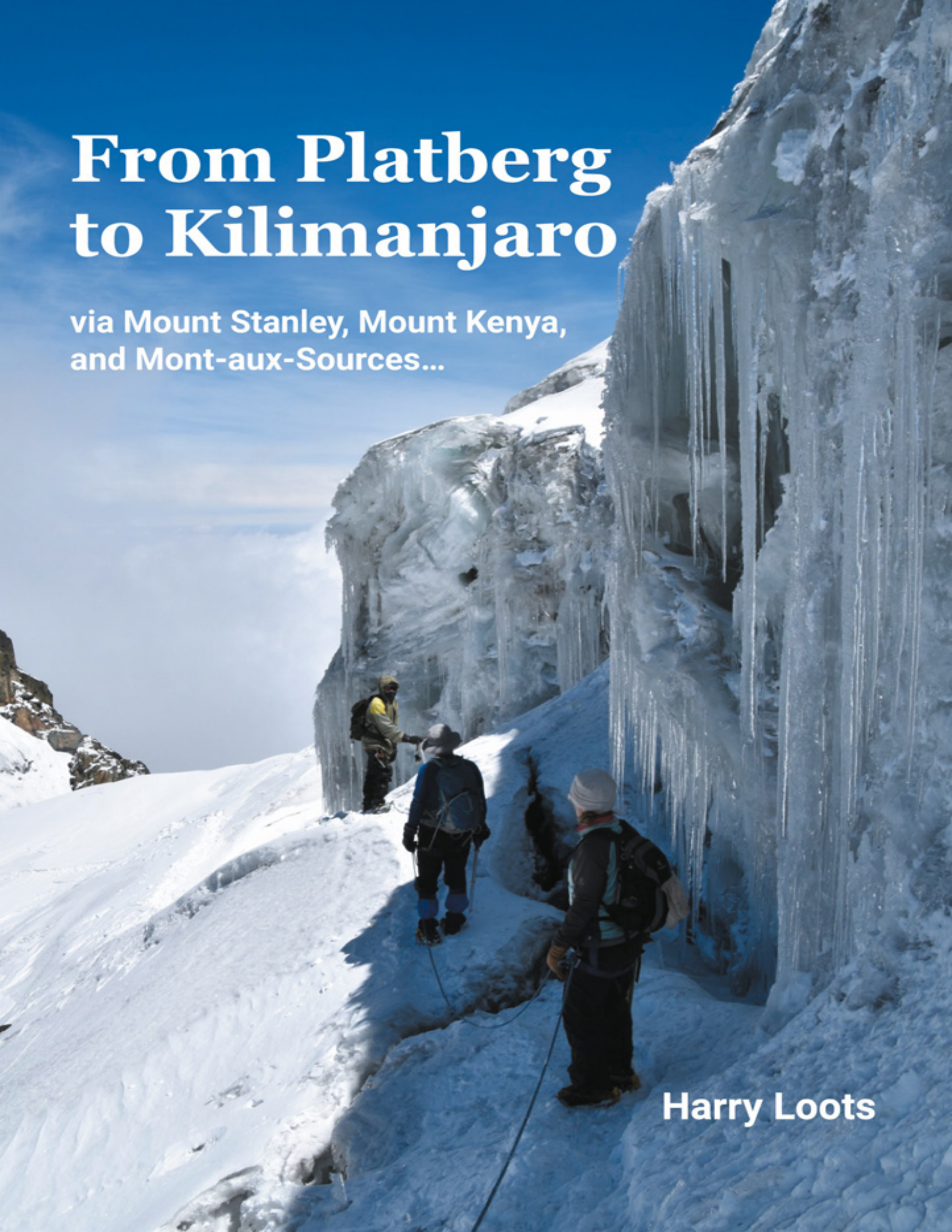
From Platberg to Kilimanjaro

via Mount Stanley, Mount Kenya, and Mont-aux-Sources...



