



An April 1962 photograph of Nigel Roberts' climbing mentors—André le Roux (on the left) and Dave Dodds (second from the right)—and three high-school students looking north across a sea of clouds at some of the peaks in the central portion of the Drakensberg mountains.

## MAFADI: MOUNTAINS, MENTORS AND MEMORIES

*Returning to South Africa's Drakensberg after an absence of almost 60 years*

*words and photographs by NIGEL ROBERTS*

Sixty years ago, on 11 December 1959, I started out on the first great adventure of my life. Thanks to wonderfully liberal and trusting parents, I was one of two 15-year-olds who began hitch-hiking from Johannesburg to Mt Kilimanjaro. When we reached Moshi at the foot of the mountain, my hitch-hiking partner and I split up: he headed north to Nairobi, while I joined four other South African schoolboys we'd met en route and the five of us tried to climb Kilimanjaro. On 27 December 1959, however, Kilimanjaro became the first of a not-insignificant number of mountains I've failed to climb on my first attempt. Altitude, cold, exhaustion and hunger conspired against me somewhere around the 5000m mark. Most of all, though, I was defeated by a lack of willpower. I simply didn't have enough determination to carry on.

*André le Roux carrying a guitar sheathed in plastic and emerging from the mist near the top of Organ Pipes Pass in the Cathedral Peak area of the Drakensberg mountains, in April 1961.*



Nevertheless, I was undaunted. I knew I wanted to climb, and 16 months later was given another opportunity to do so. Dave Dodds was a Johannesburg dentist. Born in August 1926, he was immensely talented, not only as a climber, but also as a film-maker on subjects as diverse as mountaineering and the life-cycle of termites. Dave was a family friend, and he knew that my parents, siblings and I were going to be spending the Easter 1961 holidays in the southern Drakensberg mountains. As a result, Dave asked if my younger brother Stuart and I would like to accompany him and one of his climbing partners, André le Roux, on an ascent of Cleft Peak, which is in the Cathedral Peak area of the Drakensberg range. We jumped at the chance.

Looking back nearly 60 years with the benefit of both greater knowledge and hindsight, I am struck by how young both Dave and André were at the time: Dave Dodds was only 34, while André (an architecture student at the University of the Witwatersrand) was a mere 22 years old when they took two callow teenagers with them on a four-day trip into the mountains.

The Drakensberg are, by international standards, not an especially high range of mountains. Most of its peaks are around 3000m above sea-level—higher than Ruapehu, but not as high as Aoraki / Mt Cook. But what the range lacks in height is easily made up for in grandeur. A series of 1000m-high walls that stretch hundreds of kilometres through southern Africa was given the Afrikaans name Drakensberg—meaning 'The Dragon's mountain'—because the range's ragged escarpment resembles the scaly back and tail of a preternaturally large dragon. Likewise, the range's Zulu name—uKhahlamba, which translates as 'Barrier of up-pointed spears'—also underscores the impact that the stunning, dramatic vistas make on anyone who sees the mountains.

The sheer cliffs that constitute the Drakensberg escarpment are a natural bulwark for clouds. As a

result, an ascent of any of the passes that lead up to the Lesotho plateau (formerly called the Basutoland plateau) is often undertaken in mist or even thick fog. My brother Stuart's and my first trip into the 'berg was no exception to this rule, and one of my favourite photographs from that trip is of André nearing the top of Organ Pipes Pass and about to emerge from the mist while carrying a guitar sheathed in plastic to protect it from the dampness that enveloped us. We camped on the plateau below the summit of Cleft Peak. The next morning Dave wisely insisted we wake up early, when it was barely light, so as to be able to see the sunrise from Cleft Peak's 3281m summit. I stood there for ages, entranced by the scenery. When the early morning clouds beneath the peak had evaporated, I took a photograph that I still think—possibly more than any other I've taken—conveys the rugged majesty of the Drakensberg mountains.

I finished high school at the end of 1961 and, the following year, Dave and André introduced me to the art (or is it the science?) of expedition management and leadership. They had volunteered to take 15 pupils (from the school that I'd left a few months earlier) on a six-day trip to the Cathedral Peak region of the Drakensberg. Given that I had had a little experience in the area, Dave and André asked me to join them on the trip. It was a resounding success: all the students hugely



*An April 1961 view looking north from the top of Cleft Peak (3281m) shows why the Afrikaans name of the Drakensberg range means 'The Dragon's Mountain', and why its Zulu name, uKhahlamba, translates as 'Barrier of up-pointed spears'.*

enjoyed the beauty of the 'berg and the challenges they encountered.

