

*Dierama dracomontanum*

viranatura  
tours 

# **BARRIER OF SPEARS DRAKENSBERG 2026**

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## Day 1            Arrival and to Port Edward (17 January)

We all convened at Durban airport from various corners of the world, UK, Norway and USA. Then it was only two hours' drive to our comfortable hotel with the rooms set among lush vegetation beside a small estuary on the Indian Ocean.

## Day 2            Umtamvuna

Bird life was busy in the estuary first thing with lots of spur-winged geese and Egyptian geese. After enjoying a good breakfast overlooking the water we set off for our first day in the field, which took us to the Umtamvuna nature reserve, an excellent introduction to the richness of South African grasslands. And not only grasslands, right at the administration there were mature specimens of *Encaphalartos alternsteinii* an impressive cycad. Immediately obvious were shrublets of *Dissotis canescens* with large pink flowers and on the adjacent rock sheets grew succulent rosettes of *Bulbine latifolia* and *Cyperus rupicola*. Moving out into the herb rich grasslands there were the leaves of many species, and it was obvious multiple visits to this area at different times in the season would be necessary to fully appreciate the wealth of plants here. However, there was plenty on show today with attractive yellow heads of *Gnidia anthyllioides* and its shrubbier cousin *G. triplinervia*, slender stemmed *Pentanesia prunelloides* waved its heads of mauve-blue flowers in the wind, there was a delicate *Alepidia* sp., the pale yellow duo of *Sebaea grandis* and *Thunbergia dregeana*, together with bright yellow stars of *Hypoxis acuminata*, stands of *Hibiscus trionum* and the large pink flowers of *Cycnium racemosum*. The 'green pineapples' of fruiting *Eucomis autumnalis* and the spotted leaves of *Ledebouria apertiflora* studded the grasslands and moving downslope Joan then found a population of the wonderful *Pachycarpus grandiflorus*, an milkweed with large green to purplish, balloon-like spotted flowers that were held in dense heads. Some time was spent photographing these before we moved across to a rock outcrop that was crowned with stands of *Agapanthus campanulatus*. The rocks and crevices supported many other plants too, including the tough scrambling vines of *Smilax anceps*, dark red *Tinnia galpinii*, the lithophytic orchid *Polystachya pubescens* grew with the unkempt tangles of *Aloe arborescens* and there were twisted flowers of the pea *Vigna unguiculata* and an unknown, red-flowered



*Pachycarpus grandiflorus*

shrub. Across the valley in a damp flush was a large population of *Watsonia pillansii* still with some decent spikes in flower. Behind them, on the edge of the valley forest grew a stand of tall *Strelitzia nicolai* and searching the wet ground carefully revealed the lilac-pink form of *Utricularia livida*. The white form of the same species was common back up near the vehicle too. After a rewarding three hours it was time to cover some ground and head towards the still distant mountains.

The remainder of the day was spent travelling across the undulating landscape with the flat-topped hills slowly growing in stature as we seemed to pass through an endless village, with dwellings scattered across the landscape. What seemed incongruous was the complete lack of flowers growing around the houses, with not a single house cultivating any flowering plant! The grasslands were not that flowery either with only the odd clump of *Agapanthus* or stand of pink *Watsonia*. We pushed on, ate a brief lunch and then arrived in time for dinner at our nice bed and breakfast, where a blue-and-yellow macaw gazed down at us from its perch.

## Day 3            To Tenahead

A long day, but one with some great plants that took us further north to a remarkable place. We began close to town at an area of grassland flanking a small river where we found an array of orchids including *Satyrium longicauda*, slender *S. parviflorum*, red-and-white *S. sphaerocarpum* and *Eulophia hians*. There was plenty more than orchids too, from the attractive fern *Pellaea callomelanos* sprouting from rock crevices to pristine spikes of *Gladiolus dalenii*, fruiting *Rhus discolor*, a scrambling vine of *Gloriosa modesta* and pretty mauve *Monopsis decepiens* poked its flowers out between the grasses. Moving on we drove for a while, the countryside becoming wilder and the layers of tableland closer. The road then climbed into a striking landscape with interesting sandstone rock formations, and we stopped near the pass for another interesting selection of flora. Here there was a flowering tree of *Protea subvestita*, both *Erica cooperi* and *E. cafforum*, an attractive golden sedge, a fine stand of *Wahlenbergia cuspidata* growing near *Clematis brachiata* and then a handful of *Schizoglossum hamatum*. On the opposite side of the road were good bushes of another milkweed, *Gomphocarpos fruticosum* with



*Gladiolus saundersii*





*Disa thodei*

dangling creamy flowers and inflated hairy fruits. A pink *Lampranthus* sprouted from the rocks too.

