

Dierama dracomontanum

viranatura
tours

DRAKENSBERG 2024

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Day 1 16 January Arrival and to Port Edward

Arriving on different flights into Johannesburg airport we took our connecting flights to Durban. Heavy storms delayed departure and then a missing bag ate up some more time, rush hour traffic a bit more so that in the end we just made the restaurant in time. Luckily the restaurant was very accommodating and we had an excellent first meal together.

Day 2 Umtamvuna

Rain was forecast, and that was unsurprising given the lush vegetation along the coast. There was time to photograph *Gloriosa superba* before we left, first driving a short distance towards the botanically rich Umtamvuna nature reserve. On the way we stopped for some flowering specimens of *Strelitzia nicolai*, a remarkable tropical-looking relative of heliconias and gingers with a large inflorescence of black and white bracts. In the roadside vegetation was *Euphorbia cyanthophora* too. The rain had eased and arriving at Umtamvuna we took photos of a large fruiting cone of *Encephalartos alternsteinii* and then set about exploring the rock outcrops and grasslands. In wet, shorter turf was plentiful *Utricularia livida*, on the rocks was a good spike of *Tritonia disticha* and the photogenic little *Cyperus rupicola*. A much larger cousin of the latter was also here, but at this point the rain unleashed and photography became a challenge. We took a stoic walk in the rain still seeing many things including the pretty pink flowered hemiparasite; *Sopubia simplex*, the yellow trio of *Alectra sessiliflora*, *Thunbergia dregeana* and attractive *Gnidia anthylloides*. The shrubbier *Gnidia* sp. was found on another outcrops where the finely divide pinnate leaves and soft yellow flowers of *Chamaecrista plumosa* draped across the rocks, alongside brighter spikes of succulent leaved *Bulbine latifolia* and a handful of lovely pink *Watsonia confusa*. At this point the rain had become too much and we were all fairly soggy. Retreat was sounded and we returned to the bus where I had to completely change.

A washout along our planned route meant we had to take a slower longer way instead, winding through villages and rolling countryside, getting the odd hint at the dramatic landscape hidden within the clouds. A quick stop for late lunch and then it was on to our accommodation and just in time for another very good meal. Lots of wet clothes we hung up to dry.



Strelitzia nicolai

A big improvement in the weather with blue skies and fine clouds all day as the sun shone just enough to warm us, but the clouds came often enough for good photographic light. First stop was a patch of riverside grassland and marsh where a fine spike of *Gladiolus dalenii* was found and *Hesperantha coccineus* was sprinkled along the riverside. A broad range of interesting plants was found among the grasses (themselves interesting) with good spikes of *Satyrion longicauda*, its stouter cousin *S. sphaerocarpum*, pretty *Monopsis decepiens*, fruiting clumps of *Scadoxus pruinosis*, lilac cups of *Wahlenbergia cuspidatum*, delicate *Commelinia africana* and *Disa versicolor*. Another orchid; *Eulophia distans* was almost in flower. A good start and moving on we stopped for a crowned crane just outside Maclear and then drove for a while until we climbed higher onto an escarpment for our first striking views of the Drakensberg, with a jumble of contorted, weathered rocks jutting out of the tableland. At the pass we stopped for a while, finding another assortment of things from fuzzy *Erica cooperi* to *Dianthus basuticus*, *Senecio discodregeanus* and the bright yellow asclepiad; *Aspidonepsis diploglossa*.

A twin spike of *Gladiolus oppositiflorus* was next up, the flowers beautiful against the blue sky. Then, having already seen some fiery stands of *Kniphofia linearifolia* we stopped for a large sweep where dozens of dazzling malachite sunbirds were attending the flowers. A vivid combination of glossy green plumage and very hot pokers. Time was moving on and an attempt at a quick lunch proved longer than if I had prepared a picnic, but the coffee was good and we finished eating in the vehicle as we drove into a drier rockier landscape, with green pastures punctuating the rugged terrain. Flowers were around but we didn't stop until the first graceful and lovely *Dierama robustum* was found, much to the delight of Ruth. Various angles were taken to photograph this beauty. The flowers increased as we climbed into the misty hills, but we had to resist stopping. There was a final pause for



Aspidonepsis diploglossa



Disa thodei

more *Dierama*, with both *D. robustum* and *D. dracomontanum* in flower together. A selection of other flora with them included three species of *Berkheya*; lilac *purpurea*, white *cirsifolia* and yellow *multijuga*. We rumbled the last few kilometres to the remarkable lodge, which was set above a bend in the river, a haven of luxury in the wilderness. Roaring fires were already set in each room, check in was swift and efficient and we were soon sitting down to a five course meal!

