



Above, Stuart Camp surveys the Schwarzwald Forest on day five. Top, a view from Mnyameni to Zingcuka hut, looking back on Geju Peak. Pictures: Sarah Camp

Sarah Camp tackles the Eastern Cape's Amatola Trail, a likely inspiration for Tolkien's Middle Earth

A light breeze tugged playfully at my hair, blowing it into my face. For the umpteenth time, I swept it under my hat and stopped to admire the view. We'd spent the day, our last morning on the trail, climbing the grassy flanks of Hog 1. A chunky carpet of forest rolled away to the plains on our right. To our left we had our first glimpse of Hogsback tucked in among the trees.

Behind us lay the bumpy blue spine of the Amatola mountains, snaking towards the horizon. Posing for pictures on the saddle, it looked like we were standing over a huge map. After six days of tough hiking we'd almost reached the end of our family adventure on the Amatola Trail and we were feeling on top form.

The Amatola has something of a reputation. At about 106km (averaging a hilly 20km each day), it truly is the granddaddy of South African hiking trails. My parents, brother and I are all avid hikers, so it was one we'd been itching to tackle. We love being able to spend quality time together on the trail, surrounded by nature and far away from the demands of cellphones and e-mails. And the Amatola delivered.

Although the region was in the grip of a severe drought, there were still forests aplenty, dripping with every sort of moss and echoing with dawn birdsong. Many of the streams and waterfalls were sadly depleted but there was more water the closer we got to Hogsback. I imagine these mountains

transform into something of a fairyland after a bit of rain.

THE NANNY STATE

As it does for most who tackle the trail, our adventure started with a trip to the trailhead in Dan Cornick's bakkie. Cornick runs Amatola Trails, which offers comprehensive support and advice for anyone attempting to complete the hike.

We wound our way deep into the mountains, passing prettily painted villages and cattle grazing on the rolling hills. Lumpy emerald ridges loomed dramatically in the background. The scene set, Cornick peppered the landscape with soldiers, missionaries, Xhosa prophetesses, dragons and giant earthworms.

Tolkien's nanny came from this region, and it's easy to see how her stories would have fired the young writer's imagination as he created his literary classics, *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*.

Maden Dam signalled the turnaround point for Cornick, so we took our cue, said our goodbyes and shouldered our packs, ready to play our part in this mountain drama. The trail skirted the polished damwaters, lined with reeds and framed by forest and cliffs, then wound off into the trees. Sunlight filtered through the canopy and danced on the path ahead.

A flash of royal blue transformed into a kingfisher. We passed remnants of a bygone timber trade: an old railway and rotting bridge, saw pits and a timber chute. Between

1910 and 1917, JE Howse extracted 40,000m³ of wood from 16,500 trees in these parts. At the time it was the largest logging operation in southern Africa.

The only fallen trees we saw, however, were those felled by a mini-hurricane, lying haphazardly in a clearing, torn by the storm. Xhosa legend tells of a giant winged snake that lives behind Mnyameni Peak (Hog 3) and leaves a trail of destruction in its wake – possibly the inspiration for Tolkien's dragon Smaug. After a bit of huffing and puffing of our own, we reached Gwili Gwili hut, perched at the fringe of the forest, which marked the end of day 1. The hillside behind the hut boasted sweeping views of the plains below, but the mist soon descended and we fell asleep in the clouds.

IN MORNING MIST

Misty conditions made for a treacherously slippery path at the start of day 2. Dad and my brother, Stuart, looked suitably wizardly striding along with their walking sticks, with Dad even sporting the beginnings of a grizzled beard. The forest might have come straight out of Middle Earth – huge old trees elegantly dressed in snug velvet coats and woody creepers artfully draped in mosses.

After an hour or so of steady walking, we came across a sudden break in the impregnable wall of green, where a krantz jutted out from the tree-line. Agapanthus and wild geranium grew among the rocks, and layers of farmland lay like crêpe paper below us. From there it was drier – scrub, more krantzes and plantations of wattle and pine.



The writer, her brother Stuart and dad Steve Camp on day three of the trail. Picture: Sally Frost



Mnyameni hut shelters below the ridge of Hog 3.

We almost lost the path in a section of recent logging as huge strips of forestry alternated with bands of indigenous bush. I spotted a pair of bushbuck, as well as a trio of horses galloping into the mist. On arrival at Dontsa hut, we found the river too low for swimming, but a bench pulled outside allowed us to bask in the afternoon sun.

