

Monks Cowl

Maloti-Drakensberg Park
World Heritage Site



WALKS & HIKES GUIDE



Conservation, Partnerships & Ecotourism

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INTRODUCTION

This brochure has been designed to ensure that your experience of the day walks at Monks Cowl is enjoyable and safe. There are seven recognised day walks and these vary in terms of both difficulty and length. Ensure that you choose a walk that:

- suits the amount of time (daylight hours);
- that you are fit enough to complete the walk.

RECOMMENDED BASIC EQUIPMENT

The equipment listed below could save your life, take these along on your day walk:

- warm waterproof jacket
- water bottle
- torch
- basic first aid kit
- food for at least one night
- comfortable hiking boots
- walking stick
- cell phone - turned off (it could help save valuable time in an emergency situation).

MOUNTAIN RESCUE REGISTER

The Mountain Rescue Register must to be completed before you begin. This helps us to find out where you are in an emergency situation. Make sure you complete the form in full and sign out again when you return. Any mountain rescue, whether an accident or as a result of your failure to follow the necessary procedures, could be at your cost.

IMPORTANT INFORMATION

- The weather in the Drakensberg can change within minutes. Do not take any chances!
- For information or assistance on your hike, please ask Ezemvelo KZN Wildlife staff.
- All emergency situations must be reported to the Ezemvelo KZN Wildlife staff first. Do not attempt to arrange anything yourself.
- The Ezemvelo KZN Wildlife emergency fund will cover the cost of any rescue, provided the visitor has paid the entrance fee and that the situation was not as a result of negligent behaviour.

EMERGENCY CONTACT NUMBER

036 - 468 1103 / 083 608 3742 / 083 665 5233

DAY WALKS

1. THE SPHINX (1 700 m)

4 km return (± 3 hours) This walk starts to climb into the Little Berg and reaches a prominent rock feature known as the Sphinx. It starts halfway between the entrance gate and the Office (Point 10) and then continues to wind its way up the Little Berg for about 2 km. The path becomes very steep in parts. It is very rocky and care must be taken, especially when going downhill, as it is easy to twist an ankle if you are trying to hurry. The walk initially passes through a short stretch of indigenous forest, and then continues into protea bushveld and then grassland. Water can be found in the forest, and at a waterfall known as the Crystal Falls which is passed along the way. After this waterfall, there is however no more water, so we suggest you fill your water bottle at this point. There is a flat area on top of the Sphinx which is ideal for a picnic lunch or water break and for enjoying the view of the whole valley.

2. BLINDMAN'S CORNER

12 km circular route (± 6 hours) Follow the Sphinx route (See 1). Once you have reached the Sphinx, the path continues up to the right. Follow this path as it winds its way steeply up the rest of the Little Berg and onto the plateau. As you reach the plateau there is a beautiful little stream, known as Breakfast Stream. This provides a marvellous resting site. From here on, there are only slight uphill with the rest of the walk being flat, until the descent begins.

On your left is a hill, known as Verkykerskop. This refers to the spectacular view from this prominent vantage point. Once you've rested, collect some water from the stream, as there is very little, if any water, for the rest of the hike. As you continue along the plateau, look carefully at the grassland. During spring and summer there are countless different species of wild flowers to be found. Please note picking of these flowers is forbidden, and persons found breaking this law will be prosecuted.