Continuing, we found the excellent spikes of the lovely salmon pink *Gladiolus oppositiflorus* after which it was time for our picnic lunch. A dazzling stand of *Kniphofia linearifolia* came after we had eaten, complete with several equally beautiful malachite sunbirds that were avidly feeding on the flowers. Refuelling in Barkly East we now left the tarmac behind and rattled our way along a variable dirt road, passing through an interesting landscape of low escarpments, rock sheets and narrow strip fields. Crossing a river, we stopped on the other side for a few stunning *Gladiolus saundersii* growing near shrubby *Phygelius capensis*, the former a real bonus as we do not always see this species in flower at this time. There was still some ground to cover and now the road became even rockier as we covered the final stretch to Tenahead. Thick mist swirled and we could not see anything except the many *Berkheya purpurea* that lined the road. We made it, though it would not be until morning that we would appreciate our surroundings.

**The first** delicious five course dinner arrived!

Day 4                      Tenahead

A full day inside the private nature reserve of Tenahead. There was a beautiful dawn with the sun illuminating the last thin clouds and by the time we left the whole landscape was revealed for the first time with a pristine tableland swathed in big clumps of *Merxmuellera macowanii* grasses and much more besides. Flowery bushes of *Euryops tysonii*, the delicate soft orange of *Papaver aculeatum* and a couple spikes of *Pterygodium dracomontanum* were around the car park; a gentle introduction. Our ascent of a shallow river valley took a long time; there was so much new flora. The first slope had bluish *Senecio barbata* and intense pink *S. speciosus*, whilst the rocky outcrops had tight mounds of *Euphorbia clavaroides*, clumps of *Hirpicium armeriodes*, neat buns of *Crassula setulosa* (which only got larger as we got higher), flimsy *Moraea trifida* and showier white *M. albicuspa* and a superb fresh spike of *Gladiolus saundersii* glowing in the sun. On a flat rock sheet were fine spikes of *Disa fragrans*, golden *Romulea macowanii* and looking closely we found many

diminutive *Massonia echinata* among the gravel, the cryptic leaves making them almost invisible. The sun then decided to take a back seat and thick mists rolled down the valley. It didn't affect what we found, there were just fleeting views, such as back to the isolated lodge across stands of *Berkheya purpurea*. A wet flush had *Disa thodei* and many spikes of the crispy marked *Wurmbea elatior*, as well as the tiny *Utricularia livida* and both *Kniphofia stricta* and heftier *K. caulescens*. *Satyrium longicauda* was scattered across the landscape throughout the walk in both white and pink forms and *Disa oreophila* was picked up before we reached another low rock outcrop with lots of very nice *Dierama dracomontanum* growing with the slender spikes of *Kniphofia parviflora*. We reached a broad rocky plateau with patches of vegetation that held more orchids, various low shrubby Asteraceae (such as *Senecio seminiveus*) and *Rhodohypoxis baurii* encrusted the damp flats in great quantity, mainly deep pink but sometimes in mixed shades. The mists made navigation tricky but by the time we reached the cliff edge of the plateau the cloud suddenly dispersed, and a magnificent view was opened across the vast landscape, the craggy basalt cliffs plunging down and across a rippled landscape of massifs and valleys. Oriented again we continued across the plateau punctuated by stands of *Berkheya multijuga*, also finding the tiny *Disperis wealei*. A lammergeir swept overhead as we made our way down to the road, walking along a short distance to a convenient flat rocky area where we enjoyed lunch with a grand view of the landscape.

It was a short drive back to the lodge and then most of us set off on a second walk, crossing the Bell River where vigorous stands of *Papaver aculeatum* crowded a slope. Along the track we found many small bushes of *Jamesbrittenia pristisepala* and a spike of *Habenaria lithophila* before heading away from the trail upslope to where there was a superb colony of scarlet-and-yellow *Kniphofia triangularis*. Here and there were the cryptic spikes of *Pterygodium flanaganii*, pretty blue drifts of *Lobelia flaccida* and near the seeps, the larger flowered *L. preslii*, whilst mats of white *Anagallis huttonii* spread over the wet ground. Many more spikes of *Wurmbea elatior* were here too as we made our way higher, crossing over to a colony of the huge *Kniphofia northiae*. Since we were already