Four months later, I left South Africa permanently—never to live there again—but before I did so, Dave Dodds, André le Roux, and I organised one more trip to the Drakensberg. This time we went to what's possibly the best-known area of the 'berg: Mont-aux-Sources, in what was then known (and, interestingly, still is known) as the Royal Natal National Park. It was the middle of winter, and although it didn't snow, night-time temperatures were well below freezing. As a result, when Dave (as always) ensured we were up well before dawn, I took what I regard as the best photograph I've ever taken in the Drakensberg. It's of Dave standing on a small rise above the frozen Tugela river, focussing his medium-format Hasselblad camera in order to take a picture of the sun as it rose above a solid layer of clouds beneath the Mont-aux-Sources escarpment. A short while later, Dave moved his camera further back, straddled the frozen river, and took the photograph that was used on the cover of his book, *A Cradle of Rivers: The Natal Drakensberg*—a book that was praised in the *British Alpine Journal* for its 'excellent' photographs. I'm proud to say that some of my photos were also included in Dave Dodds' book, one of which—a black-and-white picture—I'll always treasure because it shows Dave and André, my

two climbing mentors, and three high school students looking north across a sea of clouds at some of the impressive peaks and big walls that constitute the central Drakensberg.

July 1962 was the last time Dave Dodds, André le Roux and I climbed together. Very sadly, Dave died (from complications caused by early-onset Alzheimer's disease) in August 1995; he was just 69 years old. Like me, André left South Africa in 1962. After a few years in Britain, he migrated to Canada and has worked as an architect and lived there ever since.

A few months ago, an unexpected (and unwanted) turn of events took me back to South Africa. My youngest brother, Charlie, who has lived in Johannesburg for the past four years, was diagnosed with cancer in mid-March. As I'd not seen him for 14 years, I decided it was high time I did so, and as a result spent almost all of September in South Africa. While there, I also took advantage of the opportunity to visit old friends and old haunts. One of the things I decided to do was to go back to the Drakensberg.

The first question I had to answer, though, was where would I go? Despite the initial attraction of nostalgically returning to places I'd been to before, I decided to seek pastures new. When I found that it was possible to ascend the highest mountain in South Africa during a four-day, three-night trip, I couldn't resist the challenge. After all, I'm known to be an old, unrequited peak-bagger. Mafadi (3450m), the highest mountain in the country, was certainly somewhere I'd not been before. I had never even heard of it.

When my family moved to South Africa in the late 1940s, it was commonly claimed that Mont-aux-Sources (3282m) was the country's highest mountain. I suspect the fact that Mont-aux-Sources was in the best-known section of the Drakensberg had a lot to do with this early instance of 'fake



news.' The area had been given its Royal appellation because King George VI, Queen Elizabeth and the Princesses Elizabeth and Margaret had stayed there in early 1947. People swooned over the royal family, and most simply couldn't see (or wouldn't look) beyond the horizon (even though the Mont-aux-Sources' amphitheatre horizon was justifiably famous). During most of the 1950s, however, it was widely thought that Champagne Castle (3377m) was South Africa's highest peak.

New surveys and more careful measurements have revealed that Mafadi is the country's highest mountain, followed by Injisuthi Dome (which is 40 metres lower than Mafadi). Champagne Castle is ranked third and, as one source puts it, 'the one-time highest favourite Mont-aux-Sources is number 26' (which is, after all, what happens when a country becomes a republic: royals are downgraded).

Mafadi is inland, behind the Drakensberg's dramatic escarpment walls, and so too is Injisuthi Dome. Both peaks have thus suffered from being out of sight and out of mind: it's not entirely surprising that Champagne Castle and the Mont-aux-Sources area have long been better known. Both Mafadi and Injisuthi Dome are on the South Africa/Lesotho border—a demarcation line that is not defined by the range's escarpment walls, but instead (and more logically) follows the line of the east-west watershed. Rain that flows west (and into the Orange river, for example) falls in Lesotho; water that goes east (such as in the Tugela or Injisuthi rivers) is in South Africa. As a result, Mafadi is not the highest mountain in southern Africa; that distinction is reserved for Thabana Ntlenyana (3482m), a conical peak south-west of Mafadi that's wholly in Lesotho. The small mountain kingdom also contains two other peaks—

*This July 1962 photograph shows Dave Dodds (1926-95) standing above the frozen Tugela river and using a tripod-mounted Hasselblad camera to take pictures of the sunrise.*



*Members of a group of about ten black African climbers descending Judge Pass in September 2019 that made Nigel Roberts realise that he 'really was in the new all-race South Africa'.*

my pack, which, at 15kg, I'd deliberately kept as light as possible without erring on the risky side. I made slow but steady progress up through the foothills of the Drakensberg mountains, and when we reached Centenary Hut—our designated day one camp site—at 1.45pm, we decided to carry on for another three kilometres and camp instead near the foot of Judge Pass.

The following morning, we climbed the pass before lunch and were well ahead of schedule. Two factors struck me forcibly while climbing Judge Pass.