Day 4 Tenahead

The lodge at Tenahead is surrounded by flower-rich tablelands and we had a mentally dense, but enjoyable introduction to the flora of the Drakensberg today. Dawn was calm, cool and gentle but the sun once it had risen gave early warmth and the temperature was ideal all day long. Setting off from the lodge we drove a short distance and stopped by a thriving colony of the large yellow daisy; *Berkheya multijuga*. Next to it were its cousins; white *B. cirsifolia* and the attractive lilac *B. purpurea*. The adjacent slopes and streamsides had a wealth of plants and in the space of half an hour we found *Satyrium longicauda*, the one-sided white brushes of the orchid *Holothrix scopularia*, *Pterygodium drakensbergensis*, slender yellow spikes of *Kniphofia pauciflora*, shrublets of bluish *Selago galpinii*, the interesting round leaves of *Ranunculus baurii*, rich blue *Lobelia galpinii*, bright pink *Senecio speciosus* and a spike of two of golden *Manulea crassifolia*. Pulling ourselves away from this rich site we set off on a botanically dizzying walk immediately finding good plants with sulphurous *Sebea natalensis*, *Euphorbia clavaroides* (in fruit) and *Nemesia caerulea*. On the first rocks was the pink parasite *Harveya pulchra* and succulent clumps of a *Delosperma/Lampranthus* sp. Reaching the first rock shelf the dwarf shrubs were interspersed with golden *Romulea macowanii* and countless *Satyrium longicauda*. The latter was with us all day in incredible numbers, in fact the sheer quantity of orchids was mind-boggling. Flowering spikes of scented *Disa fragrans* followed and then the exquisite stone-like leaves of *Massonia echinata* were found among coarse gravels including one still in flower. Fiery spikes of *Kniphofia stricta* were scattered above the damp grasslands and in a wetter flush was the stouter, taller *K. caulescens* alongside another, very robust species with decidedly matt flowers; *K. ritualis*. Searching the seeps and bogs carefully we found a good

number of lovely bicolored *Wurmbea elatior* in perfect condition and as we gained height there were increasing quantities of *Rhodohypoxis baurii*, which created a candy-pink frosting to the wet ground. Dieramas were also appearing and various clumps of *Dierama dracomontanum* were seen, together with some indeterminate (possible hybrids). Near the escarpment edge we crossed an area of low vegetation and rock pools that was crowded with orchids before reaching the magnificent viewpoint with sweeping views across the landscape and the occasional cape vulture or lammergeier soaring overhead. Walking along the edge we found fine-leaved *Kniphofia triangularis* subsp. *triangularis*, perfectly positioned with the vast landscape beyond and there were clumps of *Cephalaria galpiniana*, whilst further up we found crisp pink *Helichrysum ecklonis*. The shelves of the tableland led down to a wetter seep where there were fine mats of *Helichrysum marginatum*, lots more orchids including *Disa oreophila* and then below the last marshy flush the red of *Tritonia drakensbergensis*.

It had been an invigorating morning/early afternoon and our picnic lunch was enjoyed on a rock sheet with the now familiar expansive views all around. A more relaxing afternoon followed with various stops along the rough road for *Cotyledon orbicularis*, *Diascia barberae*, *Dierama robustum* (complete with roosting bees inside the flowers), fine swathes of the grass *Merxmüllera macowanii*, a few *Ornithogalum viridiflorum* that grew near black-purple flowered *Pelargonium sidoides* as well as the final bonus of hefty *Satyrium parviflorum* with very large shiny (rather plastic-like foliage).

Day 5 Tenahead - Naudes Nek

Another fine clear morning boded well for the day as we drove out to Naudes Nek, set above a vast landscape at 2500 metres. From here we began a slow walk down. *Crassula setulosa* was abundant on the rocks, in crevices or emerging from bright green moss. On the alpine turf above the first cliff we found many *Disa oreophila*, together with *Tritonia drakensbergensis*, abundant *Satyrium longicauda* and a few *Pterygodium leucanthemum*. Orchids were everywhere and our next choice delight