*Kniphofia triangularis*



halfway up it seemed worth continuing higher through the lush grassland and stands of *Berkheya purpurea*, finding *Stachys rugosa*, and then at the top pretty tufts of *Dianthus basuticus*, *Hyobanche rubra* and a wispy wand of *Dierama robustum*. There was a curious (and nervous) herd of horses posed in front of a *Kniphofia northiae* with a magnificent backdrop as the light began to play across the untrammelled landscape. The freedom and wilds of Tenahead are special and indelible, something we would all come to appreciate as we continued our Drakensberg journey. Descending the views continued to change and unfold and we continued to find new plants with a good clump of hairy-leaved *Kniphofia hirsuta*, its robust cousin *K. ritualis* and *Zaluzianskya ovata* as we made our way back through the colony of *Kniphofia triangularis* and along the river past the weatherbeaten old wagon to the lodge.

#### Day 5      Tenahead - Naudes Nek

A fine clear morning bathed the rolling hills in crisp light as we drove out to Naudes Nek. Parking at the pass we began a slow walk down hill, cutting up onto the grassy slopes above the road to begin with where we found an abundance of *Disa oreophila*. Growing with these was a scattering of *Pterygodium leucanthemum*, lots of *Tritonia dracomontanum* and some dense patches of showy *Cycnium racemosum*. The wind was bit troublesome, but lower on the slope it eased enough to photograph the orchids with superb backdrops of the stepped hills. A few *Disa cephalotes* (a species which mimics *Scabiosa columbaria*) were found not much further on as were the slender spikes of *Brownlea macroceras* (still in bud). Walking on there was plentiful *Crassula setulosa*, various pink *Delospermum spp*, pretty *Diascia barberae* and on the rocks grew *Holothrix inflexa* and *Glumicalyx montanum*. Whilst tucked in a shady nook was scarlet *Harveya scarletina*. Scouring the slopes further on, the robust ivory spikes of its cousin *Harveya speciosa* could be seen and heading down towards these we reached a fine stand or two of *Phygelius capensis*. Just below these we could see the fiery *Cyrtanthus epiphyticus* and the subtler *Alepidia amatymbica*, but the star of the show were the pristine specimens of *Harveya speciosa*. From here we returned to the vehicle and enjoyed a good lunch with a big view as well as the many golden *Romulea macowanii*, the smattering of pink *R. camerooniana* and dainty little *Zaluzianskya crocea*.



*Harveya speciosa*



*Berkheya purpurea*

The afternoon was spent enjoyed some easy walks along the road, stopping on the way only for a *superb specimen of* *Dierama robustum* swaying gently in the wind. Our furthest destination was a wonderful stand of *Berkheya purpurea* that crowded *a pasture with* hundreds of spikes crammed into one area, backed by a perfect sky of azure and bubbling cumulus. *Berkeya cirsiifolia* was also mixed among them and as we walked there was *many more of these* along with the third species, yellow *B. multijuga*. The next area we looked at had more excellent *Dierama robustum* as well as the giant rosettes of *Kniphofia northiae*

*beside a stream*, whilst clumps of *Gazania krebsiana* hung from the cliffs and there were hazy drifts of *Myosotis semiaplexicaulis* too. Our final stretch began with some architectural plants of *Cotyledon orbicularis* in flower on the rocks and once again ambling on a few hundred metres produced more goodies with broad-leaved *Bulbine narcissifolia*, below which grew the diminutive adder's-tongue fern, *Ophioglossum polyphyllum*. On top of the bank was a few *Kniphofia ritualis* and then we reached an immense cushion of *Euphorbia clavaroides* flanked by greyish *Cheilanthes eckloniana* ferns to complete the day.



The following is added intentionally out of sequence:

Reaching a small overhang fiery spikes of the remarkable *Disa porrecta* poked out from among the low scrub, one of the most striking of all *Disa* with very long orange-red spurs. It is pollinated by Pride of Table Mountain butterflies and appears a convincing mimic of *Kniphofia*.

**Day 6                      To Underberg**

Alas, the delights of Tenahead have their price and we now had to transfer between this wonderful flowery expanse to our next centre and the start of the eastern Drakensberg. It was an all-day drive with occasional breaks to photograph the amazing landscape or stretch our legs, have lunch in the shade beneath a busy weaver bird colony or much later on to photograph crowned cranes and long-tailed widowbirds. The route was scenic, passing through rural South Africa, mainly with rugged hills to our left which became increasingly dramatic as we neared Underberg with moody thunderous skies interspersed with shadow-sharpened sunlit cliffs of the Drakensberg.