Harry Loots

Self-published
Walk in Wild Places
https://walkinwildplaces.com/
Harry Loots
harry.loots@walkinwildplaces.com

Table of Contents

DEDICATION

To the guides, porters, muleteers, and cooks who made this possible.

To André, who climbed Africa's three highest mountains with me, and Mandy who joined us for part of the way. I could have done this without you but, it would not have been half as much fun.

To my children, who tolerated my absences. At least one of whom constantly worried that I was going to be abducted by terrorists in a remote African village. To my girlfriend who lit a candle in a church in Sicily on the day André and I were descending Kilimanjaro.

To my family and friends who supported me throughout this journey.

Without your love and support this would have been just another trip to a mountain. Knowing how much love and care there was out there made a memorable adventure an unforgettable one. And, finally, to the long list of friends who have spent many days and hours climbing mountains with me. Making memories and forming lifelong friendships.

You know who you are.

PS! I tried to remember as many names as possible in the 'Climbing mates' chapter, but I'm sure I will have left out a few. Please remind me so that I can add your name.

FOREWORD

I was six or seven years old when a visiting school nurse told me: “Ai my kind, jou ou voetjies is so lekker plat. Jy moet nooit te ver wil gaan stap nie!” which roughly translates to “My child, your little feet are very flat. You should never try to walk too far!”.

I ignored the advice.

Fifty-three years, thousands of kilometres, and many mountain tops later, I stood on top of Kilimanjaro, the highest mountain in Africa.

Flat feet and all!

This is how I got there.

GETTING HOOKED ON THE MOUNTAINS

I didn’t grow up in a mountaineering family, but it may have been a family outing that triggered what was to become a life-long passion. I was four or five years old when my parents walked to the top of Platberg, the flat-topped mountain that towers above Harrismith. I remember that I was unhappy at being left behind. Whether this was just me being annoyed at parents leaving me at home with my Granny, while they went out and had fun, or envy that they got to walk to the top of the mountain and I did not, I can’t remember. Apparently, for weeks afterwards I asked questions about the trip and what they saw on the mountain. It was also the only time I know of that my parents climbed a mountain.

Perhaps it was this that planted the seed… Or perhaps it was after my first trip to the top of the Drakensberg. I was six or seven years old by then. It was a Sunday school outing, and the group leader was Oom Dawie, I seem to recall.

In my brown leather satchel, I normally used for my schoolbooks, I was carrying a flask of water and the sandwiches my mother made for me.

An orange or two. My jersey was tied around my waist and my plastic raincoat was stuffed into the satchel. I was probably wearing shorts and a flannel shirt. On my ‘flat’ feet I had my good leather shoes with rubber soles that I normally wore to church on Sundays.

The trip was to the Drakensberg area us locals referred to as Mont-aux-Sources. But in fact we went no further than the

old Mountain Club hut, a few kilometres from the peak. At the time, and for years after, I thought Mont-aux-Sources was the highest point in the Drakensberg. A trip to Mont-aux-Sources carried with it bragging rights. Plus there was the added excitement that you would see where water bubbled out of the earth. The ‘sources’, to start the Tugela and Elands Rivers, and a tributary to the Orange River! One of these rivers ends up in the Indian Ocean and the other two in the Atlantic – more than 1400km apart.

To get to ‘Mont-aux-Sources’ one walks steeply upwards via a series of zigzags to a path below the North Face of the Sentinel. And then along a slightly rising contour path to end beneath a solid rock wall equipped with a chain ladder.

What I remember from this first trip was how the world below got smaller and smaller as I zigged and zagged upwards. And the feeling of disconnection as I walked along the contour path. The valleys below appearing to float beneath my feet, as I made distance and gained altitude. Then, as we turned a corner, in front of us was a huge gap between two solid rock walls. On the left, when you looked up, was the chain ladder. Two strands of cold, and rusty-looking chain snaking down the smoke grey rock wall, with metal rungs that seemed to go up and up and up into the blue sky above. Then, almost too soon, it was my turn to climb...