Moving along, you'll come across an interesting historical feature on the left of the path. An old furrow is visible that has been colonised by various grasses. This is known as a hoe line which was put in as a tracer line for fire breaks. Tracer lines are put down before a firebreak is burnt as a safety and control measure. Obviously the method of hoeing a trace line has severe environmental effects. Today, they are created by spraying a line of a chemical called Gramoxone which desiccates the grass on the edge of the firebreak. If you are walking in this area during autumn or winter, you will be able to see these lines or firebreaks. If however, you are walking here in spring or early summer, the areas that are much greener than the rest of the unburnt areas. In front of you, you will see a mountain with a path going straight up it. This is known as the Sterkhorn (2 973 m). To the left of this mountain is another mountain with a rocky, flat top. This is known as Cathkin Peak (3 148 m) and as a result, the valley is called the Cathkin Valley. On the left, and behind this mountain, is an incredibly large, and flat mountain. This is called Champagne Castle (3 377 m). Between these two mountains is a third after which this reserve takes its name: Monks Cowl (3 229 m). This is unfortunately not visible from here. You will also see a mountain on the far ridge with a hole in it. This is aptly known as Gatberg or Intunja, meaning "eye of the needle" in Zulu.

About a kilometre from Breakfast Stream, you will see a path on your right. This is the path that you will return along on your way back down. Approximately 500 m ahead is the sign at Blindman's Corner. This is the turning point of the hike.

Blindman's Corner is situated on the contour path that runs almost at a constant level along most of the Maloti Drakensberg Park. It is from this level upwards, that the Drakensberg becomes extremely hazardous with regards to weather changes, and all people venturing past this level must be adequately prepared. You are required to complete the mountain register for hikes beyond Blindman's Corner. This is a good place to have lunch and to enjoy the view and majesty of the mountains. Water may be found in the rainy season in some of the little tributaries coming down from the mountains. When sufficiently rested, retrace your steps to the path discussed earlier. As you will be descending, the path will be on your left, which is signposted as Keartland's Pass. You will soon reach a series of zig-zags as the path passes through the band of sandstone forming what is known as the Little Berg. This is the area of the hike where a walking stick is very useful as it can be used to take some pressure off the knees from the jolting of continually stepping downwards.

At the base of the zig-zags, the path levels out, and you are able to take a leisurely walk along the base of the sandstone layer. You will notice many caves above the path, to your right. These are caused due to weak areas of the rock having being hollowed out by wind and water. Prevailing winds are caught in a depression in the rock face, and begin to swirl. The swirling wind picks up sand and dust which causes a sandpaper effect on the wall of the cliff, slowly wearing the wall away and forming a cave. Once this has occurred, the water in the soil begins to seep out, and runs down the cave walls. This water then goes into cracks in the rock surface. When very low temperatures are experienced, this water freezes. Water expands when turned to ice, and this pressure within the rocks causes the rocks to crack even more. When temperatures once again rise, the cracks are larger and more water is able to penetrate. This process is repeated again and again, eventually causing a layer of rock to fall off. This type of erosion causes many "sheets" of rock, resembling layers of an onion skin, to fall off the cave wall, thus enlarging the cave. This form of rock erosion is known as onion skin erosion, or exfoliation. At this point, a large section of cliff that has broken off the cliff face recently, can be seen as an example of natural erosion processes.

After one more steep drop you will find yourself at a T-junction in the path. Take the right hand path and you will descend down another slope, to another T-junction. Again take the right hand path and you will find yourself walking through Protea veld again. You will be able to replenish your water supplies here from one of the streams that you cross. The walk now meanders along the plateau passing houses to your right. These houses are on private property, so please do not enter. Along the path on the left, you will pass a weir and then carry on along the path for a short way and you will come to a road. Turn left and then follow this road back to the offices and gate.

3. HLATIKHULU NEK (2100m)

16km (± 8 hours) Take the Blindman's Corner route, (See 2), via Crystal Falls, the Sphinx and Breakfast Stream. At Blindman's Corner, you will notice that the path goes along the base of the escarpment. This path is known as the contour path and has been discussed in the previous walk. Take the right fork (right hand side when facing the mountains) and you will find that it is fairly easy-going as it is relatively flat. The path winds in and out of little streamlets as it passes on the contour along the base of majestic peaks and crevices.