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

**Day 7                      Drakensberg Gardens**

A clear blue-sky morning as we drove towards the mountains, the green slopes sweeping up to eroded and battered tops and cliffs. A few pristine *Watsonia confusa* on a grassy bank brought us to a halt, growing with *Eulophia zeyhneriana* and the extra-large *Brunsvigia grandiflora*, which though not in flower was still impressive with wavy-edged leaves growing from a big turnip-like bulb. Moving on to the grasslands below the peaks, countless *Moraea inclinata* were starting to open and these were liberally sprinkled throughout. The morning walk saw us explore this rich area, moving slowly and finding many new plants, especially orchids including many *Habenaria dives* and *Satyrium longicauda*, alongside the golden stars of *Helichrysum herbacea* and pretty *Sopubia canescens*. Climbing up to a low rise past a few grazing baboons, we found *Protea roupelliae* in flower and there was also *Disa brevicornis* and stream gullies with various sized tree ferns; *Cyathea dregei*. Christopher then



*Disperis stenoplectron*

found a colony of very fresh *Disperis oxyglossa* with extraordinary three-dimensional flowers. The path continued alongside the river where we saw our first cabbage tree, *Cussonia paniculata* and then on up to an interesting corner with the red-pink form of *Dierama dracomontanum*, deep blue forms of *Agapanthus campanulatus* and the dark brown balls of *Schizoglossum atropurpurea* clustered on tall stems. The views ahead were of sheer ramparts and deeply eroded sandstone and all morning we had enjoyed fabulous backdrops to the many flowers. The return walk also produced new plants with *Satyrium neglectum* growing with pretty *Zaluzianskyia microsiphon* and flat heads of yellow *Crassula vaginata*.

Lunch was in the shade of some eucalypts and by now the clouds had rolled in and the mountains were decidedly moody. A nearby swathe of grassland proved very productive and we just kept finding new plants as we thoroughly explored the area. The tiny *Neobulosia tysonii* was found, as well as more *Satyrium neglectum* and as we criss-crossed the area *Pterygodium hastatum*, *Habenaria lithophila*, purple *Lotononis lotonoides* and then a blue *Craterocapsia tarsodes* turned up. Next to the latter were other gems, the pristine spikes of *Disperis stenoplectron* and not far away the pretty white and yellow of *Schizochilus fleuxuosus* completed a productive orchid session. Leaving the area a troop of baboons was feeding and playing on the golf course, some chasing one another, others more intent on digging for roots with everything from youngsters to an alpha male. A final botanical note was a plant of *Asclepias macropus* growing a roadside bank and then it was back to prepare for tomorrow's drive to Lesotho.

**Day 8                      Sani Pass I**

A gorgeous clear day and the good weather stayed with us well into the afternoon. Starting up towards the Sani Pass, we stopped first for a good colony of *Protea dracomontanum* with many plants in flower and a stunning backdrop of the 'twelve nice basalt rocks' behind. The slender and elegant shrub *Polygala virgata* was also along the roadside. After clearing immigration in South Africa, we began our slow ascent to the pass, not just because of the bad road, but because of the many and varied flowers. There was *Leonotis intermedia* and *Jamesbrittenia breviflora*, followed by a



*Anisodonteia julii*



look at a bright red ‘suicide lily’ *Gladiolus flanaganii* on a black cliff. A stream cut across the road and the well-vegetated banks and rock faces had *Eucomis schiffii*, *Agapanthus campanulatus*, *Moraea brevistyla* and *Disa cephalotes* as well as a flowering stem of *Berkheya leucaugeta*. A little further up and we stopped for a delightful combination of golden *Merxmuellera macowanii* grasses punctuated by shrubby *Anisodotea julii* with large pink flowers and this population continued on upward to the base of the distant cliffs. Here and there among them were the peculiar cylindrical leaves of *Drimia sp.* too. *Geranium pulchrum* tumbled over the opposite slope, but the display of these high up was amazing, the whole valley side coated in a hazy veneer of pink. Shrubs of *Lotononis sericophylla* were also laden with soft mauve flowers and the many floriferous bushes of *Euryops tysonii* eventually switched to *E. evansii* once we had gained a bit more height. Here we also searched a grassy slope for orchids finding a solitary *Disa thodei* and then the elegant *Brownlea macroceras* growing near *Pterygodium cooperi*.