What I remember even more vividly than the walk was my very first experience of climbing the chain ladder. Gripping the rungs tight with both hands. Putting my rubber soled shoes on the rungs, one at a time.

Moving one hand up; gripping tightly. Then moving the other hand up to a higher rung, gripping tightly. Then a foot moving up, and then another; then again hands, moving up one at a time, and repeat.

I remember being worried that the weight of the satchel on my back would make me fall backwards. This worry increasing at probably about the same rate as the drop below me increased. I also remember worrying that my hands or shoes might slip off the cold damp metal bars. And there were probably another hundred worries running through my head. One for each time I took a giant step up to the next rung. Making sure I didn't lean too far back and overbalance, I gradually made my way to the top.

And then I stood on top of the Drakensberg! For the first time! In complete awe of the dramatic drops and the roughly sculptured rock faces that guarded her. In my mind, I had reached the very top of the world. Every fear that had gripped my six-year-old body evaporated and was replaced by a sense of 'Wow! I made it.' Later, peering over the edge of the escarpment at the Tugela falls, and having lunch near the Mountain Club hut, all added to the sense of adventure. And perhaps on that day I knew that I wanted to stand on top of many mountains.

I also remember how disappointed I was when Oom Dawie decided that it would be too dangerous for us six-year-olds to descend via the chain ladder. We had to return via a boring rock-strewn gully that led back to the contour path.

I there-and-then resolved that I would go back to the Drakensberg and go up and down the chain ladder on my own. I did! Many times over in the coming years and continue to do so whenever I get the opportunity.

Sometimes, I'd scramble up the Standard route on the Sentinel. The imposing buttress which stands tall above the path to the chain ladder. With its mind-blowing views across the Amphitheatre, the Devil's Tooth, and miles and miles and miles beyond.

So, perhaps it was this first trip to the top of the Drakensberg that set me on this path of climbing mountains. Discovering new summits and intricately carved rock-faces with interlocking structures creating unique shapes. Seeing plants and the trees as I wend my way, dazzling me with their colours. Wondering at the shape of their leaves and how they manage to survive in the most unbelievable and sometimes inhospitable places. Amazed at birds that cross the skies in effortless flight: gliding, tumbling, diving, hovering. Birds who make untraceable paths in the air. Playfully following and watching me as I make my way along a mountain path. Sometimes venturing closer as I eat my lunch at a resting spot. The sounds that surround me. The whistling of the wind through sky-tall trees, around rock fortresses and up never-ending rockflutes. The swish-swish-swish as swallows and swifts dive headlong past me to the depths below. Rustling leaves and grasses waving in the moving air. Thunder rolling down a ridge while blinding flashes pierce the darkened skies. Water rushing headlong over stones…

Or perhaps I started climbing mountains because, as Mallory said, it’s there.

LEARNING TO CLIMB

Growing up at the foot of a mountain meant that I was able to learn outdoor skills in a relatively safe environment. Our house was situated at the edge of town. With a clear view and easy access to both the fields and the nearby stream, known as K-spruit in polite conversation, or more commonly as 'Kakspruit'. As children we spent many hours convincing ourselves that we were the new incarnations of Robin Hood and his Merry men. Or whoever the heroes were in the latest adventure story we were reading. Just beyond this field and stream was the start of our mountain.

Platberg – our mountain

Platberg (Flat mountain)

Platberg towers majestically above the little Free State town of Harrismith. It is home of the famous Harrismith Bergresies[1]. In 1947, it may even have been internationally famous for a little while! This was when a young Princess Elizabeth visited our mountain during a Royal tour of South Africa.

Rising from one-thousand-six-hundred metres above sea level to nearly two-thousand-four-hundred metres, Platberg really is a flat mountain. The nine-kilometre-long plateau with a width of more than one-and-ahalf kilometres in some places, averages between two-thousand-twohundred and two-thousand-three-hundred metres in height. The highest point, 2394m, only about hundred-and-fifty metres higher than the lowest point.