While walking along this contour keep a lookout for **Klipspringer (*Oreotragus oreotragus*)** to your left on the sheer cliffs of the high peaks. A rarity in Africa, these nimble antelope have adapted to exist in areas that are almost inaccessible to most other animals. Their name is the Afrikaans word for “rock jumpers”. They are lone inhabitants of the cliffs and peaks of the Berg and share their home with Vultures and Eagles. They have specially adapted hooves that assist them in traversing very steep and rocky areas without falling. If they do fall though they do not get too hurt as their coarse coats offer excellent shock resistance. To your right in the distance is a ridge that lies in an east/west orientation. This ridge is known as the Steilberg. It is dotted with many large forests on its southern side. This is due to this part of the ridge being colder and wetter than north facing slopes and therefore more protected from fire. The absence of fire in the berg quite often leads to the development of forests.



Where this ridge joins with the contour path, is the area known as the Hlatikhulu Nek. Once you have rounded the corner, a magnificent view of the Mhlwazi River valley appears before you. It is here that a well-deserved rest can be had, while you take some time to enjoy the view. Ahead is a path leading up the ridge, from the contour path. **DO NOT follow this path.** Many day walkers trying this route have been caught by nightfall since there is no direct way of return to the reserve gate via that path, and they have become totally lost. Once fully rested and ready to continue, the path to Blindman’s Corner must be retraced and then the directions described for the Blindman’s Corner - circular route can be followed back down to the gate. **Please remember to complete the Mountain Register for this walk.**

4. THE STERKHORN (2973m)

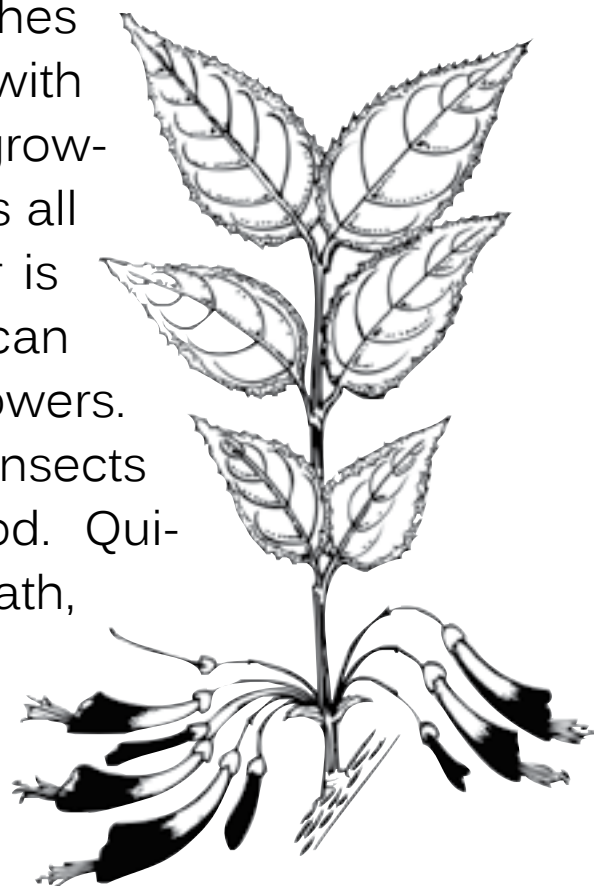
15 km return route (± 10 hours) This is a very grueling and exhausting hike, not to be attempted by unfit people or inexperienced hikers. People with a fear of heights should also be wary of attempting this hike, due to the steep ascents. A group of no less than three people is required, due to the high chance of injuries.

This hike must also only be attempted during fair weather conditions (consult the Officer-in-Charge, Ezemvelo KZN Wildlife staff or reception as regards to local weather conditions and the conditions of the path). **Please complete the Overnight Hiking Register for this hike.** A torch is essential. We also recommend that someone who has done this hike previously accompanies you. Community Guides, available at the gate, are highly recommended for this hike, guides can be booked at the Office.