Kniphofia triangularis

was; *Disa cephalotes*, a white species that is a *Scabiosa columbaria* (and *Cephalaria galpiniana*) mimic. They were on a rocky slope with a few vanilla-scented *Albuca humilis*. On the next slope we found *Cynium racemosum*, a showy pink hemiparasite and scattered in the turf were the fiery flashes of *Cyrtanthus epiphyticus* and brimstone of *Bulbine abyssinica*, offset by the subtle charms of *Habenaria lithophytica* and *Pterygodium dracomontanum*. Moving further down the road we found several beautifully-marked *Disa thodei* and lots more *D. oreophila*, which filled the meadows punctuated by hot wands of *Kniphofia* af. *stricta*. A family of ground woodpeckers moved about the rocks, yelping occasionally to reveal their whereabouts. Moving on, *Diascia barberae* was in a seep and then on the low cliffs we found pretty *Glumicalyx montana* and the very dainty *Holothrix incurva* before reaching a slope with the large white parasite *Harveya speciosa*. Not far beyond *Phygeliu capensis* crowded seeps with their showy, upturned red flowers and Urban found an even stronger red nearby; *Harveya scarletina* another of the striking parasitic plants that occur in the Drakensberg.

On the return leg there was the handsome *Alepidea amatymbica* growing with another large *Harveya speciosa*, followed by a chunky lizard sunbathing on a rock. Lunch was at the pass, in pleasant windless, warm conditions, with lots of sunny *Romulea macowanii* scattered about the rock sheet and Robert found a few more *Massonia echinata* too. Driving back to the comforts of the lodge some of us opted to relax and stay there, whilst Carmen, Pontus and Robert came with me on another walk. We first crossed the river and then contoured the slope finding delicate *Jamesbrittenia pristisepala*, plentiful *Euphorbia epicyparissus* growing with some nice bronzy grasses, *Silene undulata* and then a couple of well positioned *Kniphofia triangularis*. Looking up slope we could see many more and so made our way up finding plenty more *Kniphofia* in perfect condition with superb mountain backdrops, as well as many pristine *Wurmbea elatior*. Thunder was rumbling in the distance and grey cloud was building, but it seemed fine where we were so three of us continued to the wetter areas above finding a wonderful colony of architectural *Kniphofia northiae* mingled with a fine *Carex* sp. as caterpillars devoured the seedpods of the many *Cyrtanthus flanaganii* that grew in the wet ground.

The following is added intentionally out of sequence:

Reaching a small overhang fiery spikes of the remarkable *Disa porrecta* poked out



Disa porrecta

from among the low scrub, one of the most striking of all *Disa* with very long orange-red spurs; a convincing mimic of *Kniphofia*. There were around ten plants in total occupying the narrow strip of habitat that suited them.

Day 6 To Underberg

There was a long day of travel ahead of us and it was with some reluctance that we left the comforts and grand landscapes of Tenahead. We drove for a while, negotiating the bumpy road and just past Rhodes we took a short break to look at the abundant *Gomphocarpus fruticosus* along the roadside which included some plants in flower and some with (swollen) fruits. Another half an hour on and there was a longer stop for a population of *Dierama robustum* and *Bulbine abyssinica*. There was little time for additional stops and past Barclay East a convenient shady picnic spot was ideal for lunch. Our timing was perfect as a few minutes later a squall swept in with flashes of lightning in the moody hills beyond. There was a final stop for fuel, coffee and snacks at Elliot and then it was ears back and drive, meandering through the rolling countryside, strung out towns and then ever grander landscapes as we neared Underberg, arriving in time for dinner.

A long trip, but to miss out Tenahead would have been a crime.

Day 7 Drakensberg Gardens

The extensive Maloti-Drakensberg national park begins near Underberg and wraps around the east of Lesotho, encompassing a vast realm of spectacular mountains and botanically-rich grasslands. Our exploration began at Drakensberg Garden, just forty kilometres from Underberg. Driving in we stopped once for the superb views of the contorted rocks and layer-cake mountains. Nearing the park entrance the grasslands were generously sprinkled with mauve *Moraea inclinata* and there were plenty more on our walk through the sunny landscape. Orchids were (as ever) plentiful with *Habenaria dives* and *Satyrium longicauda*, joined by the odd flowering orange *Watsonia pillansii*, attractive spikes of *Zaluzianskya microsiphon* and countless golden *Helichrysum herbaceum*. Climbing up to an area with large *Protea roupelliae* we found *Disa brevicauda* and then the lovely flowers of *Protea dracomontana* in various shades



Zaluzianskya microsiphon

from white to carmine. Stately tree ferns grew in the gullies and crossing the grassland we found one or two pink *Watsonia lepida*, before dropping down to the riverside trail. A cabbage tree (*Cussonia paniculata*) grew near a waterfall and signalled the start of a pocket of native woodland that hugged the humid bank of the river. Following a little way upstream we passed some fine *Agapanthus campanulatus* and then reached a colony of salmon-pink *Dierama dracomontanum*. The unusual (pungent smelling) *Schizoglossum atropurpurea* also grew nearby. The clouds were building so it seemed prudent to return to the vehicle and have lunch before any rain arrived seeing yellow *Crassula vaginata* on the way back.