This is where I spent many of my days during weekends and school holidays. While other boys were learning how to play rugby, I was learning how to play in the mountains. To survive in the wilderness and, more importantly, developing a love for the freedom of the outdoors.

I was never good at rugby, and not particularly interested in playing, so I never made it beyond the third team. Which meant that I only played a few times a year, and also meant that I had time on weekends to wander around the slopes of Platberg.

Part of this learning came from being in the local Voortrekker troop. Voortrekkers were a South African equivalent to the Boy Scout movement. Ironically enough,

part of the inspiration for the Boy Scout movement originated in South Africa. Robert Baden-Powell was stationed in Mafeking during the second Anglo-Boer war. Besieged for months, he started using the local Cadet Corps to run messages, help the wounded and act as lookouts. The cadets impressed Baden-Powell with the way they took to their tasks. A few years later he discovered that boys were using his military manual, ‘Aids to Scouting’, as a guide to outdoor fun. This spurred Baden-Powell on to form the Boy Scouts, which had their first camp in 1907.

After the Anglo-Boer war, there was a very strong anti-British sentiment among Afrikaners in South Africa. Understandable given the thousands of women and children that died in the British Concentration camps. This gave rise to Afrikaner nationalism ideology. One of its aims having been to keep English and Afrikaner youth on separate social paths. Thus, in 1913 the Voortrekker movement was founded. Aimed at Afrikaans-speaking youth, with its values firmly rooted in Afrikaner nationalism. The Boy Scouts soon diversified and became an international movement. The Voortrekkers remained exactly as it started: a movement for Afrikaans speaking youth.

I joined the Voortrekkers either because my mom or dad said I should, or because some of my friends joined, and I joined them. I don’t know. What I do know is that from a young age I was learning how to tie knots, cook in the outdoors, set up a camp in a way that would both protect me from the wind and rain and cause the least amount of impact to the area.

Blissfully unaware that the Voortrekker movement was rooted in Afrikaner nationalism, I loved the camaraderie and opportunities for adventure that it brought. And it provided me with an environment where I could learn outdoor skills

which I may not have been able to do otherwise. (We had to wait until I was about sixteen years old for the Boy Scout movement to find its way to Harrismith.)

One of my earliest camping and trekking trips happened in my first or second school year. Our troop leader was Chris van Zyl who was in his final school years. We pitched our canvas tent in the little oakwood copse above Harrismith. I don’t remember what we learnt on that trip.
But I remember some of Chris’s schoolmates, possibly Arrie Schreiber and Guillaume Reitz, coming up in the evening and scaring the wits out of us.

Platberg – at sunset; from the botanical gardens area

My main climbing partner was Freddy Gray. Freddy died in a car accident when we were twenty years old, so we never climbed the big mountains we both dreamt of together. Our frequent companion was Gerard Hansen, who is also no longer with us. Gerard lived on the edge of town, near the Municipal Waterworks, where many of the paths that lead up the mountainside begin. Starting from Gerard's house on a Saturday morning, we would walk up one of the many paths that made their way past the Municipal Waterworks and through the pine forest.
Up into the gullies that give the mountain its distinctive look. Occasionally we were joined by JP de Witt, André Landman, and other friends. We'd spend many glorious hours exploring nooks and crannies, soaking up the sun and watching the birds and dassies[2]. Some days we'd come across antelope going about their daily routine.

Some days Freddy and I would go up One-Man's Pass and down Zig Zag Pass, following the route of the mountain race. Some nights we'd spend in the oakwood copse above town. Then as we got older, we went higher up to the prominent overhang halfway up One-Man's Pass, with a thick woollen blanket for a sleeping bag. Our dinners were simple. The kind that a ten-year-old can prepare without their mother's help. A can of baked beans and bully beef warmed up over an open fire and fresh bread from the baker. (Probably not the cuisine that the future Queen Elizabeth would have been treated to on her visit to our mountain.) Preparing 'dinner' often resulted in me coming home with blisters on my fingers – from taking hot cans out of open fires. Water came from mountain streams or drips off the mountainside during dry seasons.

