



*Hiking trails in the heart of the KZN Midlands*



## HIKING TRAIL DESCRIPTION AND LOCATION

The Blinkwater Hiking Trails are situated at the end of the Karkloof mountain range in the KwaZulu-Natal Midlands. The hiking trails can be split into two sections; the Northern Section (starting from Mountain Falls Farmhouse) and the Southern Section (starting from Mondi Seele Workshop).





## Northern Section

### DIRECTIONS TO MOUNTAIN FALLS:

There are various route options for getting to Mountain Falls Farmhouse.

1. From **Pietermaritzburg**, take the R33 towards Greytown, turning left just before Seven Oaks (on the P151) towards Rietvlei. About 15km down this road where it becomes a dirt road, look for the *Blinkwater Trails* sign to the left. \* After crossing the Umvoti river (on the causeway) head up the hill and look for the sign to Mountain Falls on the left.
2. From **Howick**, take the tarred road to Karkloof, passing Mbona Mountain Estate (dirt road) then turning right at the turnoff to York and soon after left past Benvie Estate. Continue on the road and look for the sign to Mountain Falls on the right.
3. From **Greytown**, take the R622 towards Mooi River. After about 26km turn left onto the P151 (signed Seven Oaks) – this is a dirt road. \*\* Cross a railway line immediately after turning and stay on this road for approximately 8km down a very steep hill and soon after crossing the Umvoti River, turn right at the Upper Umvoti School. *Continue from \* 1. above to arrive at Mountain Falls.*
4. From **Mooi River** (Johannesburg) take the R622 towards Greytown. After passing through Riet Vlei, follow the road for approximately 12km until you reach a sign *Blinkwater Trails* - turn right (this is a dirt road). *Continue from \*\* Point 3. above to arrive at Mountain Falls.*

Vehicles can be parked at this point.

### KEYS

The keys for Mountain Falls will be available from the staff at the farmhouse on arrival.

### TRAIL DESCRIPTION:

[The route is demarcated with a blue ribbon on a standard / tied to a tree.](#)

There are two route options from Mountain Falls offering hikers an enjoyable walk to Douglas Smith Cottage. Option 1 (longer route) heading east via the top grasslands and down through the indigenous forest or Option 2 (shorter route) keeping right (Grid C-5) and back to Douglas Smith via the old wagon trail. The route to Success Camp is currently closed.

#### ***Option 1: Longer route to Douglas Smith from Mountain Falls***

From Mountain Falls head up through the pine and gum plantations onto the grasslands. At the junction (Grid C-5) turn left, heading north east on the grasslands. Look for the path turning right (Grid D-3) which heads down a steep section of grassland and into the indigenous forest. The route exits onto the contour (old railway) path (Grid E-4). Keep right and continue through the indigenous forest which becomes grassland and a final section of plantation leading down to Douglas Smith Cottage.

#### ***Option 2: Shorter route to Douglas Smith***

From Mountain Falls head up through the pine and gum plantations onto the grasslands. At the junction (Grid C-5) turn right (clockwise) heading south east on the grasslands which leads up to the old wagon track (Grid B-6). From here turn left heading east, making the most of the magnificent views across Albert Falls Dam before entering the plantation which leads directly down to Douglas Smith Cottage.



## Southern Section

### DIRECTIONS TO MONDI SEELE:

1. From **Pietermaritzburg** take the R33 towards Greytown. Just before entering New Hanover, look for the left turn (signed *Blinkwater Trails*) and follow this road (dirt) to the starting point at Mond Seele Workshop.
2. From Tongaat (an option if travelling from **King Shaka International** airport / Ballito) take the R614 towards Wartburg, keeping right to Dalton. Drive through Dalton and at Frenzel's garage turn right to Seven Oaks. At the T-junction on the R33 (Pietermaritzburg – Greytown road) turn right towards Greytown. After about 1km turn left at the road signed Elandspruit. Continue on this (dirt) road until a T-junction and turn right into the Mond Seele Estate. Follow the road to the main office and workshop.

Vehicles can be parked at this point.

### KEYS

The keys for Douglas Smith Cottage will be available from the caretaker on arrival at the cottage.

### SUGGESTED ROUTES:

- A. Mond Seele to Douglas Smith (overnight)
- B. Douglas Smith to Mountain Falls (overnight) / 2 options
- C. Douglas Smith circular route back to Douglas Smith (overnight)

### TRAIL DESCRIPTION:

The route is demarcated with a blue ribbon on a standard / tied to a tree.

#### **A. Mond Seele to Douglas Smith (overnight)**

Start from the Mond Seele workshop (Grid K-5). Follow the markers along a plantation road until you reach Otto's Dam. From there follow the trail to Island Dam from where you can see the upper grasslands with the indigenous forests stretching out below enticing the hiker to explore further.

Island Dam is for viewing only (no swimming allowed), this is the breeding ground of the rare and endangered Wattled Crane.

From Island Dam there are two route options to Douglas Smith. Follow the trail along the western shoreline of the dam until it forks. At this point the choice is to either keep right and head to the upper grasslands via Rainbow Lake or take the left fork (Grid G-6) which takes hikers via Oribi Hill and Florida Dam.

