The uKhahlamba / Drakensberg Park is situated in the province of KwaZulu-Natal and covers some 243 000 ha. This immense area protects some of the most magnificent natural scenery in South Africa and is home to many endemic and endangered animal, bird and plant species. However, added significance is lent by the 600 well-preserved San rock art sites that are found within the park.

By recognising this area as a Mixed World Heritage Site, we celebrate not only the diversity and beauty of the land and its inhabitants, but also the indomitable spirit of the San people who roamed this land and changed the face of it forever.

The formidable uKhahlamba – a Zulu word meaning “Barrier of Spears”, also called the “Drakensberg” (Afrikaans for “Dragon Mountains”) - is a rugged mountainous region where visitors may enjoy the visions of unsurpassed beauty, glimpses of the diverse population of indigenous animals and birds and the historical record of the lifestyle of the ancient San hunter/gatherers.

In the Drakensberg, ancient culture and nature combine to defy time and create a unique experience. Surrounded by mountains and four-footed inhabitants, it is easy to feel a kinship with the San, whose eyes must have lingered over much the same landscape so many years ago.

THE AREA

The vast area proclaimed as the uKhahlamba / Drakensberg Park incorporates six reserves, namely, Giant’s Castle Game Reserve, Kamberg Nature Reserve, Loteni Nature Reserve, Royal Natal National Park, Rugged Glen Nature Reserve and Vergelegen Nature Reserve. The 243 000 ha park also encompasses six State Forests, namely, Cathedral Peak, Cobham, Garden Castle, Highmoor, Mkhomazi and Monk’s Cowl.
One of the landmarks of Giant’s Castle Game Reserve is the magnificent Giant’s Castle Peak, but the reserve is also home to a rich variety of animals, such as antelope, jackal, baboon and the lammergeier, which is the largest eagle on the continent.

The unspoilt Kamberg Nature Reserve and Mkhomazi Wilderness Area lie at the foot of the Drakensberg Mountains and are home to many different species of animals. The site at Game Pass Shelter in the Kamberg Nature Reserve is one of the most famous rock art sites in the world. The images at this site have helped researchers to decipher much of the mystery of San rock art. Visitors should note that the walk from the nearest camp is steep and difficult and takes approximately an hour and a half. The camp has excellent accommodation and tours to the site are conducted by trained community guides.

The Royal Natal National Park boasts the magnificent Drakensberg peaks of Mont-aux-Sources, the Sentinel and the Amphitheatre. The Park boasts more than a 1 000 different plant species in its spectacular 8 000 ha mountainous terrain. Animals such as wildebeest, reedbuck, duiker, bushbuck and baboon inhabit this reserve and it is also home to 148 different species of birds. These include the black eagle, the black sparrow hawk and the Cape vulture.

The magnificent scenery protected by these reserves can be thoroughly appreciated via hiking trails and many reserves offer accommodation to complement the game- and bird watching opportunities.

THE DRAKENSBERG MOUNTAIN RANGE

The Drakensberg Mountain Range frames the western border of KwaZulu-Natal province. Stretching over some 200 km, it covers more than seven per cent of the area of the province. Some of the peaks tower more than 3 400 m into the sky and three of the largest rivers in the province originate in the depths of the mountains.

The varying altitudes (from 1 280 m to 3 500 m), the differing climates and the different types of soil combine to house a fascinating diversity of plants and as many as 2 153 plant species have been recorded here.
An amazing number of these are endemic to the area. These plants provide shelter and sustenance for some 299 species of birds, creating a birdwatcher’s paradise. This is the place for people who appreciate the simple elegance of winged flight framed against the backdrop of towering mountains.

The best-known cliff-face in the Northern Drakensberg is the Amphitheatre. This cliff-face with its intricate patterns has been carved over millions of years by the waters of rivers flowing into the valleys. Cliffs such as the Sentinel, Devil’s Tooth, the Amphitheatre and Mont-aux-Sources provide challenging climbs for the more courageous among us.

The Tugela River tumbles off the sheer face of the Amphitheatre to form the Tugela Falls, the second highest waterfall in the world (after Angel Falls in Venezuela), with one sheer drop of 614 metres and a combined drop of 948 m.