5. THE STERKSPRUIT FALLS

2,5 km circular route (± 1 hour) This is an easy short walk to an outlook platform on the top of the Sterkspruit Falls. This overlooks the falls with crystal clear pools at the base of them. From the platform, a gorge with dense indigenous forest can be seen consisting predominantly of Yellowwood trees and other associated species. To reach the falls, follow the gravel road, turning to your right just after you have entered the gate, leading to the campsite. Walk along this road for about 50 m and you will see the Sterkspruit Falls signboard to the left (Point 1).

Follow this path as it meanders through an indigenous forest of Ou Hout (*Leucosidea sericea*) and **Tree Fuschia** (*Halleria lucida*). During late winter and early spring, these bushes are incredibly beautiful with reddish orange flowers growing on stems and leaf axils all over the tree. The nectar is so prevalent that it often can be seen dripping from flowers. These trees are alive with insects and birds during this period. Quietly sit down next to the path, as birds can be seen drinking the nectar and catching the numerous insects all around you.



Once you have left the forest you will see a large stone sign marked Sterkspruit Falls/Pools (Point 2). Take the right hand path and you will find yourself walking along the reserve fence. On your left you will see a natural pan or tarn. These are found all over the Berg, often at very high altitudes. They are a natural feature and are formed by the land having a natural depression. When it rains, water drains towards this depression, filling it with water. Dust and silt often get trapped by the water sealing the ground and making it less permeable, and therefore increasing its water-holding capability. This tarn has begun to be colonised by plants, turning it into a marsh. It must be noted that no attempt must be made to drink water in tarns, as it can carry many types of bacteria and water-borne diseases. Wetland birds can be seen here occasionally.

The path continues along the fence, dropping down towards the river. As you approach the river, the viewing platform can be seen on the right. Please stay on the path, and don't try to go through the platform to get closer. The slope here is relatively steep and consists of clay soil, making it extremely slippery and dangerous after it has rained. After enjoying the view, follow the trail back to where the path that you used on the way to the falls comes down. Instead of going up the hill, rather go along the path running beside the river.

As you walk along the river path, there are many official paths, identified by erosion logs and stones being placed at right angles along the path, that enable you to go down to the Sterkspruit River. These allow you to go to certain pools and cool your hot feet off in cool fresh water. About 300 m along the path there is a stone sign marked Pools/Office. Take this left turn. The path climbs out of the river valley and joins the path from the campsite just after it has exited the forest. Join up with this path and follow it through the forest back to the campsite.

6. HLATHIKULU FOREST

7,5 km circular route (± 5 hours) If you are a bird enthusiast, this trail is a definite must. It alternates through grassland, riverine scrub and three natural forests. There is thus a wide variety of bird species to be found on this route. Take the walk to the Sterkspruit Falls (See 5). Go 100 m past the path back to the car park, where you will see a sign indicating where the Hlatikhulu Forest walk crosses the river. Have a drink of water here, especially if it is a hot day, as there will be quite a way to go before you get another chance. The path then zig-zags its way steeply up and away from the river, towards the sandstone cliffs.

The trail at this stage passes through grassland. Keep an eye out for fleeing quail and **francolin**. They normally try to hide in the grass but as you get closer, they break cover and



frantically fly for a short distance, then glide for a short distance, before landing again in the grass nearby. Eventually the path reaches the top of a hill at a junction (Point 15). Follow the path to the left marked "Hlatikhulu Forest". The path starts to level off almost immediately and follows the contour at the base of the sandstone layer.

The first forest is not far away, and will soon come into sight. On entering the forest, you will immediately be struck by the huge trees (Hlatikhulu - means tall trees in Zulu). These are mostly Yellowwood (*Podocarpus latifolius*) trees. They have a beautiful wood, and many of the old houses in South Africa have floor boards and ceilings made of this wood. It is also used extensively for furniture making.

As soon as you enter the forest, the drop in temperature can immediately be felt. This enables epiphytic orchids, mosses and fungi to thrive. While walking, take time to look up as well as near the base of the trees and you will notice many interesting fungi and plants.

