

**SOUTH AFRICA**  
**Drakensberg – Ship's Prow**  
**September 2008**  
**By Karen Hauptfleisch**

The invitation to join Chris Sommers on his hike up Ship's Prow (Northern Fork) and down Gray's pass couldn't have come at a better time. Arranging 15 SOAPkidz events and involving 3538 people in environmental projects during the past 9 months had left me depleted of any spare energy.

The group would consist of

- Chris Sommers – very fit, the leader and Drakensberg fundi who has saved my life on several occasions in the Berg. (I suppose that he put my life in jeopardy to start with does not really count)
- Phillip van der Merwe, whose fear of heights was displaced by a fear of death on the previous trip to the Drakensberg, still very unfit, especially since he was also involved with the arranging of the 15 events and has yet again decided to give up smoking on the hike (Help!)
- Kim Lesley– Phillip's school friend, extremely fit but a novice to the group and the great Dragon.
- Warren – Energetic and motivated for his fourth hike in the Berg. Good company, especially for himself, as he has the habit of talking to himself whilst hiking. Well prepared this time with his newly acquired Gortex bivvy bag after being caught in a wind and snow storm during our previous encounter with the Berg.
- Myself – very unfit and desperate to escape the noise pollution and recharge my batteries in the beautiful Berg.

**Day 1:** We left Pretoria at 5 am and arrived at Monk's Cowl KZN Wildlife office around 11 am. The 12 km hike was unadventurous and we were all relieved to pitch our tents in day light – it has been a long day and an even longer year.

**Day 2:** Five eager hikers were up by 4 am and ready to start the hike by 6 am. Phillip was feeling strong and the first 4 km to the start of Ship's Prow Pass was done on a high note. We encountered our first Chi Chi bush at the bottom of the pass. The struggle with the Chi Chi bushes was interrupted by some serious boulder hopping, followed by gun shots and shouting from persons unknown on the southern fork of Ship's Prow.

Later back at Monk's Cowl KZN Wildlife office we were told that rustlers were using the pass and that there were two dead cows there. Wondering how cows could possibly get up such a difficult pass, we were informed that the rustlers spread cow dung ahead of the animals and the cows happily followed thinking many cows had gone before.



Bundu Bashing through chi chi bush

The last 1.5 km to the top was filled with some horrific moments when loose rocks came crashing down. Luckily no one was injured and by the time we reached the summit, we were

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just in time to glance at the sunset. A mere twelve hours to get up the pass. Kim who was so carried away admiring the sunset, delayed dressing warmly and got a fright when he entered the first stages of hypothermia.



Kim on top of Ship's prow pass

The wind was howling and five very tired and very quiet hikers hiked the last 2 km in the dark to iNkosazana cave, sharing 3 headlamps and the 1 remaining sense of humour. After 14 hours of hiking, no one was up to eating, Phillip and Kim climbed straight into their sleeping bags and appeared to be in shock. I had to force feed them and very soon everyone was asleep. Or almost everyone as I was busy trying to figure out the earplugs I had brought as protection against Phil's snoring.

**Day 3:** Kim and Chris went exploring for the day while Warren and myself hiked to Champagne castle. Feeling a bit weak after the previous day's hike, we were not brave enough to face the howling wind and went back to join Phillip who was lying on three mattresses, still snoring.

Warren discovered that we had lost the tent and luckily recovered it upon backtracking. I spend some time cutting grass for the cave and by 3 o'clock, everyone was back and we decided to hike to Vulture Retreat to look at the magnificent view and watch the sunset.



Phil, myself and Chris on top of Grey's pass



The magnificent view on top of Grey's pass

**Day 4:** Walking to the top of Gray's pass to watch the sunrise we noticed plenty of litter along the river. Two hours were spent picking up the plastics left by the locals and compressing it for transport down Gray's pass. By 10h00 we started our descent down Gray's pass. The going was slow. We stopped regularly to pick up litter and when we finally pitched our tents at the camping spot close the Gatberg, we had collected 3 bags of litter, 99% bread plastic bags.

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**Day 5:** Any ideas about going up Gatberg were put aside. We were on a mission to clean the campsites on our way back. Picking up all the toilet paper left by, I truly want to believe ignorant women, got me into a raging state. Finding empty gas canisters put me over the edge. Luckily Phil was there to remind me that by educating the children (SOAPkidz), we were influencing the next generation.

Almost at the end we came across some day hikers. My instinct was to protect the mountain against further litter and so I said "Enjoy your hike, we have just cleaned the mountain for you". The two girls smiled and politely said, "Thank you." Unfortunately the wise ass with them replied, "Don't worry, I will dirty it for you once more". Fortunately for him the rest of our group was strong enough to hold me back.



Trying to fit all the litter into the bags we took along



Down Grey's pass

The Chief in Charge of the Wilderness area was contacted and informed about the litter and guns shots whereupon he provided us with some very positive feedback on the progress they had recently made with the smugglers and rustlers.



Some of the litter we brought down the mountain

We were on the road back to Pretoria by 13h00.

My personal feelings:

- I consider mountains holy.
- It is a privilege to be on a mountain and not a right.
- I don't have any idea how we can stop the littering by the locals but I do know that I cannot keep quiet about the litter left by hikers. (especially women).
- The following rule should apply to everyone going to a mountain or wilderness area – Leave the place in a better condition than you found it.
- Nature conservation is there to preserve what should be precious to us all and visitors should therefore be placed under greater scrutiny. They should be required to detail in a register all food and canisters they have and upon return be required to show the empty packets, canisters etc. I know that this is difficult to police but at least the message is clear, "What you take up must be brought back".
- All visitors must adhere to and sign a Code of Conduct for mountains or wilderness areas. The Code of Conduct must clearly state all the Do's and Don'ts relating to ablutions, water usage, litter, wildlife, plants, fires, rock art etc.
- This Code of Conduct must be promulgated and promoted nation wide.