On some weekends, Freddy and I climbed on the basalt rock flutes that guarded the summit. Sometimes we'd belay each other with washing line cord. Many years later when I

climbed here with Mountain Club members, I realised how many mistakes we made. Not only with our choice of climbing rope, but also our technique, which, if either of us had fallen, would have resulted in a serious accident. Alongside this realization there was also pride. Knowing that we had climbed some of these rock faces long before they were being claimed as new routes. With a washing line!

---

[1] Mountain race

[2] Rock hyrax

Venturing further afield

As our confidence grew, so did our curiosity. Still ignoring the school nurse’s advice, I started wandering further afield. Some weekends we'd follow the river as far as Swinburne. Other times we'd find ourselves on one of the many sandstone outcrops dotted around Harrismith.

Then, as teenagers, we started looking towards the distant peaks of the Drakensberg.

The Drakensberg - Sentinel peak on the right of the amphitheatre.
Picture taken from Royal Natal National Park

Mont-aux-Sources

For years, I believed that the highest point in the Drakensberg was Mont-aux-Sources. So, I grew up thinking that if I get to the top of Mont-aux-Sources I will have

climbed to the highest point in the Drakensberg, or ‘berg’ as it’s colloquially known.

To get to Mont-aux-Sources you had to climb to the top of the escarpment using the chain ladder. This meant either starting your hike in Royal Natal National Park or find your way to the Sentinel car park.

Starting from Royal Natal National Park was a super long way for a teenager with a heavy backpack. So, we tried our best to get to the Sentinel car park, which made the walk several hours shorter and easier.

Getting to the Sentinel car park required a huge amount of effort if you didn’t have transport of your own. If I had grown up in present day South Africa, I would have been able to take a bus to Witsieshoek (QwaQwa). From there I would have been able to hire a local taxi to take me to the Sentinel car park. But I grew up in apartheid South Africa in the sixties and seventies. The white minority apartheid government was in power. Among some of the bizarre restrictions imposed by the apartheid regime, was the use of buses. Apartheid meant separate. Black people were not allowed on white buses, and white people were not allowed on black buses. This meant we weren’t able to use local black transport to get us to Witsieshoek. Despite these restrictions we were occasionally lucky enough to hitch lifts from Harrismith on the open trucks. Driven by black farmworkers, these trucks transported food, livestock, and black people from farm to town and town to farm in the area. The trip sometimes meant changing vehicles two or three times. And a walk of an extra two or more hours to get to the Sentinel car park from wherever we got dropped off on the other side of Witsieshoek. When we were really lucky these kind strangers would drop us at the car park. Waving happily as they were turning around and driving back to

their end destination. Having added an extra hour to their trip. An act typical of the generosity of spirit of African people. Occasionally one of our parents would give us a ride to the Sentinel car park. But this only happened on very rare occasions.

Our preferred sleeping place on top of the ‘berg’, was the ruin of the old Mountain Club hut[3]. Being without most of its roof, we could make a fire inside the thick walls that kept away the sniping wind. Being inside the walls, combined with our limited ‘mountaineering equipment’ staved off the worst of the cold. Our overnight equipment consisted of woollen blankets, thick woollen jumper, and winter undies. And we survived.

Sometimes we couldn't sleep in the hut. Then we'd head for the tiny cave a little way behind the hut, a much colder option. But one which many years later became an emergency shelter for Dave Easton and me. Caught in a freak snowstorm and thick mist while climbing on the Amphitheatre wall, we had to navigate our way in a whiteout. We found the cave, perhaps more by luck than intuition. During the night we had shrews sniffing round our heads. We didn't mind. We were just happy that we had found this shelter. The next morning we woke up to a sun rising over perfect white snow blanket. Pure magic.

