

# 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.