Lunch was with magnificent view of the emerald valley flanked by dark cliffs, cliffs which we still had to get to the top of and enter the tiny kingdom of Lesotho. The weather had remained amazingly good, so we pushed on to a pass further inside the country, climbing on a good smooth road to 3250 metres. A side turn took us higher and closer to rock terraces where we immediately found the lovely *Helichrysum milfordiae*. *Helichrysum* were to prove a mind-numbingly diverse genus here with at least a dozen species seen, including the dense silver cushions of *H. pagophilum*, multi-headed *H. albo-brunneum* and shrubby species such as *H. trilineatum* and broader-leaved *H. witbergense*. A lammergeir soared overhead and other flowers included *Jamesbrittenia jurassica*, very dwarf *Scabiosa columbaria*, lots of intense pink *Senecio speciosus* and in damper patches were drifts of tiny blue *Lobelia galpinii*. The views all around were magnificent and glancing downhill we could see slopes that were coloured pink. It seemed worth investigating and we drove down, finding the colour came from great numbers of *Felicia* af. *rosulata* mixed with white *Athrixia fontana*. Flowery clumps of *Myosotis semiamplexicaulis* were tucked into the banks too, and rock hyrax and Drakensberg crag lizard were seen too. There was time for one more stop to look at some very large mounds of *Euphorbia clavaroides* with a number of *Dierama robustum* flowering on the same slope and then it was onto to our comfortable rondavels perched right at the dramatic lip of the pass.



*Helichrysum milfordiae*

After dinner there was the chance for a bit of nocturnal botany, and we drive out a short distance and then searched the gravelly flats soon finding the remarkable sweet-scented *Zaluzianskyia rubrostellata* with some delightful clusters of yellow-and-red flowers. A bonus was the many other creatures we found with four frog species including the huge Maluti river frog, together with freshwater crabs and endemic minnows. The stars were great too.

## Day 9 Sani Pass II & Underberg orchids

A stunning clear morning on the pass with crisp views as the sun rose and illuminated the billowing golden grasses and tickled the dark basalt cliffs. Some of us were up early to enjoy this wonderful scene and see what birds were moving about, such as sentinel thrush, Drakensberg rockjumper, speckled pigeon and Drakensberg siskins. After breakfast we all set off across the rocky plateau where the large clumps of *Merxmuellera* sp. waved their golden stems in the strong breeze, backlit and the perfect foil for big tableland views. Moving slowly as we found pretty tufts of *Wahlenbergia polytrichifolia* subsp. *dracomontana* amidst the abundance *Rhodohypoxis baurii* which were liberally sprinkled throughout like sugary treats. Together with these we saw pretty *Hesperantha baurii*, *Romulea thodei* and many *Crassula natalensis*. The red buds of the lovely *Helichrysum adenocarpum* were now starting to stir, though its cousin *H. milfordiae* was already fully open with some nice cushions well-positioned on the cliff edge. As we progressed beyond the gate, we found a lot more of the former with many now opened or fast opening, the flowers suffused with pink and the combination of buds and flowers was a delight. Once saturated with these lovely plants we returned, flushing out francolins as we walked. Loading up quickly we set off and began a slow descent stopping first for a grassy slope with plentiful *Dierama dracomontanum* growing beneath the gangly shrubs of *Euryops evansii* and with the odd clump of golden *Helichrysum tenax* appearing amongst it all. A couple of grey reedbucks were visible on a distant cliff too. Moving down there was a stop for a slope where we found the striking parasite *Harveya huttonii* and then another halt brought us the large pink daisy *Berkheya leucaugeta* and *Kniphofia ichopensis*. After re-entering South Africa, we had lunch in shade of a big willow, which was welcome on what was becoming a warm day.



*Periglossum angustifolium*



Descending towards the lowlands a flash of orange brought us to a stop, and there were the last two orange lanterns of *Sandersonia aurantiaca* growing alongside some good spikes of *Pterygodium cooperi*. A bonus. Moving onto to a local farm we were taken by the owner to a thriving colony of *Protea simplex* with many plants in flower, the bract colour varying from cream to cherry red. Long-tailed widowbirds, red bishops and red-collared widowbirds also flew about the grassland. It was warm now, but there was flora to be found, so we continued through the farmland with grassy verges producing interesting plants such as various colour forms of *Eulophia ovata*, the robust pale green *Habenaria epipactidea* and the fascinating slender milkweed, *Periglossum angustifolium* with spiky balls of flowers. A marsh still had a few reasonable *Satyrium hallackii* and our final stop had a fine stand of *Kniphofia laxiflora* in both yellow and red forms, as well as the architectural flowers of *Habenaria clavata* and pretty *Satyrium cristatum* to round off the day. A storm was brewing in the distance, and it seemed a good time to head for home.