After a pleasant shady lunch we looked around the adjacent grasslands finding many more orchids with diminutive *Holobolusia tysonii*, *Habenaria lithophila*, *H. dives*, *H. laevigata*, both *Satyrium longicauda* and the more slender pink spikes of *S. neglectum*, as well as swathes of *Helichrysum herbaceum* and the delightful bonus of purple-speckled *Gladiolus ecklonii*. Other interesting flora included *Jamesbrittenia breviscapa* and then *Disa versicolor* as we finished our walk. There was time for a couple of stops on the way out, for *Crocsmia paniculata* and nearly flowering *Dierama argyreum*.

Day 8 Sani Pass I

Our rain-free chips had been cashed in and the day began with drizzle and grey skies. That didn't stop us finding *Disperis fanniniae* in a woodland patch and a flowering plant of *Protea simplex* in a rather different area of shorter grassland with some attractive grey grasses. Unfortunately, *Sandersonia aurantiaca* had finished flowering this year, but we did find a couple of *Satyrium cristatum* and further up another slope had *Moraea brevistyla*, *Protea dracomontana*, *Watsonia confusa* and across the river *Xerophyta viscosa*. Passing the border post the drizzle eased a lot and we were able to spend more time looking at plants finding *Jamesbrittenia brevifolia*, *Hebenstretia dura*, cliffs plastered with an assortment of big leaves; *Scilla* sp, *Cotyledon orbicularis* and *Haemanthus humilis*, whilst *Gunnera perpensa* grew in the damp ditches with *Eucomis bicolor* on the bank above. High on one cliff we could see the blood red of *Gladiolus flanaganii* and *Zaluzianskya ovata* was beginning to open too. The far side of a river crossing was an ideal spot for lunch and a productive plant stop too. *Eucomis*



schijffii grew on the rocks, and on the banks were *Silene undulata*, *Cynium racemosum*, *Agapanthus campanulatus* and on another outcrop a solitary and pristine *Kniphofia caulescens*, which was attended by a stunning Pride of Table Mountain butterfly, the primary pollinator of many hot-coloured flowers across South Africa. Floriferous bushes of *Senecio tysonii* were everywhere and delicate *Papaver aculeatum* grew along the rock margins with tumbling masses of *Geranium pulchrum*.

The roads ahead were lined with *Lotononis sericiphylla* laden with large lavender pea flowers and on the bank behind were a few pristine *Kniphofia laxiflora*. *Dierama dracomontanum* had been appearing here and there too, but not in the quantity we saw them higher up where they dominated parts of the grassland with innumerable salmon-pink bells. However, those bells were generously sprinkled with water droplets and by now the mists had turned to heavy drizzle. It was likely the weather was better on the plateau above so we drove directly via the last set of rocky switchbacks to the Lesotho border. Almost immediately the clouds began to part and the rugged landscape of tiered mountains spread out before us. Flowering *Dierama robustum* was seen before we reached a higher pass at 3200 metres. This rocky area was *Helichrysum* heaven, with at least a dozen species seen in a great variety of forms. Dense cushions of *Helichrysum pagophilum* hugged the rocks and scattered among them with woolly mats of *H. milfordiae* with gorgeous red-backed white flowers. We spent quite a bit of time exploring the rocks finding better and better populations of these two and along the way finding taller *H. albo-brunneum* and *H. bellum*, mats of spreading *H. subglomeratum*, similar but showier *H. basalticum* and shrubby *H. trilineatum* with some plants sprawling over the rocks. The intense grazing (and exposure to wind) in the area meant that some plants were represented in extremely compact forms and we found near stemless *Scabiosa columbaria* and stunted *Crassula natalensis*. The views continually changed with the play of light and cloud shadows and it was evident that rain was possible sometime soon with squalls off in two directions. Descent seemed a good idea and heading back we had time for one final stop for large spreading mounds of *Euphorbia clavaroides*, close to which grew a tiny *Bulbine* sp and some fine flowering *Eucomis schijffii* hiding from the sheep in rock crevices.



