**MICHAELA GEYTENBEEK**  
@mountainmix / @pathfindersa

When you go outside to be reminded that we are part of nature, that she is our protector and greatest teacher – so I am all for rustic adventure. I like the quiet, the pace of life that allows us to notice the brilliant beauty around us – the sounds, the smells, the wisdom of the mountains places everything in perspective. They show us how small, yet capable, we are. The Mnweni area is my favourite. It's exceptionally rugged, characterised by towering rock spires. The walk to the mountains is long, so you're completely enveloped by the rolling hills and rock towers. The first time I visited Mnweni, I struggled to comprehend her scale and was awestruck by the intricacies of her faces. No matter how often I visit, I always notice something new.

**trail tip** Mnweni is not for the faint-hearted. Get a guide as there are many winding paths that you can quickly lose yourselves on. And organise a lift from the Mnweni Cultural Centre to the start of your hike.

**icoffy or filter coffee?**  
filter all the way!

**what treat you really needed in the trail?**  
rusk. And my book.



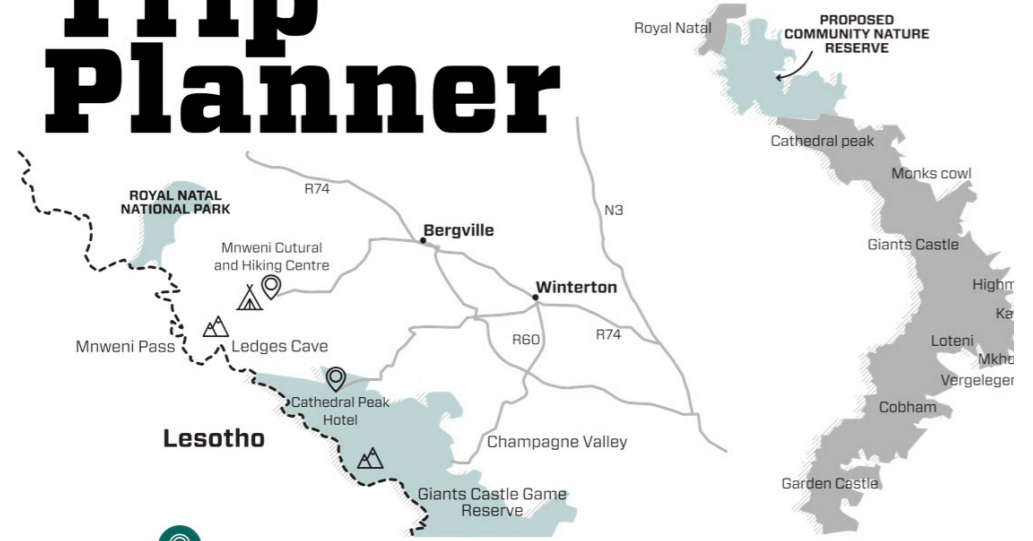
Dineo Zonke Maduna



Michaela Geytenbeek

**Did you know?**  
According to the United Nations, mountains are home to 15% of the world's population, host roughly half the world's biodiversity hotspots, and provide fresh water for human consumption. The Drakensberg is no exception and fulfils all these tasks.

# Trip Planner



**GETTING THERE**

Hikes start from the Mnweni Cultural Centre, 35km from Bergville, including 16km of rough dirt road (okay in a sedan if taken slowly). It's approximately 400km from Joburg, and 270km from Durban.

**THE MNWENI CIRCUIT**

Take a guide. Michaela runs set expeditions as PathFinders SA and lists all upcoming hikes on [pathfinderssa.com](http://pathfinderssa.com). If you want to hike Mnweni on a date not listed, set up a personalised trip with friends, from R500pp. Local guides from the Mnweni Cultural and Hiking Centre are all trained and hold first-aid qualifications. Cost is R1 000 per day per group; overnight permits cost R60pp. There are also day hikes here – the Mnweni Pools trail is 6km and very popular. Follow [@womxnforwild](https://www.instagram.com/womxnforwild) on Instagram to join other adventures – their next one is to Monk's Cowl for four days at the end of April.

**Stay Here**

**THE MNWENI CULTURAL AND HIKING CENTRE** has self-catering facilities, a simple lawn for camping (R90pp) and basic but lovingly-tended rondavels (R330pp) that sleep four. Call Leonard to book on **079 615 5941**

**LITTLE SWITZERLAND** is another excellent stopover option between Johannesburg and Mnweni. Located on the picturesque Oliviershoek Pass, it sits halfway between Harrismith and Bergville on the recently resurfaced R74. Self-catering units from **R720pp, [ish.co.za](http://ish.co.za)**

**Do This**

**RUN THE MNWENI MARATHON**

The Mnweni Marathon is managed by KZN Trail Running and comes in two formats. The first race is on 1 May 2021, and the Spring Mnweni takes place on 4 September 2021; the latter is run as the raw and unmarked version. Categories include: 40km Mountain Marathon, 20km Mountain Challenge, 10km and 5km. Online entries close on 23 April. **[kzntrailrunning.co.za](http://kzntrailrunning.co.za)**

**DAY ONE  
MNWENI CENTRE TO  
CHICHI BUSHCAMP**

**Distance:** 18km  
**Altitude Gain:** 625m  
**Our Time:** 6 hours 12min

**DAY TWO  
CHICHI BUSHCAMP, UP MNWENI  
PASS TO LEDGES CAVE**

**Distance:** 6km  
**Altitude Gain:** 1 095m  
**Our Time:** 7 hours 22 min

**DAY THREE  
LEDGES CAVE, DOWN ROCKERIES PASS BACK  
TO MNWENI CULTURE CENTRE**

**Distance:** 15-20km (shorter if you get a lift for the last 5km of flat gravel road)  
**Altitude:** 1 200m  
**Our Time:** 7 hours 50 min



**FAST FACTS**  
Distance: **42km**  
Total ascent: **Almost 2 000m**  
Total altitude: **3 000m** above sea level  
Difficulty: **Intermediate with a high level of fitness**