Keep an eye open for Bush Blackcaps (Roberts - 565) and Swee Waxbills (Roberts - 850) which are both special birds to see. Listen for the melodic calls of the Chorister Robin-Chat (Roberts - 598) and look out for its beautiful orange chest. Soon you will come to a bubbling stream, winding its way through the forest. Here you can get a quick drink of water and if you wish, a rest. Just further on however, there is a delightful spot, where moss-covered rocks provide a perfect lunch break. There is also an ice cold stream, so water is readily available. If you sit and listen for a while, you will be surprised at the number of bird calls and other interesting sounds that can be heard.

The path continues along the contour and then starts gently dropping back towards the Sterkspruit River. It begins to get a little steeper and then levels as you enter the forest, on the river margin. When you reach the river, look left and to the opposite bank. You will see the path around 15 m downstream on the opposite side. You can cross here and pick up this path to leave the river valley. Be careful not to go up the baboon path which is almost opposite to where you arrive at the river. Keep looking on the opposite bank, and you will see the well defined path gradually leading away from the river. It has a bar across it to control the flow of water and to prevent the path eroding.

After 15m, the path reaches a T-junction (Point 6). Going right here will take you to the Gorge and Nandi's Falls (Point 7). Turn left here and follow the path until another T-junction (Point 5) is reached. At this point turn right. You will find that you are climbing again, but not for long. Soon the trail starts to level out again. Slowly the vegetation changes into Protea bushveld. Keep an eye out for the brilliant green Malachite Sunbird (Roberts - 775) which can often be seen darting between the Protea bushes.

The trail crosses some rustic wooden bridges, and then after one last uphill, the path levels off on the plateau above the office. Continue from here over the small two track road and down to the main entry road (Point 9). At this point turn right and go to the gate and parking area.

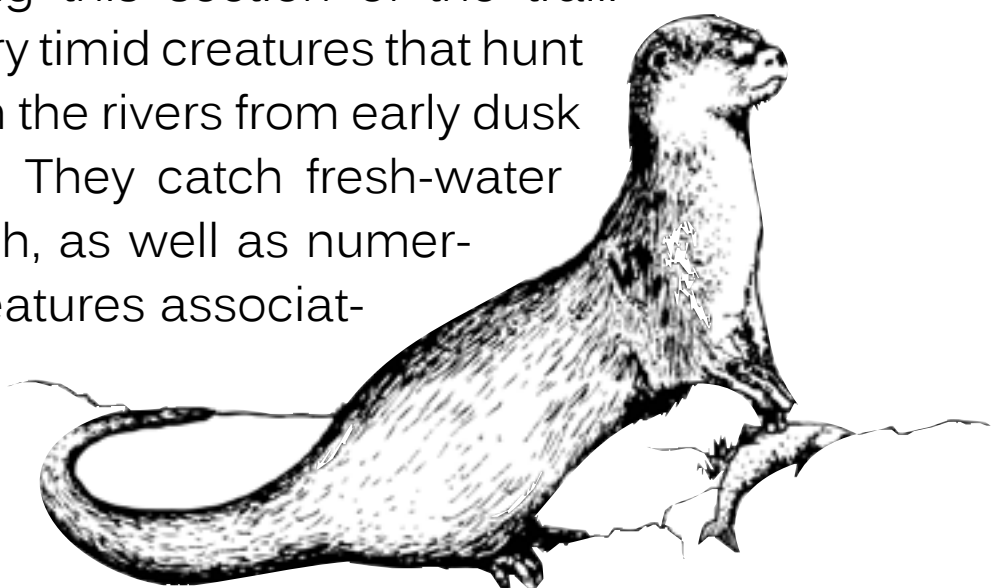
7. THE GORGE - NANDI'S FALLS

7 km (± 5 hours) This is a very pleasant walk. For the most part, it is relatively level. It leads to a pool at the base of a secluded waterfall, known as Nandi's Falls. It also follows the Sterkspruit River for a while, so many bird species are encountered. On a hot day, an added benefit is the fact that there are many paths branching off the main path. These go to pools along the way, where people can relax and cool down. To use this trail, take route number five, mentioned

above, to the Sterkspruit Falls. After the falls, proceed upstream, on the path marked Gorge / Nandi's Falls. After a short way, you will see the turn-off to the Hlatikhulu Forest / Makhulumane Rock (Point 4). Do not take this path. Keep to the left at this point and continue along the left hand side of the river. The path will slowly wind its way up, along the river.