#### Day 10      Kamberg

A day of diverse plants with some outstanding iconic species began in an area of grassland where a herd of blesbok were contentedly grazing or lounging in the sward until we rudely interrupted as we searched for plants. The animals gave some disapproving snorts as we approached and moved off a short distance. We need not have disturbed them as we found what we were after in another area with a good fresh spike of green flowered *Orthochilus foliosus* followed by a pristine spike of the impressive long spurred and sweet-scented *Disa cooperi*. A good start on a warm day and these plants were followed by a few fiery *Crocasmia aurea* as we rumbled through the undulating African countryside with now familiar strung out towns that stretched along ridges. A higher road took us through a population of cabbage trees *Cussonia paniculata* with all sizes on show including some near the road with flowers and one with a couple of impressive caterpillars (cabbage tree emperor moth). The rambling stems of *Cucumis palmata* hung over shrubs and there was a shrub of sweet-scented *Bowkeria verticillata* too. Not much further on a we stopped where there were many *Watsonia confusa* on the slopes and a fine spike of *Habenaria humilior*. The interesting flora continued to arrive with next a superb colony of *Nerine appendiculata* as well as frogs in the ditch behind which grew the hefty spikes of *Eucomis comosa*, an impressive bulb. Also on the trackside was



*Brunsvigia undulata* with *Dierama latifolium*

a large shrubby *Solanum sp.* The road carried on through grassland, farm and forest plantation, here and there crossed by streams one of which had many lovely red *Hesperantha coccinea*. Then on an overgrown verge we found our first big *Brunsvigia undulata*, with more and better following soon after including a very fresh individual with several cherry-red flowers on long pedicels and many unopened buds. Welcome cloud had cooled things off a bit by now as we enjoyed a picnic in the shade of some of the few trees.

Nearing the Kamberg nature reserve we stopped for a stunning clump of *Watsonia confusa* with immaculate fresh flower spikes and beside a nearby stream grew also our first *Dierama latifolium*. But this was nothing compared to what was soon to come. Reaching the reserve, we walked across to a magical display of hundreds of the latter in flower, countless pink bells swaying gently in the breeze, their silvery buds adding a sparkle and the brooding hills some drama. It was a truly beguiling sight, enriched further by more gangly spheres of *Brunsvigia undulata* and the occasional *Disa versicolor* and *D. cooperi*. Heading back to the road we also found a fresh *Asclepias macropus* and good spikes of *Satyrium longicauda* too. There was now the remaining distance to cover, and we drove along a pot-holed road and then smoother tarmac towards and increasingly dramatic landscape arriving in good time at Giants Castle and our comfortable well-placed chalets set in grounds filled with native podocarps, tree ferns and large specimens of *Leucosidea sericea* with grand views beyond.

#### Day 11      Giants Castle

Pink edging to the high clouds was followed by soft light spread over the hills at dawn, the gentle contours of the landscape rising to sandy cliffs and the tall dark basalt tops beyond. After a very pleasant breakfast on the veranda, we set off on a walk, passing a very large cabbage tree growing from a rock and then stopping for a few pristine *Disa patula* that were growing on a slope, poised above the river valley. Descending to the river we began our walk through the grasslands, finding an colourful grasshopper and many interesting plants including *Kniphofia linearifolia*, *Schizoglossum atropurpureum*, *Indigofera hedyantha*, a big spike of *Pterygodium magnum*, whilst white-flowered *Gomphostigma virgatum* grew in the rushing torrent, the elegant sprays of *Polygala virgata* swayed gently in the breeze and a couple of *Disperis tysonii* were found (Joan as ever!). Golden



*Disa patula*





Giants Castle dawn

*Helichrysum rudera* was in good flower shortly before the path climbed a little to where *Protea caffra* still had some decent flowers. It was warm now and the shade of the valley forest had great appeal. The first streamlet had *Disperis fanniniae* growing on a rock and entering the woodland of yellow-wood trees and *Podocarpus latifolium* the cool shade supported a thriving population of pretty *Streptocarpus gardenii* and the little orchid *Stenoglottis fimbriata*, the two often mingling on rocks into delightful colonies. Orange *Leonotis dubia* also grew in the woods along with many ferns including dainty *Adiantum poiretii*. The clouds were beginning to build as we walked back and by lunchtime there was a rumble or two of thunder.

A little shower did arrive shortly afterwards, but it didn't bother us as we had all decided to have a relaxing afternoon enjoying the beautiful surroundings from our balconies or having short wanders around the well laid out grounds.

