

This iconic image was taken by John Hone of his friend Bruce Sobey standing on a spire in the southern Drakensberg, but John's favourite part of South Africa's biggest range was the north.

King of the mountain

Ever dreamt of walking in the footsteps of a master? To Scott Ramsay, John Hone's photographs of the Drakensberg set the standard for landscape photography in South Africa. So he decided to hike Hone's favourite range. This is the story of that trip

WHY IT'S WORTH THE TRIP

- The beauty of the area is legendary. It's the kind of scenery that makes you consider the meaning of perfection, our country's magnificence and life.
- You need to be fit, and if so, it's a great test of body and spirit. And we all need that once in a while.
- For landscape photographers, the dramatic shapes and mist and light make it an excellent setting for practising your skills.



We seemed to be floating on a cloud. The basalt cliffs towered above us and the last light of day enveloped the Drakensberg's peaks like molten amber. It was a very good place to share a mug of whisky with friends.

This was the third day of our six-day hike in the northern Drakensberg. We were walking south along the top of the great escarpment, from the Amphitheatre to Cathedral Peak, a distance of about 100 kilometres.

One of the biggest mountain ranges in Southern Africa rises steeply from the foothills in KwaZulu-Natal to over 3 000 metres in Lesotho. Over millions of years, powerful rivers have carved innumerable gorges and valleys on the eastern edge. The isiZulu name for these ramparts is 'uKhahlamba', translated as 'Barrier of spears'. It's an apt description of some of the most rugged terrain south of the Zambezi and Kunene rivers.

For newcomers and regulars alike, northern Drakensberg can be an

intimidating and unpredictable place. The convoluted land can quickly be shrouded in mist, cloud, rain or snow, at any time of year. There are few marked paths and the high cliffs drop away sharply. Basotho dagga smugglers and shepherds roam the highlands, sometimes relieving hikers of their boots and valuables.

But right then these mountains seemed far from dangerous to us. As the sun fell behind the pinnacles of Mnweni and we walked the short distance back to our tents, they seemed to hold us safely. Maybe it was the fine views, the companionship of good friends, or maybe the whisky was taking effect, but right then I caught a glimpse of perfection.

ABOVE Camping above the rock formations known as Madonna and her Worshipers, in the northern Drakensberg. Frost covered the ground and our tents.



I couldn't help but think of John Hone. It was in this exact area that John took some of the finest landscape photographs in South Africa. Although I had never met him, when I first saw John's images in his book *Encounters with the Dragon*, I felt like I'd known him my whole life. After reading of his adventures in these mountains I knew we would have found much to talk about.

John worked as a professional photographer and printer, travelling all over South Africa. But the northern part of the Drakensberg made the biggest impact on him, particularly the Mnweni area between the Amphitheatre and Cathedral Peak.

'In all the Drakensberg, the spectacular peaks, the beautiful valleys and the people of the Mnweni have made this my favourite region,' wrote John in *Encounters with the Dragon*. 'The Mnweni, in my view, has the very finest inland scenery of the whole of Southern Africa.' This was no small compliment from someone who had photographed most of the spectacular scenery in Africa.

Every year in May, for more than 20 years, John would take leave from his work to go hiking for nine days with friends, while at least once a month he'd spend a weekend in the mountains. His wife Barbara wasn't a hiker herself, but she was happy to let him explore with his friends. 'I used to joke to him that the mountains were his first love,' she told me. 'But we were married for 40 years and we were a good partnership. I never, ever said to him he couldn't go. I knew the Berg was his passion and I think he appreciated that. He just loved those mountains.'

Peter Brigg, John's hiking friend of 30 years, joined him on most of the adventures. 'John enjoyed the ruggedness of the northern Berg,' Peter explained. 'The southern Berg has a much softer feel to it. And because the north, especially Mnweni, is so rugged, it has fewer hikers.'

This was true. On our first day, we had seen a few day hikers, who, like us, had ascended the chain ladders to enjoy the views of the famous Amphitheatre. But from day two, as we headed south for five days, we saw no other hikers. A few Basotho shepherds came to say hello to

ABOVE Basotho shepherds Hape Farelani and Pezulu Habayani, with Cathedral Peak behind them. These are tough men. They live in one of the remotest places in Southern Africa, at an altitude of 3 000 metres all year round, through winter freezing temperatures down to minus 15 degrees Celsius. And just wearing a pair of shorts, a shirt, a beanie, a blanket and gumboots.

us, but otherwise it was just myself, my two friends Miguel and Abigail Ferreira Da Silva and our Zulu guide Caiphus Mthabela. The autumn had cast its first chill. The nights were cold, below zero, and our tents were sprinkled with frost every night.

During the mornings a barrage of mist rolled in across the foothills of Natal, smashing into the cliffs of the escarpment like an angry ocean swell breaking over a harbour wall. As we walked along the rarefied top in the sunshine we seemed to be looking down from space onto Earth below.

I took photographs as I went, snapping away on my camera. Given our short >



Morning sunrise at the rock formations known as Madonna and her Worshippers. 'I am not bound to win but I'm bound to be true. I am not bound to succeed but I am bound to live up to what light I have.' – Abraham Lincoln.

WHAT PHOTOGRAPHERS CAN LEARN FROM JOHN HONE

START A PROJECT Focus on what enthrals you and lifts your spirits. Let your passion build a deeper knowledge of your subject, revealing aspects the ignorant would miss.

BE PATIENT Invest time in your project. See it through all its lights: the good, the bad, and the dreary. The best photographs can happen in the least ideal of conditions.

PUSH YOUR LIMITS Leave a legacy. Climb higher. Walk further. Get closer. Cross that line that other photographers stop at, and be rewarded by images that no one else has.