The Central Berg (Mountain) stretches from the Cathedral Peak region in the north, to the Champagne Castle - Cathkin Peak region in the south. Giant’s Castle in the south-west is one of the most well-known peaks of the Central Berg, which boasts some of the highest mountain peaks in South Africa. The excellent resort hotels and nature reserves has made this area a very popular tourist destination.
The Southern Drakensberg offers the opulence of many water sources, abundant wildlife and lush forest vegetation. This area has six nature reserves covering some 122,000 ha, making it the largest wilderness area in the country.

One of the best ways to enjoy the Drakensberg experience is by exploring one of the many hiking trails. One-day or longer trails are available. The longer trails include nights spent in caves. The views from the slopes and the escarpment are among the most magnificent in South Africa. Well-equipped campsites provide a comfortable base from which to enjoy the breathtakingly beautiful landscape. Avid mountaineers have also always found themselves incapable of ignoring the challenge offered by the slopes and peaks of the Drakensberg.

**ART GALLERY OF THE SAN**

Let us imagine that the San medicine men (shamans) saw the future and realised that the demise of the San and their nomadic way of life was inevitable. Maybe they wanted to ensure that later generations knew of their proud existence and how they lived in harmony with this land.

Fortunately, by decorating nearly every suitable rocky surface they could find with their paintings and carvings, the San made sure we would not forget them. And why should we want to? These intrepid explorers who lived off the land had much to teach us about determination, courage and respect for nature. The simple, yet eloquent drawings of the San tell of their hunting parties and the bravery of these hunters with their bows and arrows, record the early animal population of the region (fortunately, most of these species of animals can still be seen here), but also tell us of the deep spirituality of these people and depict their rituals and ceremonies.

By studying the 600 separate rock art sites where collectively, more than 35,000 individual drawings have been recorded, scientists have obtained important insight regarding the San and their belief system and our society has become the richer for honouring their culture.
Some of the best San rock art sites are to be found at Main Caves, Battle Cave, Didima Gorge and Game Pass Shelter.

The Main Caves complex in the Giant’s Castle Nature Reserve is one of the most densely painted areas in the Drakensberg. Snake Rock is covered in snake-like images with antelope heads. Long Panel is over five metres in length and images of people are superimposed on images of eland. Tourists can stay at the nearest camp, and guided tours for day visitors are also conducted, every hour on the hour.

The Battle Cave in the Giant’s Castle area is a 12 kilometre walk from the Injasutu camp. The cave was named for the rock paintings on its walls. The site contains some 750 paintings, depicting a battle scene between two rival clans, as well as numerous animals and elongated animal-headed figures.

Injasutu camp has comfortable chalets, and guided tours can be undertaken by prior arrangement.

The site at Game Pass Shelter in the Kamberg Nature Reserve is one of the most famous rock art sites in the world. The images at this site have helped researchers to decipher much of the mystery of San rock art. The walk from the nearest camp is steep and difficult and takes approximately an hour and a half. The camp offers accommodation and tours are conducted by trained community guides.
Didima Gorge in the Cathedral Peak Nature Reserve is home to several rock art sites. Junction Shelter is one of the best-known shelters in the area and features a painting that once caused much debate among art writers. At first glance, the painting seems to feature people crossing a hanging bridge, but research has showed that the San never built these types of bridges. After more research, the link between the art and the supernatural world, which characterises San religion, was established.
Although the San deserve their prominent place in history, they were not the only intrepid explorers who braved the high peaks and decided to stay. Because of its many different earlier inhabitants, archaeologists still scour the area to learn more about them.

Archaeological sites dating from the Early, Middle and Late Stone Ages and the Late Iron Age indicates that humans have inhabited the area over the last 1 million years. The earliest traces of human occupations are believed to date back to the Mesolithic period (Middle Stone Age). Neolithic or Late Stone Age Settlers (the ancestors of the San) arrived around 8 000 BP, lived off the land and found safety in the caves and rock shelters.

Iron Age farmers brought their cattle and sheep and are believed to have settled here during the 13th century and by the late 16th century several tribes were practising farming in the area.

Their peaceful existence was disrupted during the 19th century, when the Zulu king Shaka forced many of the tribes in the eastern coastlands to migrate northwards into the Drakensberg.

From 1837 onwards, white settlers, called Voortrekkers, started arriving in the area and taming the land. They were farmers and, to protect their land and animals, they carried out raids on the nomadic San. These raids led to the eventual demise of the San people, who left only their drawings to remind us of their now vanished way of life.

Photographs in this article by kind permission of Art Publishers (Pty) Ltd.