Helichrysum milfordiae

Rain finally stopped play and it was onto the surprising comforts of the Sani Mountain lodge. Dinner was in the warmth of the lodge and as happens up here, by the time we had finished the clouds had dispersed and there was a clear star-filled sky. What topped it off was our (somewhat inebriated) night foray to see *Zaluzianskya rubrostellata*, a little gem of a plant that flowers at night.

Day 9 Sani Pass II & Underberg orchids

A glorious sunny morning lit up the impressive cliffs flanking the narrow entrance to the pass, rising above a vast cloud sea, the warm light setting the fiery candles of *Kniphofia caulescens* aglow. Some of the group had gone with Stuart for some early birding, seeing Drakensberg rockjumper and sentinel thrush amongst others. We all spent time after breakfast walking along the escarpment edge, taking in the spectacular landscapes and the flora that clung to the rocks and lived on the rock sheets or between the grass tussocks. The lovely *Helichrysum adenocarpum* was common, the large red buds swelling and beginning to open. Together with these we saw pretty *Hesperantha grandiflora* (very dwarf at this elevation), *Romulea thodei* and many *Crassula natalensis*. Large clumps of *Merxmuellera* sp. waved their golden stems in the strong breeze, backlit and the perfect foil for big tableland views.

Leaving the hotel we began our descent stopping many times for various flowers, beginning with a white form of *Dianthus basuticus* growing on the rocks, followed by a look at the steep cliffs where the last flowers of *Gladiolus flanaganii* shone in the sun. Beneath them were rosettes and flowers of *Eucomis schiffii*, *Disa cephalotes* (with *Scabiosa columbaria*) and hefty silvery clumps of *Senecio macroceras* with large yellow flowers. Our next stop was 'orchid corner' where we found *Pterygodium cooperi*, (the last flowers of) *Disa stricta* and the elegant long-spurred flowers of *Brownlea macroceras*, as well as *Kniphofia ichopensis* and *Helichrysum tenax*. *Papaver aculeatum* was common along the roadside as we continued, stopping next for a magnificent display of *Geranium pulchrum* that smothered the valley slope way into the distance. The lilac-pink flowers looked all the better mingled with flowery bushes of yellow *Euryops tysonii* and above the road were three stout heads of *Kniphofia caulescens*. Our final morning stop was for the *Harveya huttonii* a lovely parasite with large pink flowers. These



Kniphofia caulescens

grew below the extensive *Dierama dracomontanum* colony we had seen in the drizzle yesterday, which gave us the chance to enjoy these in better weather with superb moody tableland backdrops.

Lunch was by the river again and then we drove the last rough section, re-entered South Africa and continued on smooth tarmac. The rest of the afternoon was spent looking for (mainly) orchids along the verges and fields of the foothills. *Habenaria clavata* was found with a few spikes of *Kniphofia laxiflora*, followed by a marsh with some fine spikes of *Satyrium hallackii*. Not all of us kept our feet dry, but it was worth it, they were beautiful. Back on dry land we found a few pale yellow *Eulophia ovata* growing on a grassy bank with a *Striga bilabiata* and then an altogether larger yellow orchid rounded off the day; *Orthochilus welwitschii* a robust plant with soft yellow flowers, the lip and petals forming a tube with a purple lip. This deep, secluded design seemed to appeal to the same bee (or the same genus of bee) that we had seen roosting inside *Dierama* flowers previously, with one individual diving into a flower, making itself comfortable and staying put. A few *Nerine appendiculata* and a fine spike of *Satyrium cristatum* completed the day.

Day 10 Kamberg

Today we traversed a large swathe of grasslands finding many interesting plants. Early mists quickly dispersed and it was crystal clear by the time we left Underberg, stopping for a time in a small nature reserve at Himeville. Walking across the meadows we found first a fine spike of the green-flowered orchid *Orthochilus foliosus* followed by the peculiar globes of *Asclepias macropus*, a variety of *Hypoxis* (with at least four species) including; *acuminata*, *argentea* and broad-leaved *obtusata*, *Disa versicolor*, *Commelinia africana* and *Scilla nervosa*. Bird life included African harrier, African spoonbill and a lesser crested eagle, whilst the resident herd of Blesbok munched contentedly on the grasses. On a separate patch there were was the pretty soft pink of *Hesperantha* af. *woodii* and the remarkable *Periglossum angustifolium*, with wiry stems and long slender leaves topped by little balls of flowers. Moving on we gained a sweeping view of the Drakensberg range that spanned the horizon before stopping for the intense scarlet-orange of *Crocasmia pottsii*. Our journey was punctuated