**Day 12            To Witsieshoek**

I decided to hike up to a viewpoint for sunrise, whilst everyone enjoyed a more relaxed approach from their balconies. After another pleasant breakfast on the big veranda, we left the resort and drove north, stopping for a colony of *Ornithogalum candicans* and a very colourful grasshopper. Our route took us across rather savanna-like areas, and we stopped for coffee and snacks on the way to a reservoir. Except it was the wrong reservoir! This meant a bit of extra driving to get us back on track, climbing up and over a high pass and then turning off towards a grassland reserve where we had the chance to photograph Cape zebra, wildebeest and blesbok before having lunch by the water. More zebra photos followed and then we search the (warm) grassland for plants finding fruiting *Eucomis autumnalis*, *Gladiolus crassifolius*, the odd flower on *Xysmalobium undulatum* and the leaf fans of *Boophone disticha*.

It was only an hour and half more to our destination in the altogether cooler realms below Sentinel Peak. The plan had been to search the flower rich grassland next to the rooms, but the thunderstorms we had thus far avoided during the tour finally caught up with us. After sheltering for a while it relented and gave us a chance to quickly see *Gladiolus crassifolius*, *Kniphofia porphyrantha*, *Disa versicolor* and *Disperis cardiophora*, before it once again rained heavily. We chose to retreat and even though it did stop by now the vegetation and flowers were soaked and best seen another day.

**Day 13            Witsieshoek I**

There was a glorious sunrise and by the time we set off on our transport and bumped our way up to the trailhead it was a clear sunny day with crisp views of the towering cliffs and fresh green meadows that filled every slope and terrace. We began at a decent pace, seeing a few things on the way such as pretty pink *Hesperantha baurii*, *Pterygodium leucanthum*, the pink daisy *Dimorphotheca jucundum* and the wonderful 'pineapples' of *Eucomis bicolor*. Our haste was well placed, and we arrived at a spectacular Amphitheatre viewpoint just in time with clouds fast approaching. In front of us was a magnificent plunging valley, flanked by saw-edged ridges and sweeping up to sheer basalt cliffs with silver streaks of waterfalls falling into the abyss. Mist arrived soon after and the next section was one of intermittent views as we negotiated the rocky path and its various obstacles, such as the odd ladder. There were stands of delicate *Alepidia cordifolia*, bushy *Berkheya rosulata*, *Pterygodium dracomontanum* and the slopes were peppered with fiery *Kniphofia porphyrantha*, but what was most impressive was the incredible quantity of *Dierama dracomontanum*, which coated the slopes in a swaying salmon veneer. There were many thousands. Also common were the leaves of *Nerine bowdenii*, but this year they seemed to be flowering late. However, the bonus was we found a late *Cyrtanthus flanaganii* as we photographed groups of low-growing *Eucomis schiffii*. A little further on some beautiful *Nerine bowdenii* were found in flower at the base of a cliff, though caterpillars seemed to be moving in fast on the flowers. Just as we finished photographing these the rumbles of thunder finally delivered and a hailstorm swept in. We had all brought rain gear and were soon covered up, continuing our walk to the base of the famed chain ladders.



*Dierama dracomontanum*



*Disa jacettetiae*



After a short wait we were able to have lunch in the near dry, before beginning our return leg, seeing pretty *Nemesia caerulea*, good spikes of greenish *Ornithogalum regalis* spending time among the amazing *Dierama dracomontanum* or just taking in the stunning scenery, with ever changing vistas as the mists drifted across or the sun broke through casting light and shadow across the sombre cliffs and looming square-topped peaks. There was a second look at the big view and then closer to the car park we found *Kniphofia thodei* and *Crocasmia pearcei*. Our transport bounced us back down the road to the lodge where we could dry out and put our feet up for a while. I decided to search for something very special...

#### Day 14      Witsieshoek II

First glance out of window at 5 am revealed thick mist, but this suddenly withdrew into the valley by 5.15 and there was a wonderful dawn with glowing clouds, ridge silhouettes and warming cliffs the ebbing and flowing mists slowly shrinking away. By the time we set off after breakfast it was blue skies and warm sunshine. We made our way slowly, exploring various slopes and finding *Disperis cardiophorum*, *Kniphofia porphyrantha*, *Disa versicolor*, slender green *Alepidia setifera* and plenty of lilac-pink *Gladiolus crassifolius*. On another steep slope there was a real treat with spikes of the gorgeous *Disa jacettetiae* in perfect flower growing with the small yellow spikes of *Kniphofia fibrosa*. Continuing there were stands of orange *Leonotis intermedia*, the convoluted flowers of *Diascia purpurea*, a scattering of *Agapanthus campanulatus*, bright pink *Helichrysum vernalis*, *Disa brevicornis*, *Erica woodii* and several dainty *Disperis tysonii*. Showier were the flamboyant *Harveya speciosa* and *Hesperanthes coccinea*. Our walk led to a cascade where we found *Albuca shawii*, *Melasma scabrum*, *Drosera natalensis* and more *Kniphofia fibrosa*. The odd spray of *Gladiolus microcarpus* could also be seen hanging out from the rocks, but these were much more approachable and plentiful by a larger waterfall where they grew in a delightful combination with *Ornithogalum regale* and *Dierama dracomontanum*. Walking back up the final cherry on the cake was the unusual buff bells of *Pachycarpus campanulatus* on a grassy bank.