Keep a lookout for signs of **Cape Clawless Otter** while walking along this section of the trail.

These are very timid creatures that hunt beside and in the rivers from early dusk until dawn. They catch fresh-water crabs and fish, as well as numerous other creatures associated with this river system. Their presence is often only giv-

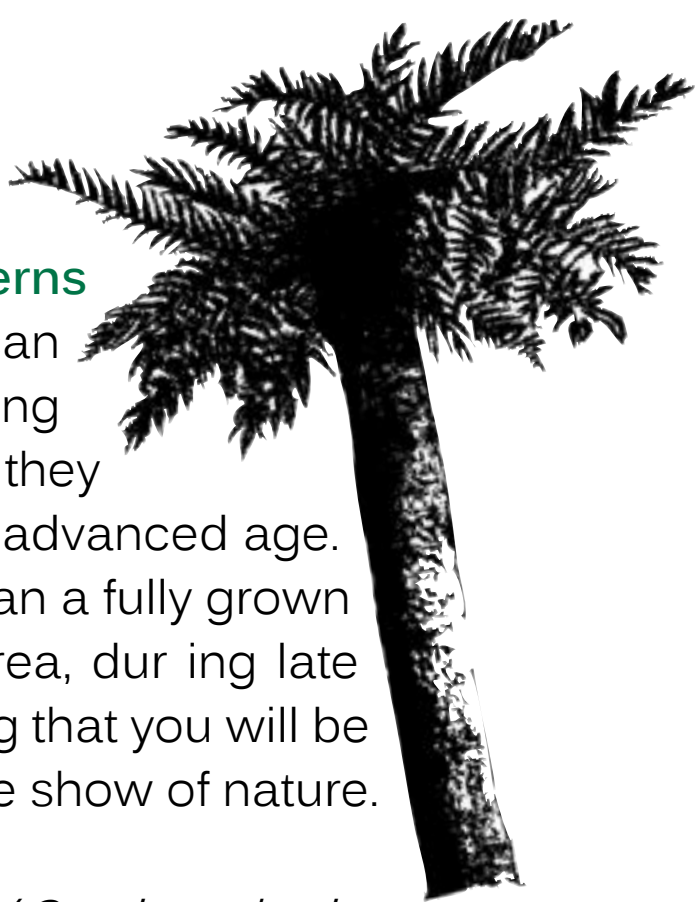


en away by their dung which is identified by the presence of lots of pieces of crushed crab in them.

About 900 m from the turn-off to the Hlatikhulu Forest, a path turns off down to the Pools (marked by a sign). This section of the river flows through a series of pools and makes an ideal picnic and rest spot. If it is hot, enjoy one of the cool pools, then dry yourself while relaxing on one of the large flat rocks found here. Return to the main path and continue along to your right, up the river. The path now begins to climb up and away from the river. This gives you a good view of the gorge.

Keep a lookout on the opposite bank.

Very large **Tree Ferns (*Cyathea dregei*)** can be seen growing along streams flowing into they grow to an extremely advanced age. Old plants are taller than a fully grown person. It is in this area, during late winter and early spring that you will be treated to an incredible show of nature.



The Natal Bottle Brush (*Greyia sutherlandii*) trees are in full bloom. They often flower before the leaves have fully returned, therefore increasing their visibility. Many birds and insect species can be seen amongst these trees.