Brunsvigia undulata

by various stops for plants and sometimes birds with crowned cranes and long-tailed widowbirds the standout avians and then a population of *Watsonia confusa* and the peculiar inflorescence of *Cussonia paniculata*. With the former grew a solitary *Habenaria humilior*. Wending our way through a fairly remote rural landscape with small villages and lots of cows we eventually reached better grassland when the cry of “*Brunsvigia*” went up as we found our first impressive *Brunsvigia undulata*. The two plants were just starting to open their cerise flowers, but not much further on were three more impressive plants, full spheres of long-stemmed flowers. It required a bit of commando crawling to get under the wire but we managed an illicit look at these amazing flowers. *Hesperantha coccinea* grew beside a stream and we found a patch of shade beneath some *Acacia* for our picnic.

Not far beyond the picnic site we ground to a halt for some fine clumps of *Dierama latifolium* in both soft pink and cerise forms. Quite a long time was spent photographing (and filming) these. A jumbo *Brunsvigia undulata* was seen, with three hefty plants growing together and then reaching a small river, long-tailed widowbirds were bathing and perching in surrounding vegetation and decent photos were taken of these and more *Hesperantha coccinea*. Just beyond we entered the national park grasslands and there was an immediate change in vegetation with pristine habitat filled with superb stands of *Dierama latifolium* and a fair sprinkling of *Brunsvigia undulata*. An hour was spent wandering among the best clumps with fine landscapes all around. Extra-large specimens of *Disa versicolor* grew among this recently-burned habitat, fuelled by the extra nutrients and the slender spikes of *Habenaria laevigata* appeared here and there too.

Moving on we covered the last hour along some shocking potholed roads to enter the dramatic landscape of Giants Castle and our bungalows set amidst native plants with many architectural *Cyathea dregei*, *Podocarpus latifolius*, *Protea roupelliae* and more making for an pleasant organic arrangement. A bit of rooming shenanigans meant some of us skipped the showers but still made the beers.



Dierama latifolium



Giants Castle dawn

Day 11 Giants Castle

A glorious dawn saw soft light illuminating the contoured grasslands and sheer cliffs of the Drakensberg, the warming gold spreading slowly across the landscape. Breakfast was outside on the big veranda with a grand view all around. Setting off afterwards we descended through rocky grassland towards the river seeing many opening *Moraea inclinata*, a small *Aristea* and *Disa patula*. At the riverside was a white flowered shrub; *Bowkeria verticillata* and along the water's edge grew lots of willowy white-flowered *Gomphostigma virgatum*. Berry-laden *Rhus discolor* and *R. pyroides* were seen and then the large fruits of *Melianthus villosa* and three robust spikes of *Pterygodium magnum*. A stand of a *Crocasmia paniculata* was tricky to reach. There were wonderful views of the river cutting through the landscape which swept up to the vaunted heights of the Drakensberg range. However, a set of closer cliffs were our objective and we cut in from the river and climbed to a different trail finding a fine *Schizoglossum atropurpureum* and flowering *Protea cafra* before plunging into an area of shady

cool woodland. This was not only a pleasant change (it was warm out) but offered the chance of a suite of different flowers including plentiful *Streptocarpus gardenii*, bushes of *Leonotis dubia*, *Disperis fanniniae* and abundant ferns with *Adiantum poiretii*, *Asplenium aethiopicum*, *Dryopteris inaequalis* and more. There was a bit of a wait for our guide, but no matter it gave us a chance to photograph the delightful *Stenoglottis fimbriata*, a diminutive orchid that grew on rocks. There followed an interesting tour of the bushman rock art from a lady with a skilled voicebox who could click and pop and purr like a bushman. Peels of thunder encouraged us to take the quicker way back, seeing *Monsonia attenuata* on the way and lunch was in the shelter of Carmen's cabin as the rain started to patter.

Setting out for the afternoon the clouds did burst for a short time and rain was never far away but we managed to go out, finding the extraordinary fruits of *Xymatolobium undulatum*, two species of heath; *Erica woodii* and *E. cafforum*, a tall *Chlorophytum krookianum* and two baboons sheltering under a rock overhang.

Day 12 To Witsieshoek

Carmen, Robert and I set off at 5.30 to walk up to the viewpoint where we had a superb grandstand view of a big sweep of Drakensberg mountains that eased to smooth contoured hills and the snaking river below us. The drive out was eventful with two *Brunsvigia radulosa* in flower and then a colony of *Ornithogalum candicans* alongside a river. After some essential shopping and posting back of keys(!) we carried on to a nature reserve for lunch stopping on the way in for the lovely *Gladiolus papilio* and *Xysmatolobium undulatum* in flower as well as the wonderful leaf fans of *Boophone disticha*. Our shady lunch was on some convenient picnic benches with a view of the large reservoir.