HOT AND HUNGRY

Day 3 started early in the pretty glade behind the hut. A burst of scarlet and liquid birdsong betrayed a Knysna lourie hiding in the canopy. These birds are abundant in the indigenous forests of the Amatola, along with Samango monkeys. The path, meanwhile, crept slyly upwards. We collapsed on a spongy mattress of pine needles halfway up, before finally emerging onto the contour path and reaching a small waterfall that trickled down a shady kloof. Red-hot-pokers glowed in the shadows. From there it was a clamber to the lip of the ridge, where we were rewarded with a view of the telephone tower we'd passed on day 1 in the far distance. Not too shabby!

By this stage it was scorching hot, so we took Cornick's advice and skirted Doornkop, walking through a thicket of protea instead. Before our next river crossing, we rested in the shade, watching creamy swallowtail butterflies drifting downstream. Then it was a knee-jarring descent towards a welcoming wall of green and a leafy sanctuary once more. A herd of cattle watched our progress with their calves, the *amathole* that give these mountains their isiXhosa name (there is certainly good grazing to be had here). At the bottom we were faced with a confusing three-way split. Dad went one way; his sense of humour another.

Everyone was hot and hungry, so an emergency lunch stop in Waterfall Valley was quickly agreed upon. Rumbling thunder produced a sunny cloudburst, fat droplets sparkling in the slanting yellow-green sunlight. Better still, the biggest of the rivers was still full enough for our first swim – definitely the highlight of my day! Just as well, because the day's exertions ended with an exciting, near-vertical scramble to Cata hut.

We popped out at an alpine meadow sprinkled with pink and yellow flowers, to be rewarded by the welcome sight of that night's hut nestled snugly in its gently overgrown garden. Standing on the deck that evening, we enjoyed the serenity of village lights twinkling in the darkness far below.

Plan your trip

BOOK FOR LATER

Dan Cornick of Amatola Trails in Hogsback says they can take bookings only for overnight trails that start from December 1, in accordance with direction from the department of environment, forestry & fisheries. Bookings can be made for groups of three to 13 (50% capacity). These conditions, of course, are subject to change.

● Costs: The five-night trail with two nights' accommodation before and after the hike is from R1,900 pp. Discounts available for students and scholars.

LOCKDOWN UPDATE

As day hikes are allowed under the current regulations, Eastern Capers can do a portion of the Amatola Trail from Hogsback to Zingcuka (extremely tough) or Zingcuka to Hogsback (a bit easier), a distance of 25km and 16km respectively. Hikers will be dropped off or picked up at Zingcuka. Booking is essential.

● Costs: R250 per person includes permits, safe parking and transport to/from the start or end of the trail.

● Contacts: See amatolatrails.co.za or e-mail amatolatrails@gmail.com.

ALTERNATIVES

Cornick points out that there are several shorter and easier day hikes in the area, including in the Auckland Nature Reserve. The main hiking trail starts at Away with the Fairies backpackers and goes straight into the indigenous forest to the 800-year-old Big Tree, the largest tree in the Eastern Cape at 36.6m tall, and on to three big waterfalls. This hike is on donations only.

● See awaywiththefairies.co.za.

THE WEATHER TURNS

We left our secret valley shortly after daybreak on day 4 to follow a gurgling brook up into the quietness of the morning. The hillside was cloaked in dew-beaded grasses and brightly coloured wildflowers. A pair of franklin took to the sky in noisy, flapping indignation and broke the silent spell.

As we climbed steadily to reach the saddle above, the weather deteriorated and soon we were engulfed in swirling mist. A needling drizzle and biting wind snatched at our words and gloveless fingers – I'd never been so cold. Hard to imagine we'd been almost suffering from heatstroke the day before.

In the subzero temperatures, the decision to skip Geju Peak was unanimous. Bundled up in our wet-weather gear, we stumbled through the icy smokescreen, following the trail markers and, despite a few close calls, managed to keep to the path. Twice, we scrambled over a huge field of meteoritic boulders that had a curious metallic quality when struck. There was nowhere to stop, only exposed, windswept scree.

At last we spotted a few scraggly pines and

ate a quick snack in their welcome shelter. My clumsy fingers could hardly manage the peanuts and raisins. Dad helped me put on an extra layer and we kept moving as we were all shivering from the break.

