

# uKhahlamba Drakensberg Park

## New prospects in South Africa's Drakensberg Mountains

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South Africa's political isolation from the international community during the 'apartheid era' meant that it did not become a signatory to the World Heritage Convention until as recently as 1997. But it has moved fast to catch up, and is now the proud custodian of no fewer than eight World Heritage sites – three natural, four cultural and one mixed.

The uKhahlamba / Drakensberg Park became a World Heritage site in 2000 and is one of only two sites in Africa designated under both natural and cultural criteria, the other being the Cliff of Bandiagara (Land of the Dogons), in Mali. The park protects much of the steep escarpment of southern Africa's most dramatic mountain range, and

the wealth of San rock art painted on the walls of about 600 natural sandstone caves along its length. Its highest reaches are lands of jagged peaks and massive walls of basaltic rock, while lower down a thick layer of golden sandstone creates overhanging cliffs, piercing the grassy slopes and leaving massive fallen boulders in the valleys below. It is a hikers' paradise, in which the crisp mountain air, dramatic vistas and solitude are sure to set the spirit free. And its status as a World Heritage site is bringing enormous benefits to the people of South Africa, economically, socially and politically.

The park covers an area of 2,428 km<sup>2</sup> along South Africa's international border with the 'mountain kingdom' of Lesotho. Its western boundary – at about 3,000 m

– marks the watershed between the great river basins of South Africa. From here, the land drops steeply through a complex of deeply incised valleys to the park's eastern boundary about 20 km away and 1,500 m below. The vegetation varies with altitude and aspect, with alpine-tundra communities of heath-like plants near the summits; extensive fire-maintained grasslands on spurs and plateaux at mid-altitudes, and a variety of other plant communities including montane forests and Protea woodlands lower down. The long harsh winter – during which the summits are often covered in snow – creates conditions that are not especially favourable to larger mammals, but herds of eland and several other species of antelope inhabit the lower altitudes.



The spectacular natural beauty of uKhahlamba / Drakensberg Park attracts an increasing number of tourists. The site was inscribed on the World Heritage List in 2000

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## Stone Age

There is evidence of human presence in the area from the early and middle Stone Ages, but the San hunter-gathering communities are only known to have lived here for the past 8,000 years. It was the San people who created the wealth of rock art still seen throughout the park, mostly during a period of about 4,000 years up until their disappearance early last century. The gradual demise of the San was brought about by the arrival of new immigrants, the first black farmers migrating into the area from the north about 400 years ago, followed by the Zulu-speaking people, British and Dutch in the first half of the nineteenth century.

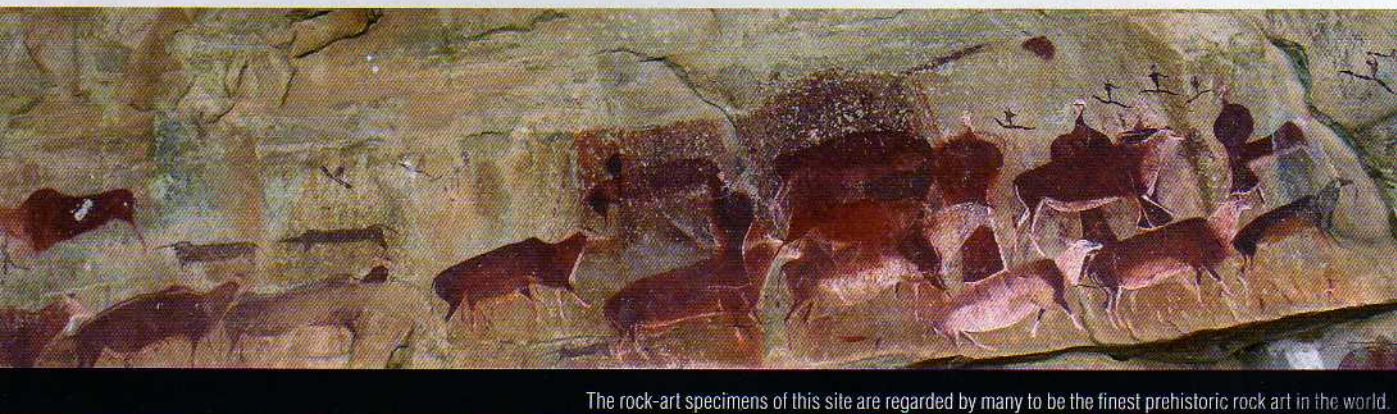
The British colonial government realized that there was a need to protect the forests and water catchment areas of the Drakensberg and maintain the upper slopes as unoccupied state land. Thus, they created a number of protected areas under various statutes over a period of about fifty years from the early 1900s.

The present park represents the consolidation of twelve (mostly contiguous) protected areas, now managed by a single agency, Ezemvelo-KwaZulu Natal Wildlife (EKZN Wildlife). About half the area of the present park was proclaimed as Wilderness Areas in 1973, and the whole park became a Ramsar site in 1996 in recognition of its value as an internationally important wet-

land with its abundance and complexity of high-altitude tarns, springs, bogs, marshes and streams.

## Plants, birds and paintings

The outstanding universal value that qualifies the site for World Heritage status falls under two natural and two cultural criteria. In terms of its biodiversity, the site is especially important for plants and birds. It is the principal protected area in the Drakensberg Alpine Centre, a unique floristic region occurring at altitudes above 1,800 m along the eastern escarpment of southern Africa. Within this floristic region 334 of the 2,520 species of flowering plants occur nowhere else in the world. Similarly



The rock-art specimens of this site are regarded by many to be the finest prehistoric rock art in the world.

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