Lunch was with a sweeping view of the Drakensberg, with thunder beginning to rumble and the blue skies of the morning all but wrapped up in grey clouds. Typical weather for this season and it did not put off Morten, Sandra and I as

we set off for a productive afternoon walk, quickly finding the graceful *Dierama cooperi* on a rocky slope and then a good number of freckled *Gladiolus ecklonii*. We made our way slowly along the ridge, finding multi-flowered *Moraea brevistyla* and various other plants in photogenic positions with the moody mountains beyond the perfect backdrop. A population of *Disa cornuta* had a few decent flowers left and we found richly coloured forms of *Satyrium longicauda*, *Habenaria dives* and the fruiting spokes of *Brunsvigia radulosa*, with many of the broad flat leaves of the latter scattered about. *Cephalaria oblongifolia* was widespread and at times mixed with the very similar *Scabiosa columbaria*. Crossing a rocky flat with an unusual community of *Xerophyllum tenax* and *Euphorbia clavaroides* we then climbed up onto another ridge where there were several pristine *Kniphofia ritualis* in flower as well as a couple of *Brunsvigia radulosa* with some flowers left. More of the former grew above and I managed to photograph the lovely Pride of Table Mountain butterfly pollinating one. There were superb views all around and the thunder though regular brought no rain as swifts fizzed overhead. Morten then found a compact form of *Schizoglossum bidens* on a rock outcrop just before we began our walk back along the road. The occasional flowering *Clematis brachiata* was seen and there were lots of familiar faces with tufts of *Wahlenbergia cuspidata*, various daisies and then on a ledge too high to reach was a *Brownleea galpinii*. In the end we enjoyed a dry walk, the thunder providing only the quintessential ambience of the Drakensberg.

#### 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 sandstone cliffs. At the top of one escarpment, we stopped and crossed the rocky grassland finding the first flowers on *Ipomaea crassipes* and pale yellow *Thunbergia atriplicifolia*, but alas, the large shrubs of *Protea roupellei* had no flowers this year. After checking in at the hotel we drove back to the grasslands and took a side road and stopping in an area 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 several including one in great condition. Next up was an outcrop with more red *Gladiolus crassifolius* and down in the damper grassy hollows were quite a few very different *Gladiolus papilio* with pale yellow flowers marked with maroon inside. A few *Habenaria dives* were found and



Pride of Table Mountain on *Kniphofia ritualis*





*Gladiolus papilio*

then a flowering *Drosera natalensis* at a viewpoint over the complex sandstone landscape and lunch was taken at another viewpoint with a pleasant breeze.

Moving on to our final destination for the day we acquired the necessary permit and although it was still quite warm, we began our hike below imposing rock formations. An area of *Leucosidium* scrub held *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* with the vines bearing large fruits. A pure orange form of *Kniphofia triangularis* was found in the grassland and then as we turned to go up there were three big pink trumpets of *Ipomaea pellita*. Next were two superb spikes of a red-orange form of *Gladiolus dalenii* as our route swung around and then climbed on to the rock sheets above, finding two more good specimens in the vegetation patches that clung to the rock. Here, there was a matrix of *Aloe maculata* and a large-leaved *Drimia* species, with the odd off-white *Schizocarpus* (*Scilla*) *nervosus* poking out of the grass tufts on the flatter plateau at the top. There was the bonus of a pair of Verreaux’s eagles that soared out and slowly circled to gain height offering superb views and Joan and I also saw two hartebeest as we were climbing up.

Soon it was time to descend and return to the comforts of the hotel and prepare for a reluctant departure from the flora and scenery of the wonderful Drakensberg.

#### **Day 16            To Johannesburg & flights (1 February)**

Some took a last walk into the coloured hills, finding *Pelargonium sidoides* and many birds, but for most it was a leisurely morning that saw us away by 10.30 am and driving across the vast fields and flat grasslands north of the Drakensberg, with fast 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 switching the warmth of South Africa for much cooler northern climes.

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