Mercifully, the worst was over and we descended into the magnificent Malan Forest after traversing a dramatic, gusty ridge. The sun made a miraculous, if somewhat timid, appearance and Mum prepared Cup-a-Soup.

We stopped for lunch by a magnificent waterfall and our good humour returned as our bodies thawed.

The rest of the day's walk was through pristine indigenous forest bisected by a chain of pools and cataracts. Occasional rustling hinted at Samango monkeys in the treetops. After we'd crossed the river 11 times, Mnyameni hut came as a delightful surprise as we emerged from the forest to find it hidden in a picturesque fork in the valley. The sun shone in earnest and Dad fired up the donkey boiler for the ultimate luxury: buckets of deliciously hot water, followed by a lazy afternoon basking on the lawn. We made a small fire behind the hut and chatted into the starlight hours.

TEMPTED BY THE RIVER

Day 5 dawned clear and sunny as we steered towards the majestic form of Hog 3, silhouetted on the ridge above the hut in the early-morning light. At the pass, we paused to admire the sweeping views of Geju Peak and the valley we'd descended the day before. It was beautiful walking and we were feeling particularly light-hearted.

From the ridge, the path dropped into a hidden meadow nestled below Hog 2, complete with bubbling brook and meandering pine trees. Tiny figures (the first people we'd seen on the whole hike) moved among peaceful cows. This was the start of the Wolf River, so named for the hyenas that used to be found here.

We lunched at a gorgeous black pool, then had to stop again almost immediately to swim. It was just too tempting – this section of river is full of tumbling waterfalls and idyllic swimming spots.

A hike through a glen of silvery bracken saw us picking our way along the clifftop above the Schwarzwald Forest. Both contour and descent had our adrenaline pumping. Luckily it was a short walk to Zingcuka hut, through charming woodland canopied by stately yellowwoods, luscious lemonwoods and splendid ironwoods. A reed-lined boardwalk led to the hut that overlooked a small, sun-drenched vlei in the midst of the forest. That afternoon we sat there enjoying the sun, the smell of crushed wild mint and the chatter of Cape parrots. It was our last night on the trail.

Reaching Hogsback was bittersweet. Our final day was as tough as any of the others. We had tackled a real adventure, and we had memories to share. To soak in a hot bath again was bliss. As we sipped our rock shandies at the Hogsback Inn that evening and watched the sun paint the three hogs pink, I felt proud of what we'd achieved. Who knows? Maybe someday we'll be back. © Sarah Camp

5 OF THE BEST HIKING ESSENTIALS

Hit the trail like it's a comfy catwalk with these picks from Sahil Harilal



Nike Manoa hiking boots, R1,499

Fusing form and function, these boots are a versatile option suitable for urban and off-road exploring. With a waterproof leather upper, a padded ankle collar for all-day support, and a Phylon foam padded midsole, it's no wonder they're regarded as one of the top hiking boots in the industry.

● totalsports.co.za

Patagonia Hampi Rock trousers, R1,599

Loaded with hidden features, and made from a lightweight, breathable hemp with added polyester/spandex for durability, they feature internal mesh pockets and a tapered lower leg with semi elastic cuffs that can be pulled up for additional cooling.

● goneoutdoor.com



The North Face Borealis backpack, R1,269

The 29L Borealis backpack features a padded back and hip belt for extra comfort, stretch mesh side pockets and an eternal bungee cord, allowing for

additional gear to be added on. It has a 15-inch fleece-lined laptop sleeve in the central compartment, as well as a phone pouch and key chain, allowing for safe storage of all your electronic gear.

● sportscene.co.za

AR-X waterproof jacket, R1,999

Made from VapourTex, a fully breathable and totally waterproof fabric, the AR-X features a semi-elastic sleeve to keep cold air and rain from flowing in, and laser-cut holes in the underarms for extra ventilation. The jacket can be folded up in its own back pocket and strapped around the waist (via an adjustable belt), making dealing with unpredictable weather a breeze.

● firstascent.co.za



Legacy windbreaker, R1,599

A reinvention of the traditional windbreaker and made out of lightweight ripstop woven fabric, it has a

looser fit for added comfort. It also features Under Armour's durable "storm technology" to repel water and wind while keeping full breathability. You can shield yourself from the elements with an adjustable hood, extended brim and lowered bungee hem.

● underarmour.co.za