Completing the journey to Witsieshoek, we checked in and then set off for an exploration of the adjacent slopes, which were brimful of plants. Three new species of *Disperis* were found; small flowered *cardiophora*, larger pink *stenoplectron* and white *wealei*, as well as many *Disa versicolor* and later on some very tall *Satyrium parviflorum*. The warm accents of *Kniphofia porphyrantha* studded the slopes and wandering across we found a gully full of *Eucomis bicolor*; their 'pineapple' tops visible from afar. Among these were the delicate cymes of *Afrotysonia glochidiata* and the pretty pink pea; *Lessertia perennans*. *Eucomis autumnalis* was also seen in fruit and along the track was the orange *Leonotis intermedia* that was attracting glossy-green malachite sunbirds. The intricate flowers of *Diascia rigida* needed to be examined carefully to see their complex structure, whilst *Gladiolus crassifolius* offered elegant arching spikes and *Helichrysum monticola* provided a snowy sprinkle throughout along with the subtleties of two *Alepidia* spp. The views the whole time had been of layered ridges stretching to the horizon, sometimes the sun playing on the closer warm-toned cliffs other times a moodier scene of greys and greens, but always magnificent.

Day 13 Witsieshoek I

A clear start for us as we took the very bad road up to the start of the trail, although the last few kilometres were paved and smooth. The scenery all around was of the now familiar stepped tablelands that led steeply to the lowlands in a maze of slopes, cliffs and angles. However, it was somehow more impressive here than anywhere else we had been. Our walk was constantly punctuated with floral interest,



Eucomis bicolor

beginning with a perfect stand of *Agapanthus campanulatus* positioned as ever in the Drakensberg with a stunning mountain back drop. A series of switchbacks took us higher and past our first stand of *Eucomis bicolor* and then a spike of intricately-designed *Disperis renibractea*. A short diversion led to a jaw-dropping viewpoint of 'The Amphitheatre', a narrow ledge poised above a giddy drop with plunging deep gorges on one side and soaring cliffs on the other. One of the ultimate views of these consistently dramatic mountains. Pretty tufts of *Dimorphotheca jucundum* and bushy *Berkheya rosulata* provided the colour along with powder blue *Wahlenbergia cuspidata* and slender deep pink *Hesperantha grandiflora*(?). Wending our way up past patches of *Ornithogalum regalis* we reached a fantastic drift of *Eucomis bicolor* mingled with fruiting *E. autumnalis* on the ledges of a seep. A third species *E. schijffii* was not far away on rockier ground. The path levelled out and we contoured the flanks of the mountains, dark cliffs rising to our left and grassy meadows dropping away to our right. *Dierama dracomontanum* in a more or less uniform salmon-pink became increasingly common as we walked, negotiating various obstacles such as ladders and ledges with chains. As we advanced we could see leafy masses of *Nerine bowdenii* and we managed to find a number in perfect flower, the crisp, crinkled pink flowers semi-translucent with backlight.

Lunch was in various spots but I sat with Carmen and Urban at the base of the famed chain ladders that led up to the escarpment. There was a magnificent view as thunder rumbled and gave us that quintessential Drakensberg ambience. The rain never materialised as we walked back down photographing whatever took our eye from waving drifts of *Dierama dracomontanum* mixed with *Eucomis bicolor* to bushy *Jamesbrittenia pristisepala* or the various architectural *Alepidia* including leafy *A. cordifolia* that formed near vertical meadows. *Agapanthus campanulatus* peppered the landscape in various shades of blue and the many tufts of so many different grasses completed the scene.

It had been a superb and rewarding walk even if our feet were a touch sore when we reached the end. Transport back down arrived, but a few of us braved a couple of hundred metres more to see dwarfed forms of the unusual shrubby carrot; *Heteromorpha arborescens* and striking red-and-white *Kniphofia thodei* in the grassland next to the road before the second car arrived. A second bumpy ride brought us back to base and a welcome break before dinner.