The next sign and path junction is just up ahead (Point 5). Continue along the river, as this is where you will turn up on the way back. Further along the trail, you will see a junction (Point 6) in the path. Here, you must keep left and continue along the river. The path to the right returns from the Hlatikhulu Forest walk.

The vegetation now starts to change into riverine forest as you begin to wind down towards the river. After about 350 m, you will find yourself in the river bed. Here the path becomes a bit indistinct. Look carefully on the left bank (while looking upstream) and you will see the path gently meandering underneath the canopy of the riverine forest (Point 7). The path then moves away from the river and heads up a small tributary to the impressive 10 m high Nandi's Falls. This is an ideal spot to relax.

You will notice graffiti on the rock face in front of you. Please note that scratching and writing on any rock face is a criminal offence. Nandi's Falls is as far as you can go up the gorge. Here, you must turn back and retrace your steps to the sign mentioned above (Point 5). On reaching this sign, take the right hand fork, and proceed uphill along the zig-zags. There is only a short, steep section of path and before long this levels out and begins to run along the contour.

The vegetation also opens up and changes into grassland and Protea scrub. Proteas are fire resistant while many of the other plants and bushes are not. If you look carefully at them, you will see their specially adapted bark, which is very corky and thus is able to insulate the growing parts of the plants from the heat of the fire, protecting them, and enabling them to rejuvenate quickly. They are thus able to gain an advantage over other plants. As you walk through the proteas, you will come across wooden bridges crossing streamlets which flow into the Sterkspruit River. Take care if it has been raining or if it is wet as the wooden poles become very slippery.

All that is left now is to walk up the next ridge. Move carefully down the next set of zig-zags going down off this ridge. The ground here consists of a very fine clay, and after rain becomes very slippery. Here a walking stick will come in handy as it provides support and greatly decreases your chances of slipping. After one last uphill, the path levels off on the plateau above the office. Continue from here over the small two track road and down to the main entry road (Point 9). At this point turn right and go to the gate and parking area.

INFORMATION & HINTS FOR HIKING

- Monks Cowl is visited by many thousands of hikers every year. Because of this, the paths are very compacted, and in great danger of erosion. For this reason, poles and rocks have been placed across the paths in an attempt to stop water from running along the path and causing erosion.
- On hot days, however, snakes such as **Puff Adder** and Berg Adder are occasionally found lying next to these poles, in an attempt to warm themselves. It is therefore suggested that care is taken when walking, especially uphill, as this is when the chance of not seeing them is more likely. If a snake is seen, just keep still, as snakes are attracted to movement. If the snake does not move away, as is normally the case, then slowly move backwards, whilst taking care not to make any sudden movements. Due to the problems with erosion, please keep to the footpaths. Shortcuts serve only to destroy the delicate ecosystems found in this area.
- Take your cellphone along. In an emergency, phone and notify Ezemvelo KZN Wildlife at Monks Cowl. **It must be stressed that this must only be done in an emergency**, since rescue operations cost a lot of money.

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- Wear good hiking boots. Boots with an ankle support greatly reduce the chance of a twisted ankle. A walking stick is of great advantage, especially when walking downhill. Walking sticks can also assist you descending from the mountain, should you have a twisted or sprained ankle.
- Ezemvelo KZN Wildlife suggests that hiking groups must consist of no less than three people. This can help in an emergency situation where one person can stay with the injured party whilst another can go and find help.
- The principles of **LEAVE NO TRACE** must be adhered to at all times whilst hiking in the berg. This is to ensure that the pristine character of the berg is protected for future generations.
- While walking, take time to stop and listen. You will be surprised at the solitude and peace of the Berg. There are also many species of animals and birds to be seen and heard. In spring many wild flowers bloom, adding beauty to the landscape.

