

THE start of the Battlefields Route and once an outpost of frontier defence, Estcourt today is a thriving commercial centre. However, it was Wembezi township that drew us to the area, a hotbed of political violence with a dark history of clashes between the IFP and ANC.

Riding through the township, we were met with mild hostility – grim, unwelcoming faces – and were threatened with the throwing of stones.

Fortunately the atmosphere was much lighter at the two schools we visited: the Zola and Ezamakuthala primary schools.

With support from Food & Trees for Africa, the neighbouring schools have established food gardens that help feed pupils (many of whom are orphans and vulnerable children who have HIV) with fresh, organic fruit and vegetables, while generating a small income to buy seedlings.

As we rode along the Battlefields Route, the air was clogged with smoke as farmers burnt firebreaks. Flames lapped at the edges of the road as we passed, crackling like bullets in what felt like a tribute to the long-ago wars.

Stopping at the Ambleside Cemetery, burial site of soldiers killed in the Battle of Colenso during the Anglo-Boer War, chilling screams filled the air, an eerie soundtrack to this long-past battle as a nearby piggery began a slaughter of its own.

Our last stop was Spioenkop, scene of the most futile and bloodiest of the battles fought during what became known as the “Black Week”.

We would be staying at the Fair Trade and Green Leaf Certified Three Tree Hill Lodge. We followed our GPS which took us along deeply rutted gravel roads.

We passed a herd of eland standing incongruously in a blackened field set against emerald-green hills, and drove right up to the gated entrance to Spioenkop, only to have to turn around and ride in near-darkness all the way back to Three Trees (on the other side of the hill), an effort rewarded by our catching a hare and a bushbuck in our headlights.

The lodge recreates the wood-and-tin huts used by British officers during the war. Its post-colonial emphasis is on uplifting the local community through sustainable employment, health education and environmental awareness.

Energy-saving light bulbs, a solar cooker, Econo heat pads and insulation keep energy costs down, while locally made biodegradable products, worm farming, recycling and a vegetable garden ensure the lodge minimises its impact on the environment. The lodge is deeply involved with the community through feeding programmes, and it sponsors a local long-distance runner.

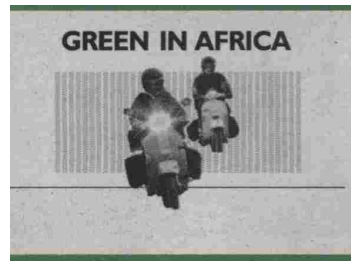
Dawn the next day revealed an African savannah-type plain, dotted with acacias. The neighbouring game reserve only added to the attractions: we hiked along the edge, spotting zebra, eland, giraffe and even two rotund rhinos, waddling away as fast as their stumpy little legs could carry them.

The Drakensberg beckoning, we rode on towards the Amphitheatre, and stayed at the solar and

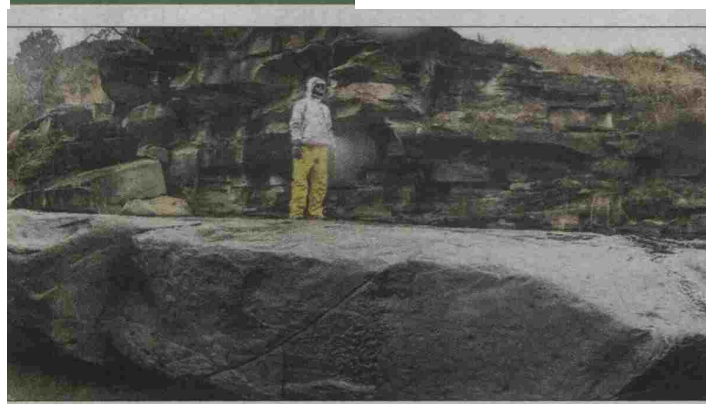


PITSTOP: A quick breather on the way to enjoy the splendour of the Drakensberg mountains visible in the distance.

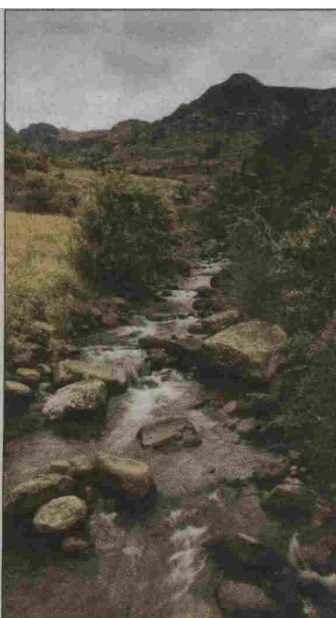
DESTINATION DRAKENSBURG



After two days of rain, the mist finally opens up to reveal the snowy peaks of the Drakensberg to MELISSA ANDREWS AND CHRISTOPHER LIST before they tackle the potholed Sani Pass climb on their trusty carbon-neutral steeds



KITTED: In waterproof gear, clambering over rocks becomes a struggle.



‘ The air was clogged with smoke as farmers set their fields alight to burn their annual firebreaks

wind-powered Sungubala Bush Camp, set on 500 hectares of wilderness below the Hlolela and Sungubala peaks. Although marked for 4x4s only, the route up was not very challenging, even with its loose rocks and tight corners. We set off for a brisk walk in the mountains, baboons barking at us as we meandered through pockets of indigenous forest.

Waking up to non-stop rain, we decided to visit the Royal Natal National Park. Following a waterfall upriver, which cascaded down natural steps, it wasn't hard to tell how the Cascades got their name.

Riding back we stopped off at the Sprinkle Orphanage, which drew us in with its cheerful countenance and expansive vegetable garden. The 18 children were happy, well cared for and full of life – skipping with a rope fashioned from plastic bags.

Manzima Maziboko, one of the orphanage's six carers, showed us around with evident pride – she had helped build its very walls.

Amphitheatre Backpackers is set at the foot of the Berg, although it could have been in a quarry for all we could see – the mist was so thick it was as though you could walk through it and enter another world.

Amphitheatre Backpackers and Guest Lodge uses solar heating and natural building materials, and reuses all its waste in incredible craftwork items that make it a place fit for an interior

design shoot – and it has five-star status.

After two days of rain, the mist finally opened up to reveal a startling vista of snow-covered peaks topped with dense cloud. We hiked to the foot of the Amphitheatre. Waterfalls gushed down as the snow melted, but the clouds hiding the peaks refused to part.

Then it was off on the potholed Sani Pass, though with two wheels these were easily avoided and we managed to beat most cars.

Through mountain passes overlooking the turquoise waters of Drieberg Dam, a stop at the Vulture Restaurant to see the carcasses of cows put out for the endangered vultures, we entered Golden Gate, dwarfed by the beautiful Maluti Mountains. After setting up camp, we hiked to Brandwag Buttress to watch the sunset, hauling ourselves up the last bit with the help of a chain. In the far distance you could see the Basotho Cultural Village blending in with the landscape, while the five-star hotel stood out like a wasp in a beehive.

Catch us next time as we head for the City of Gold.

● *Andrews and List are on a 7 500km carbon-neutral scooter safari to document and photograph SA's natural beauty and the inspiring environmental projects that aim to conserve this.*

Follow their journey at www.eco-friendly-africa-travel.com or www.facebook.com/EcoFriendlyAfricaTravel