

Ernest and Mark: The faces behind the Drakensberg's new hiking trail

By Claire Allison

The Drakensberg Mountains have long been a popular tourist attraction with thousands of people from near and far visiting this UNESCO World Heritage Site each year. Not only do these mountains boast incredible rock art and cultural history, but they are also a wilderness for adventure travellers to explore and now, there is a new activity that ties the traditional Zulu culture and expansive wilderness together.

An overnight hiking trail was developed in early 2015 by a group of local youth along the Drakensberg Experience Route as part of a programme run by non-profit organisation, Open Africa. This three-kilometre hike lies in the area between Weenen and Colenso where visitors spend a night at a traditional homestay in the village of Mankandane and are treated to a traditional meal and local hospitality in a rural Zulu village.

Ernest Miya, who manages the homestay experience, is originally from the village of Mankandane and this project is close to his heart. 'By adopting this initiative the community now has something to offer. The hike is not too long, nor too short or technical, making it ideal for all fitness levels.'

Ernest accompanies travellers into the village and oversees their stay. He met Mark Calverly, owner of nearby Zingela Safari and River Company, and the two partnered up to develop the concept. Zingela also plays a prominent role in marketing the initiative as it offers their guests an authentic unique Zulu cultural experience.

'When I initially suggested the idea to a group of international tourists I was met with a stone wall,' says Mark. 'I added a co-incidental walk through the area on to their agenda and briefed Ernest who excelled himself with the full and enthusiastic support of the community. What started as a "tea break" on their hike soon turned into a firm booking for 120 people for 2016. The problem was people's perceptions. Once they'd seen and experienced the traditional rural Zulu hospitality they were blown away.'

Mark encourages his visitors to break out of their comfort zones and take the hike to nearby Mankandane to see the hospitality, the welcoming smiles and the extent to which the people will bend over backwards to look after any guests they receive. 'This is our biggest obstacle,' says Mark. 'Fear of the unknown.' The overnight hike is very popular with international travellers and even the British Cadets have expressed an interest in the experience. The addition of a successful dance team and a Sangoma visit have gone down very well with overseas groups.

For Ernest, the impact it's had on the village is noteworthy. 'It's added an income-generating model for home-owners while at the same time showing the community that these sorts of things are possible, provided everyone is on board. It has also received the blessing of the local chief and his Indunas, making it something the people of Mankandane can be proud of.'

The overnight hike has been called a once-in-a-lifetime experience by visitors and the



Ernest Miya



Mark Calverly

opportunity to benefit a local community in such an innovative way is appealing to travellers. According to Mark, 'People don't want staged shows. People want authentic experiences and interaction with locals.'

For more information contact Mark and Linda Calverly at The Zingela Safari and River Company on (036) 354 7005.