- Anton's Cave and Cat Cave are closed to the public, however people wanting to visit these caves may do so only with a Community Guide. Community Guides operate in the Monks Cowl area and are accredited by Amafa and the Ezemvelo KZN Wildlife. Rock art sites may only be visited with a Community Guide. Please enquire at the entrance gate or office if you require the assistance of a Community Guide you can phone the camp on 036 - 468 1103, or preferably phone them directly on 065 915 5225 for a booking.
- A campsite with hot and cold water ablutions may be booked through the Central Reservations at Queen Elizabeth Park on 033 845 1000 or drop us a line at the address below.
- Overnight hiking does not require a booking. However, all caves must be booked in advance through the Monks Cowl Office. Caves that may be booked are: Zulu, Nkosazana, Cowl and Stable Cave.
- Entrance to the Park via the Drakensberg Sun Hotel and Champagne Castle Hotel trails are permitted provided entrance fees are paid beforehand. Entrance tickets are available from the hotel reception. **Remember it is compulsory to complete the MOUNTAIN RESCUE REGISTERS located at these points and record your return by signing in.**
- When walking/hiking in wilderness areas either on day hikes or overnight hikes, it is compulsory to complete the Mountain Hiking Register situated at the main entrance gate. This helps us to find out where you are in an emergency situation. Most of the rescues performed at Monks Cowl are for day visitors, who often underestimate the time it will take for them to finish a trail. Make sure you complete the form in full and sign out again when you return. Any mountain rescue, whether an accident or as a result of your failure to follow the necessary procedures, could be at your cost.
- If any clarification is needed on any matters relating to the reserve, please do not hesitate to ask the Ezemvelo KZN Wildlife staff for assistance.
- If you wish to make suggestions or report unusual sightings please write to: Conservation Manager, Monks Cowl, Private Bag X2, Winterton, 3340. Tel 036 - 468 1103 / 083 608 3742 / 083 665 5233

OTHER RULES AND REGULATIONS

- **DRONES** are strictly prohibited in the Park. You may not fly drones.
- **DO NOT LITTER.** Please discard all waste into the bins provided. There are no bins in the wilderness area. The last refuse collection areas are at the trail heads near the campsite.
- **AS FAR AS POSSIBLE** try to do all ablutions before you depart on your walk.
- **DO NOT MAKE ANY FIRES.** Fires anywhere except in designated areas (main camp site) are strictly prohibited. Always be aware of the chance of runaway veld fires during the dry winter months (April - September). If a fire is threatening your hiking party take evasive action immediately. NEVER approach too close to any veld fires.
- **ALWAYS** keep an eye on the weather. It can change rapidly. Make sure you are adequately protected against cold and heat. Always carry a light weight rain jacket with on any walks.

- **NO PETS** are allowed to enter the park, except for registered guide dogs that are in service of a visually impaired visitor.
- **DO NOT FEED ANY ANIMALS.** This is cruel as it means that animals lose their fear of man and start to harass visitors. They are then destroyed. Baboons and monkeys may become aggressive if fed by humans.
- **ALWAYS RESPECT THE RIGHTS OF OTHERS.** Please refrain from making a noise anywhere in the wilderness area as this will impact negatively on the visitor experience.
- **REMEMBER, LEAVE NO TRACE!** This is a World Heritage Site and is an important part of South Africa's natural heritage. Please respect the area and do nothing that will have a long term negative impact on the fauna and flora of this special place.
- **BE AWARE.** Immigrants from Lesotho may occasionally be encountered in the remote parts of the park. These people mean no harm and are merely traversing through the park to South Africa, albeit illegally.

INDEMNITY

The Kwazulu-Natal Nature Conservation Board trading as Ezemvelo KZN Wildlife accepts no responsibility for any death, illness or injury sustained or suffered by any person, or loss of or damage to any property, occurring within or arising from a visit or visits to parks, reserves or resorts under their management or control howsoever caused and whether allegedly due to the negligence of the Kwazulu-Natal Nature Conservation Board/Ezemvelo KZN Wildlife or any of their employees or agents, or arising from the use of any facilities supplied or made available.

