

BARRIER OF SPEARS DRAKENSBERG



Agapanthus af. nutans



Disa thodei



Disa cooperi

Every so often one visits a place that leaves an indelible impression. I have visited the highest mountain regions of Earth; western China, the Himalayas and the Andes, each time bombarded with sensational landscapes so that everywhere else seemed flat by comparison. Thus, the drama of the modest altitudes of the Drakensberg came as a refreshing and unexpected surprise. It is quite different from the vast mountain chains of Asia and South America, a magnificent escarpment that fringes the tiny kingdom of Lesotho, the table top summits offering a different perspective, one that can be readily walked across to allow one to peer down into spectacular basins or plunging valleys. The visual adrenaline rush was helped by early starts and some fortuitous morning weather, where mists rolled up and down the river valleys, curling around the smooth forms of hills and lapping against the sheer cliff walls. On another occasion a day of cloud suddenly transformed as the nebulous vapour slipped away for a giddy half hour of frantic photography and views of The Amphitheatre at Witsieshoek to remember. Every bit as impressive as any scenery I had previously seen.

Floristically, it is different too, an experience of vast rolling grasslands, within which reside many gems. I had not expected to see over fifty species of orchid, but with some determined searching beauties such as porcelian *Disa thodei*, hefty *D. cooperi* and fiery



Disa porrecta



Satyrium longicauda



Harveya huttonii



Harveya scarletina

D. porrecta were found. There were great numbers of more widespread species such as; *Satyrium longicauda* and *Disa fragrans*, the latter as its' name suggests is deliciously-scented. The orchid bonanza began in the south-western Drakensberg, in a region seldom included in itineraries. Quite why is a mystery. Here the tablelands were easy to walk into and the terraces fin places were filled with flowery meadows of *Disa oreophila*, *Tritonia drakensbergensis*, red-hot pokers, scabious and their pollination mimic *Disa cephalotes*. Rocky areas were encrusted with *Crassula setulosa* or the sprawling domes of *Euphorbia clavarioides*. There were straightforward hikes to superb viewpoints of tablelands stretching away to the horizon and all based around a wonderful comfortable hotel nestled in folds in the hills. A great place to watch one of Drakensberg's famed thunderstorms rumble through after a good day's botany.

Leaving this place, a final flourish was provided by the outrageous flaming flowers of *Gladiolus sandersii* growing on rocks with *Eucomis autumnalis* and showy *Harveya speciosa*. The latter is one of the amazing parasitic plants found here. Others include the *H. scarletina*, another dazzling species I found in the west, and lovely pink *H. huttonii*. This grew commonly on the Sani Pass road, a well beaten botanical track, but one that



Gladiolus sandersii



Disa oreophila



Helichrysum milfordiae



Schizoglossum atropurpureum



Xysmatolobium involucreatum

still offers much. The upper stretches of the road are still rough and unmade with lots of good plants from rocky banks plastered with *Agapanthus campanulatus* and *Eucomis bicolor*, to cliffs with vermilion *Gladiolus flanaganii*. Areas of turf have plenty of orchids too, but for me the best was at the top, technically inside Lesotho, where the escarpment rock crevices were filled with the beautiful everlasting flowers of *Helichrysum milfordiae*, the outer bracts of each white flower tipped with dark red, stunning backlit and offering fabulous backdrops with the Sani Pass switchbacks below. There were many more of the same farther into Lesotho, where a high pass also had silver mounds of *H. pagophilum* and grand views of a tiny country.

Plenty more grassland orchids followed, as did the colossal spheres of *Brunsvigia grandiflora*, a truly outsize bulb that erupted from the sward. Curious antelope looked on as I rolled around in the grasses to photograph some of the extraordinary asclepiads that occur here, such as *Xysmatolobium involucreatum* and sombre *Schizoglossum atropurpureum*. A series of dramatic valleys continue around the eastern edge of the Drakensberg, each different in character, with great landscapes and new plants. Some had good patches of open protea woodland and habitat that may well have been more widespread before humankind began playing with fire here. *Protea roupellei* is perhaps the showiest, though dwarf *P. simplex* has its own charm.



Helichrysum milfordiae



Nerine bowdenii

The botanical counterpoint to the western end of the range has to be Witsieshoek, a rich area with arguably the grandest scenery of all. Gullies are filled with *Eucomis bicolor*, dark rocks near waterfalls and seeps the lovely pink *Gladiolus microcarpus*, the gaps in between filled with orchids, campions, agapanthus and *Zaluzianskyja microsiphon*, a delightful plant with pure white flowers, the reserve a deep red. However, the plant I most wanted to find here did not disappoint. *Nerine bowdenii* grew in abundance on the rocky slopes and at the base of the soaring tan and black cliffs, lush clumps of leaves fuelling spidery masses of candy-pink flowers. They were stunning and alongside were *Ornithogalum regalis*, *Eucomis*, *Moraea*, *Kniphofia*, *Dianthus*, *Alepidea*, *Geranium*, etc, etc. For those that want to gain a little more height, a twin set of fantastic metal chain ladders lead up vertical rock to the tableland, and across the world's highest waterfall; 983-metre Tegula Falls. The moorlands were crowded with orchids, a tufts of lovely red-budded, white *Helichrysum adenocaulon* are poised near the unfenced lip of the escarpment.

Suitably wild, a refreshingly unfettered, as if one needs a sign to say mind the edge!



Gladiolus microcarpus



Protea roupellei



Gladiolus dalenii



Giant's Castle



The Amphitheatre, Witsieshoek



Brunsvigia grandiflora

And for those that wondered, Barrier of Spears is a translation of uKhahlamba, the Zulu name for the Drakensberg, which itself is Afrikaans for Dragon Mountain.

Witsieshoek dawn