Agapanthus campanulatus

Day 14

Witsieshoek II

Dawn was a wonderful parade of colours, glowing clouds, ridge silhouettes and warming cliffs. We took a walk after breakfast onto the ridge above the resort, quickly finding the first of several *Dierama cooperi*. The leaves of *Brunsvigia radulosa* were common and fruiting stems here and there as we walked finding over the course of the morning *Watsonia lepida*, *Disperis cardiophora*, a stout spike of *Disa cornuta*, lots of *Berkheya speciosa* and fiery *Kniphofia porphyrantha*. Large mounds of *Euphorbia clavipes* were in rockier parts. Nearing the road we found fresh *Pterygodium nigrescens* and then walking back along the road a solitary but lovely *Disa crassifolia* was in perfect flower on a black cliff. Delicate *Nemesia rupicola*, the climbing curcubit *Zehneria scabra*, the odd *Kniphofia thodei*, a close view of a cruising lammergeier, the white form of *Eulophia ovata* and another scabios mimic; *Brownlea galpinii* rounded off the morning.

Lunch was with a grand view of the mountains, but cloud was building and by the time we set out in the afternoon it was decidedly grey with thunder and lightning (in the distance). Sure enough a light shower (but with big raindrops) ensued but didn't last and we were able to look at a hefty clump of *Kniphofia ritualis*, the fresh white flowers of *Harveya speciosa*, a *Stachys kuntzei*, *Gladiolus crassifolius* and more as we descended towards the waterfall. Reaching the first cascade, we located a few accessible *Gladiolus microcarpus* and went down for a look, also finding *Albuca shawii* and *Kniphofia fibrosa* in the wet ground. However, a bit farther along at the main falls was a ravishing display of choice Drakensberg plants with the black cliffs plastered in *Gladiolus microcarpus*, *Ornithogalum regalis*, *Dierama dracomontana* and *Eucomis biflora*, together with the attractive leaves of a lush *Drimia* sp. It really was a stunning finale to our stay here and we spent some time trying to photograph the various plants with the loose cascades. Walking back we took our time taking photos and I couldn't resist a stand of *Leonotis intermedia* growing with *Agapanthus campanulatus* with a silver-and-charcoal backdrop.

Day 15

Golden Gate

We left the drama of Witsieshoek and drove onto the softer charms of Golden Gate, entering an area of lower hills and coloured stone cliffs. At the top of one escarpment we stopped and crossed the rocky grassland to where *Protea roupelliae* was in good



Gladiolus microcarpus & *Ornithogalum regalis*

flower with several perfect blooms and excited malachite sunbirds flying around. Two larger species of *Hypoxis* were seen on the return; broad-leaved *obtusa* and upright *rigidula*. Moving on we took a side road and stopped in an area of grassland where the cherry-red form of *Gladiolus crassifolius* grew amongst many narrow spires of *Disa versicolor*. It's altogether larger cousin; *Disa cooperi* was nearby, an impressive species with long spurs and there were many on the lower slope of the gully, most in great condition. Next up was *Gladiolus papilio* with a few in damper grassland from where we could also see a wildebeest and long-tailed widowbirds.

It was time to check in to our hotel so we did this and then took lunch in the shade at a picnic site, before moving on to our final destination for the day. It was still quite warm so there was time for a quick drink at a café before we began our hike below imposing rock formations. An area of *Leucosidium* scrub held the tumbling masses of *Clematis brachiata* in flower and scattered bushes of 'tree parsnip'; *Heteromorpha arborescens*, an unusual umbellifer with beautiful peeling bark. A little further down the track and we found the shiny, climbing foliage of *Gloriosa modesta*. Most of the vines were bearing large fruits but we did manage to find a few decent soft orange flowers too. Another orange followed, this one more intense with a scattering of a form of *Kniphofia triangularis* in the grassland. Unfortunately, we were denied a triumvirate of orange, since all of the *Gladiolus dalenii* we saw were still in bud this year. Our route swung around and then climbed on to the rock sheets above, the vegetation patches that clung to the rock were a matrix of *Aloe maculata* and a large-leaved *Drimia* species, with a many off-white *Schizocarpus* (*Scilla*) *nervosus* poking out of the grass tufts. The wind had really picked up and it seemed a good idea to go back down, finding a pink form of *Xerophyta viscosa* on the way.

The final dinner was somewhat haphazard, with a power cut midway, but it is Africa!

Day 16 To Johannesburg & flights

A leisurely morning saw us away by 10 am and driving across the vast fields and flat grasslands north of the Drakensberg, with very straight roads piercing the expanse and the drama of the mountains behind us. There was time for lunch in a service station before reaching the airport and checking in and then dispersing to various corners of the globe.



Disa cooperi

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Nerine bowdenii