The first factor was a double-header: it hit me initially when we encountered a group of about ten climbers coming down the pass, and then later when we met a group of four climbers at the top of the pass. I realised I really was in the new all-race South Africa. The first group we met had consisted solely of black African climbers, while the second, smaller group comprised four young Muslim men (each with a distinctive Abraham Lincoln-like beard). The last time I'd climbed in the Drakensberg was in the midst of South Africa's apartheid era. People of colour simply did not climb then for fun. Now, for some at least, Nelson Mandela's *Long Walk to Freedom* has resulted in long climbs in freedom.

The second factor that struck me as Otto and I made our way up Judge Pass was how similar the experience was to when, in 1961, I'd climbed Organ Pipes Pass for the first time. The clouds that clung to the escarpment's walls meant that our ascent was largely in mist, which we broke through when we reached the Lesotho plateau. Once again, emerging from the mist and climbing onto the top of the Drakensberg escarpment was a magical experience.

Even after I had slowly trudged up to the ridge that separates Injisuthi Dome and Mafadi, Otto and I were still well ahead of schedule at the end of day two. We pitched our tents out of the wind beneath a small rocky outcrop a mere 100 vertical

namely, Makheka and Thaba Putsoa—that are higher than Mafadi.

The thought of climbing Mafadi filled me with consternation. Fifty-seven years had passed since I last climbed in the Drakensberg. I was no longer a fit, young 18-year-old. On the plus side, however, I was far more experienced as a climber. I hesitantly shelved my doubts and signed up to climb Mafadi with a guide, not least because it was in an area I'd never been to before. It was just as well I did so. The Injisuthi office of the uKhahlamba/Drakensberg Park had run out of maps of the area, and the Thokoziisa information centre where I was told I could get one was permanently closed. Had I set out to climb Mafadi unaccompanied by Otto Wipplinger, I suspect I may not even have found Judge Pass (our ascent route); I definitely would have been unable to locate the top of Leslie's Pass, our descent route. Otto is a trilingual (German, Afrikaans, and English-speaking) white South African mountain guide and outdoor educator. He is also 186cm tall and worth his weight in gold (even so, I opted to pay him in South African rand, of which there are about ten to the New Zealand dollar). By complete coincidence, when I climbed with him, Otto was 34 years old—exactly the age that Dave Dodds had been when I first climbed with him in the Drakensberg in 1961.

My doubts about my abilities to climb Mafadi at the age of 75 were dispelled on the day we set out: 22 September 2019. I was happy with the weight of

metres below and a little less than one kilometre away from the summit of Mafadi. At 6:30pm, shortly after the sun went down, I climbed into my sleeping bag and slept for 11 hours until I was woken by the early morning light. After breakfast and repacking, Otto and I set off again and we reached the summit of the mountain a mere 22 minutes after our departure. As I had initially been told we would get to the summit 'around lunch time', we were making very good time—which was just as well.

I really struggled during our descent via Leslie's Pass. I've never been good at descents. I've always been slow and overly cautious. What is more, since breaking my right leg rather badly five years ago in a small and somewhat stupid climbing accident on Mt Ruapehu, I've been even slower than usual coming down mountains. Descending Leslie's Pass required an all-or-nothing commitment: after leaving the top of the pass, there was nowhere to camp until the bottom. Otto and I could not stop during our descent, other than for lunch, which we ate huddled miserably in the lee of rocks in the middle of a large and unstable boulder field. Thanks to Otto's help, however, I made it down the pass. Otto often gave me a literal helping hand (and his hands were huge; my hand usually managed to grip just three of his fingers) and he twice belayed me down particularly steep and slippery pitches.

Our campsites were biblical and we saved the best till last. As dawn broke on the final morning of our climb, we were rewarded with stunning views of the changing colours on the Drakensberg's foothills, escarpment walls and peaks. Unlike my three previous Drakensberg trips in the early 1960s, when the best views had without exception been from the tops of the mountains, my most memorable views in 2019 were looking back up at the mountains. However, reflecting both on what I did and on what I have seen over a period of almost 60 years, I am forced to ask if that observation is a function of age.

Is it the case when you are 75 years old that the best views are, almost inevitably, those you see when you are looking back?

*TOP Emerging from the mist at the top of Judge Pass in September 2019 was similar to experiences in the Drakensberg almost 60 years earlier—in a word, magical.*

*MIDDLE Nigel Roberts (left) and Otto Wipplinger on the summit of South Africa's highest mountain, Mafadi (3450m), on 24 September 2019.*

*BOTTOM Three panoramic views looking back up at the Drakensberg escarpment before, during, and after sunrise on 25 September 2019. The Injisuthi Buttresses (3202m and 3212m) are in the centre of each panorama; the Triplets (2946m, 3150m, and 3190m) dominate the left-hand skyline; and the Molar (3045m) and the Ape (3044m) can be seen near the right-hand edge of each picture.*

