

SOUTH AFRICA
The Amatola mountains
December 2008
By Karen Hauptfleisch

The brochure I received about the Amatola hiking trail suggested an early start. We were, however staying in one of the cottages at Starways Pottery in Hogsback and needless to say we could not help but get involved in the preparations for the opening of the Rose Theatre on the premises.

After Anton van der Merwe, the owner and master potter of Starways, showed me how to operate the chainsaw there was no stopping me and Sam, an artist from Scotland and within hours we had built the bar for the theatre. Phillip and Anton finalized the roof while the band consisting of Elliot and Pierce had us all in a cheerful mood after their practice session. Pretty soon it was time to work on my culinary skills, or should I rather say my decorative skills since 40 pizzas had to be made and what better oven to bake them in than the pottery oven! The opening went exceptionally well and the music had everyone in a relaxed mood.

Day 1: Marden Dam to Gwili Gwili. (12 km - 7 hours)

Unfortunately, waking up at 5 am the next morning left me less chirpy than usual. Vale, Anton's daughter, was kind enough to take me and Phil to Marden Dam where we started our first day hike. We decided on taking the short cut after we were informed of 1000 bee stings received the previous week by two hikers who were forced to abandon their hike. Hiking through the Pirie forest gave new meaning to sweating and made me feel good about my resolution (old year?) to get fit! What a great way to start! We could hear birds singing all the time but it was only the Knysna Louries that showed themselves.

Vermiculture was also given a new meaning when we learned that giant earthworms reaching up to 6m were responsible for the ever present heaps on the paths. Gwili Gwili hut was a pleasant surprise and since I was not expecting hot water, I was not too disappointed when we discovered that there was none. It started raining 15 minutes after we arrived and the rain only stopped an hour before we had to leave the next morning.

Day 2: Gwili Gwili to Dontsa (18 km - 8 hours).

The hike was predominantly through the moist indigenous forests and we once again could hear birds chirping all the way. We took the lower route at the Dontsa forest station which left us with some climbing near the end. Phillip couldn't resist swimming in one of the lovely pools and refused to remove the pair of RayBan sunglasses he had picked up on the path. At the hut after another cold shower it started to rain and we were forced to move to another room since the roof started leaking rather badly.

Day 3: Dontsa to Cata (17 km - 10 hours)

We decided to stick to indigenous forests and shorter routes and after reaching the Eseka Stream we opted for the upper route. I was getting quite confident in my navigation skills and showed Phillip exactly where we were. After explaining to him that we should just follow the jeep track for another 4 km, I set off, leaving him to enjoy his snooze next to the path. I was an inspired woman! It wasn't long before I heard Phillip shouting at me – apparently I had taken the wrong route. My explanation for not finding any footprint markers along the way was that according to my reading of the map the route was so obvious and they weren't needed! A long 6 km followed and we reached the lovely hut without having to use headlamps. According to the journal left at the hut, we were not the only hikers getting lost.

Sunrise on Africa's Peaks - South Africa

Day 4: Cata to Mnyameni (13.5 km - 8 hours)

According to the brochure, one of the finest days hiking you are ever likely to experience is day 4 of the Amatola Trail. The trail was not laid out to get you simply from A to B, but rather to take you past the most spectacular and scenic spots you could wish to see. Unfortunately I did not find this amusing as the trail kept on cutting back to the extent that we seemed to almost be returning to our starting point. Picking up all the litter that the previous hikers had left around the hut left me in an even sulkier mood. Luckily we were still not expecting hot water.

Day 5: Mnyameni to Zingcuka (18.2 km - 10 hours)

The day started with a stiff climb up through another enchanting forest. I found this the best day and we could see the surrounding mountains most of the way. Phillip had several dips in and naps alongside the many rock pools.

Day 6: Zingcuka to Tyumie River (15 km - 7 hours)

Due to heavy mist and after getting lost in the forest we were forced to take the forestry road to Hogsback. I found walking in the mist special with huge trees along the road and next to no visibility creating a wondrous atmosphere.

Two days later we were back at Zingcuka hut and completed the last leg of the hike in perfect weather. This time we were accompanied by Vale, Anton's daughter. The whole mountain was covered in flowers and all along the route we were presented with fantastic views and we finally got to see a lot of birds.

Except for the zig-zaging from Cata to Mnyameni on day 4 and the huts not being maintained properly, I can definitely recommend this hike. The fact that the huts couldn't lock was something to get used to.