On one of these trips, probably around 1972, we met John Doctor, a member of the Natal section of the Mountain Club of South Africa. He suggested that we look up the MCSA and join their members on excursions to the Drakensberg to gain experience.

JOINING THE MCSA

Six or seven years later I joined the MCSA. Somewhere towards the end of the 70s or early 80s, on an MCSA trip to Giant's Castle, I met André Dalais, a.k.a. 'Frog'.

André and his climbing partner Mike Richmond had been climbing one of the technical routes. At some point André was hampered by his pack. He and Mike decided that he would throw it to Mike who was standing below him. The pack, which contained all their warm clothes, food, etc. sailed over the top of Mike's hands. Out into space, and then down and down and down until it landed a few hundred feet below. André and Mike arrived at our campsite wearing t-shirts and shorts.
The rest of their clothes, camping equipment, and food, lying somewhere in a valley hundreds of metres below. We fed them and Mike managed to get into the cowl of our tent. André had to spend a cold and miserable night outside, inside my plastic survival bag and the few extra clothes we could spare.

He survived both the cold and the survival bag. He also survived a few other incidents, including one where he had to be resuscitated twice.

André and I climbed together regularly after this, until I moved to Cape Town in the mid-eighties. After this I'd see him and other Natal mates mainly during the summer holidays. Then I moved to England in the mid-nineties and didn't see my friend again until 2008.

The occasion was the twenty-fifth anniversary of the Amajuba Section of the MCSA. The club that I had started in 1983 with the help of other MCSA members. Wiv and Joan von Willich, Dougal Drummond, Frank du Toit, Doug Lyon, Christine Glasspool, Tjaart van der Walt, Giel Prins, and a few others. Some of my most memorable mountaineering trips were had with the club…

Like the time we left the Isandlwana Police Station after eleven in the morning (some claim it was even later). Apparently, I had been at a party the night before so took my time getting to the base. We duly left with packs, packed for a three-day stay on the escarpment.

I aimed to reach the escarpment via the Rockeries Pass that evening. The best part of twenty kilometres of walking and about sixteenhundred metres height gain.

At the foot of the pass Frikkie van Zyl decided to put up camp. Angus Drummond, Richard Groenewegen, Thea Groenewegen, Gary Gifford, and I carried on. We arrived at the top of the pass in the dark and in the rain. And discovered that half the second tent we were supposed to have with us was at the foot of the pass with Frikkie. We pitched our tent. Squeezed in. All five of us. In a two-man tent. Did synchronised turns all night long. Thea and Richard sleeping next to each other[4]. We climbed one of the Mnweni Needles the next day.

On another occasion we woke at the foot of the Mnweni pass after hiking for three days across the escarpment. It was my fortieth birthday and Jane Hill and Henriette Gibson produced cake, candles, and champagne to celebrate.

Not forgetting the Christmas parties we had in Xeni Cave. Black tie affairs with five-course dinners with some of the best people I've known. Herman Behrens, Rob Campbell, Beryl Gronland, Jane Hill, Henriette, Colin, Julie-Anne and William Gibson, Thea Groenewegen, Dougal, Lynn, Angus, Ian and Rowan Drummond, Gill Tresise, Jan van der Velden, and others.

Nor trips to the top of the Drakensberg with Doug Lyon, Chris Steenkamp, and Frank du Toit. And someone knocking

the pot of rice over...

Sadly, not all of these people made it to the twenty-fifth anniversary dinner. But André did. This started a sequence of events which would lead us to the top of Kilimanjaro a few years later.

In 2009, a year after the twenty-fifth anniversary celebrations, André joined me and members of the MCSA Amajuba section on a hiking and climbing trip to the Dolomites, the mountain range in Northern Italy that had become my ‘mountain home’ since moving to the UK. A couple of years later André was back in the Dolomites. And this time we were joined by Adrian Jardin (Pigmy).

---

[3] Since restored for use by park wardens, now in disuse, once again in decay

[4] They got married a few years later.