

GOLDEN GATE HIGHLANDS National Park - SOUTH AFRICA - November, 2015

There were many golden moments at our Mini-Meths in this lovely region of South Africa, just north of the Lesotho border. Mike and Verena set the whole thing up and we are very grateful for their efforts, arriving a couple of days before the rest of us, to do some final recce-ing.

Four of us set out on the 1500 km drive from Fishhoek, stopping en route at the Karoo NP near Beaufort West, and Prior Grange Farm near Springfontein. Prior Grange was remarkable for farming merino sheep whose primary role was to mow one pristine cricket pitch, right in the middle of the Karoo, an amazing sight. Diced up, they also made amazing eating.

Richard, John, Miriam and I joined Mike and Verena and Yvonne and Tich at the Golden Gates Hotel (just below 3,000'), driving in from our Glen Reenen campsite chalet nearby. It was quite surreal, parking next to a Maserati, alongside a Ferrari, an Aston Martin, then a Porsche, etc. What kind of place had we come to? *(There was also a wedding reception on that evening -ed.)* The sight of Mike, propping up the bar in his dingy shorts, quickly brought us down to earth. Over a buffet supper plans were made, and at 9 am next morning the troops gathered for our first foray into these wind-carved sandstone mountains. We tackled the Brandwag Butte, following a well-used trail meandering up the face of the cliffs to the chain-assisted final scramble to the top. On a lovely sunny day with a pleasant cooling breeze, it was a nice introduction to this scenic wonderland. We took a short game drive in the afternoon, getting a bit excited by zebra, but mainly the wonderful bird-life. The small touristy town of Clarens is but 20 km away. We were careful to schedule our arrival just after the tourist shops had closed for a quick stroll round before dining splendidly at the Portuguese Restaurant (highly recommend: the butterfly prawns).

On Monday morning we gathered at the Hotel again to cross the river and battle our way up the ridge opposite. It was pretty steep going, and very windy, causing Verena to opt out to save herself for the morrow. High up on the ridge we were grandly rewarded with views of endless mountains into Lesotho, highly specialised mountain flowers, and a herd of black wildebeest grimly surviving on the parched grassland below. The delightful cliff edge walking led to Wodehouse Peak at 7,999' (2,438 m), where we beach bums were feeling the altitude a little. Finding a wind-sheltered spot, we sprawled on the grass for lunch. The path down descended steeply onto the 'mushroom' plateau, so called because of the substantial undercutting wind erosion. Looking for a new route down, Mike headed off towards Echo Ravine but decided that particular way down would most definitely cause a rebellion in the ranks. So, wisely, we took the 'normal' route off, which still involved some careful scrambling. This path eventually led us below the mushroom overhang, quite spectacular with its projecting edge shading bright yellow sandstone above maroon coloured shale. That night we opted to dine Mulanje style, on that easy old favourite, spaghetti bolognese, in our spacious Glen Reenen cottage. It was a fine evening, with tasty home-cooking, very nice South African wine, excellent company, and lots of good Malawi memories to reminisce over.

On our last day of hiking we drove up a dirt track close to the park entrance gate to intersect with the Ribbok hiking trail. Although little used (we saw nobody) the path is quite well marked with occasional white spots. For a long way the path meandered up the valley criss-crossing the dry river bed many times. John and Richard frequently got excited by unusual birds (red collared weavers, ground woodpeckers, etc.) and on the hillsides we spied hartebeest, zebra and wildebeest, with dung of porcupine and jackal on the path to remind us of the nocturnals. We passed quite close to a group of magnificent wild horses with a very young foal, tucked in a side valley. At times the flowers were stunning. We lunched just past a stand of beautiful pendulous blue Scilla blooms, which we had last seen dangling out from the cliffs above the waterfall on the Chapaluka path while climbing up to Chambe Hut. The path got steeper and threatening clouds gathered. We pushed ourselves onwards towards the head of the valley, just below Generaalskop (one military style hat-shaped peak). At the top of the pass, the wind

was howling away and we were expecting to continue over into sheltered terrain. Not so, the path turned abruptly to climb up the ridge, getting even higher and windier. It was cold up there, and with dark clouds all around, it became a little threatening ... best to keep moving. Eventually the rain came and Tich put on his bin bag, recently tailored and surprisingly strong, not shredding as it flapped madly in the wind. The ridge kept ascending, to much more of a knife edge than that notorious Mulanje misnomer between Chambe and Tuchila. With the wind buffeting and almost blowing us off, we battled along extremely cautiously. From the top we spotted Mike who had driven to the far end of the trail and then walked back to meet us. He was about to give up on our ever arriving, but thankfully held on a little longer. Relieved that the plan had worked out, we made the steep descent off the ridge down to the good old Kombi. It had been quite a long route, 12 miles (19.3 km), given the climbing we did, up to 8,431' (2,570 m), so we all felt we had been well challenged by the end of it. Verena especially deserves a medal for perseverance. Over the final fine buffet meal at the hotel, we all felt this had been an excellent destination for a METHS meet. Many thanks to Mike and Verena for sussing it out and organising this event.

Martin Horrocks.