John's book *Encounters with the Dragon* can be bought at Exclusive Books for R569.



John passed away on 1 May 2012, at the age of 65. His ashes were scattered at the bottom of Mnweni Valley.

Mountain guide Caiphus Mthabela (and inset) admiring the views of The Cockade, with the escarpment cliffs extending south-east towards Organ Pipes Pass.

time in the area, I was trying to capture as much of the beauty as I could. But I felt like an amateur; John would have spent several days in one location, waiting for the ideal light. Often he would return several times to the same place every year, hoping to capture the perfect image.

'John was a perfectionist,' Peter laughed. 'I used to tease him that he'd never be entirely happy because he was never satisfied until his photos were perfect.'

'We used to look at his beautiful photographs and he'd always find something that could be better. He would go back again and again until he was absolutely happy, and even then I think he was questioning things.'

As a young man in the early days, John used a Rolleicord 6x6cm camera, then progressed onto a Linhof Super Technika 4x5. Later he held a Mamiya RZ67, and finally a Hasselblad, which he used to take some of his finest images.

'Some trips were highly fruitful, while other were disappointingly unproductive,' John wrote. 'Many of the better photographs I have taken owe their existence to a tremendous amount of time and physical effort.'

'In that rarefied air, there is always "one more never-ending gruelling crest" to climb. The weight of the backpack full of camera and other gear often felt as though its sole mission was to destroy one's soul.'

'On the other hand, there were occasions when everything seemed so easy, with a magical photographic opportunity presenting itself after hardly any effort or preparation. Either way, every good photograph, no matter how captured, is a prized record of a special moment.'

His images are today considered some of the finest landscape photos of all time in Southern Africa. 'John's work was a big inspiration for me,' landscape photographer Hougaard Malan told me. 'Even today I still feel John's book



Encounters with the Dragon is the best photographic book in South Africa.

'All great landscape photographers have got to find a scene that works, and then you've got to wait for the right weather, the right light and the right place. John did that over several decades. He put in everything he could to get the shot. In many ways, John laid a foundation for landscape photography in South Africa.'

Despite his dedication to capturing the perfect image, it was John's love of the mountains which inspired him and kept drawing him back, again and again. 'I love the Drakensberg's unspoilt surroundings, nature's beauty and the shapes and forms of the landscape,' he wrote. 'High in the mountains there's often a sense of excitement and adventure too. It is a place where one is reminded of one's vulnerability and where one can experience freedom, realizing that one doesn't always have to be "in control".' These words echoed deeply in my

heart when I read them. Like John, I came first to love the country's mountains, because I found in them solace, freedom and a sense of belonging.

Photography is one way to honour the mystical and almost inexplicable beauty of our magnificent land. And there is no one who has done it better than John Hone. When I admire his photographs of the mountains, I don't just feel inspired to explore more of the Drakensberg, I also feel inspired to lead a more meaningful existence, to make the most of the time I've been given.

'It seems to me that modern life is a trap,' John wrote near the end of *Encounters with the Dragon*. 'We are all programmed into a system determined by an overcrowded world. We spend so much of our time and energies pursuing those things we believe make us happy. We lose sight of the simple yet important things.' 📍

PLAN YOUR TRIP ➔

GETTING THERE

The hike begins at Sentinel Car Park near Witsieshoek Mountain Lodge. From Durban, take the R74 past Bergville and the Sterkfontein Dam Nature Reserve, and then right onto R712 to Puthaditjhaba. From there follow the signs to Witsieshoek. From Joburg, take the N3 to Harrismith, and then follow the R74, which becomes the R712 to Puthaditjhaba.

WHEN TO GO

Autumn or spring are the best times to hike in the Berg. There are fewer thunderstorms, and temperatures are milder than winter.

DO THIS

A guide is recommended. Caiphus Mthabela is a well-respected mountain guide

who lives in the Mnweni area, and knows the northern Drakensberg better than most. Call him on 073-603-9107 or email him on caiphus@emachibini.co.za. He charges from R600 per day, depending on the length of the hike and the size of the group. emachibini.co.za/emachibini

NEED TO KNOW

The hike from the Amphitheatre to Cathedral Peak takes five nights and six days. It is a one-way hike ending at Cathedral Peak Hotel. Hikers can expect to walk about 15 to 20 kilometres per day. It is only for experienced or fit hikers who can cope with difficult terrain. Hikers must be fully self-sufficient and prepared. A map of the area is vital. The official uKhahlamba-Drakensberg Park maps No 1

and 2 cover the area, and are on sale at any of the regional KZN Wildlife offices. GPS with mapping capabilities such as Garmin Oregon 550 is vital. 033-8451-017, www.kznwildlife.com

STAY HERE

Witsieshoek Mountain Lodge is where you spend the first night. From R585 pp sharing B&B. It can arrange to transfer your vehicle to Cathedral Peak Hotel for a fee of R1 200. www.witsieshoek.co.za
Cathedral Peak Hotel R1 315 pp sharing, including dinner, bed and breakfast. 036-488-1888, cathedralpeak.co.za,

EAT AND DRINK

Pack high-energy foods, including salami, cheese, tuna, nuts and chocolates. Breakfast:

Pronutro with powdered milk and sugar. Lunch: salami, cheese and crackers. Dinner: 2 Minute Noodles and tuna. Remember rehydrate powder, tea, coffee and whisky.

PACK

Gear should include a comfortable backpack and hiking boots, all-weather gear plus a rain jacket with pants and thermal clothing, a tent, all-weather gas stove, matches, first-aid kit, GPS and a satellite phone.

COSTS

Other than accommodation at the hotels, vehicle transfer and guide costs, the only additional expenses are food and camping gear. The trip cost me ± R3 000.

**Prices correct at time of going to print*