#### ***Option 1 to Douglas Smith from Island Dam (via Florida Dam):***

Bearing left (clockwise) at Grid G-6, the trail passes through commercial plantations for a short while before reaching Oribi Hill. This is a landmark where you might see the graceful Oribi and the flowers growing in this rock-strewn meadowland are a botanist's delight, especially in the late spring and early summer. From Oribi Hill, the trail meanders through more plantations before reaching Florida Dam (Grid H-9). Well named, the Florida Bass are often seen leaping high out of the water and whilst this is a 'fishing area' swimming is permitted. It is also an ideal spot for a lunch break. Having refreshed in the cooling waters of Florida Dam, follow the valley leading gently upwards. Along the stream banks you will find many fine specimens of Tree Ferns (*Cyathea dregei*). Leaving the valley, the trail climbs through plantations making use of forestry roads

and boundary firebreaks with splendid views of the valley below until one reaches an avenue of azaleas! This amazing find, high on the slopes of Blinkwater, leads the hiker to the Arboretum and the Douglas Smith Cottage.

***Option 2 to Douglas Smith from Island Dam (via Rainbow Dam):***

Taking the right hand route (anti-clockwise) from Island Dam (Grid G-6). Follow the blue ribbons, crossing the stream onto a plantation road. The trail passes Rainbow Dam (Grid F-6) and onto the lower grasslands before entering the indigenous forest. At the first junction on Grid E-4, keep left and after about 100m take the left fork to continue through the forest. From this junction it is approximately 3km to Douglas Smith Cottage on a contoured path passing through a section of grasslands and commercial plantation.

**B. Douglas Smith to Mountain Falls (overnight) / 2 options**

Various options from Douglas Smith allow hikers to take the longer (and more strenuous route) via iPhasiwe or two shorter (more direct) routes to Mountain Falls.

***Option 1: Longer route to Mountain Falls via iPhasiwe***

Leaving the cottage, the trail leads through the cattle kraal and plantations for a short while, then it follows the route of the old railway line [*the railway line itself is not in existence. The path appears as a contour path*] through the grasslands before entering the forest. The grasslands offer superb views and there is a good chance of seeing common reedbuck and grey duiker. The railway line was built at the turn of the 20th century, when the people of York started a company to extract the fine timber from the forests for commercial purposes.

Enjoy the walk through this beautiful section of indigenous forest. Continuing with the railway line through the forest, there is evidence of old saw pits. The Blinkwater forest has a wealth of trees, all three yellowwoods; Cape Chestnuts, giant Strangler figs, Sneezewoods, Knobwoods and many others, together with the beautiful flowers to be found in the forests such as *Streptocarpus* and *Begonia sutherlandii*. Mosses, lichens and ferns complete the scene. The vociferous calls of the Knysna Turaco (*Lourie*) let you know that you have been seen, whilst the flocks of Crowned Guineafowl will make their presence known to you as they scuttle noisily away.

At the junction at Grid E-4 bear left; the route meanders upwards where orchids, figs and many other interesting plants can be found. Before exiting the forest there is a fascinating section of krantz. The trail exits the forest and leads on to the long grassland spur before reaching a junction (Grid D-3/4). Continuing straight takes one onto the upper grasslands on top of the Blinkwater whilst keeping left goes to Mountain Falls, following the grasslands. Look for the right turn (Grid C-5) which leads to Mountain Falls through a pretty section of plantation.

If opting for the longer route to Mountain Falls (*recommended for experienced hikers only*), at Grid E-4 take the right fork which follows the old railway track deep into the forest, until Seele's Dam (Grid G-3) is reached. This is a perfect spot to stop, relax and contemplate the beauty of the area. A short way further along the track the trail turns and climbs steeply to the top of the Blinkwater (Grid F-2). Steps have been constructed to take the hiker quickly and comfortably through this section but take your time and enjoy the magnificent trees along the route. Once on top, the views are endless; north, south, east and west.

There is an option at this point to do an extended loop heading east towards the radio tower. The trail follows the edge of the grassland plateau, all the while skirting the forest and looking down over Albert Falls Dam in the far distance. Due to time constraints, it is recommended to rather do this extended loop as a day walk from Mountain Falls.

### ***Option 2: Shorter route to Mountain Falls***

From Douglas Smith follow the road westerly through the beautiful Arboretum. Prepare for a hefty but rewarding uphill section along a road through a plantation. Exiting at the top on a grassland section, take time to enjoy the magnificent views across Albert Falls Dam. Continuing through the grasslands, this becomes the old wagon track which was used for moving cattle from Mooi River during the winter months. On Grid B-6 the route turns a sharp right in a north-easterly direction and heads towards the junction to Mountain Falls. At this point the obvious route turns left off the grassland (Grid C-5) and into the gum and pine plantations down to Mountain Falls.

### **C. Douglas Smith circular route back to Douglas Smith (overnight)**

Douglas Smith Cottage is a delightful spot to spend two (or more) nights. There are various route options which allow the hiker to venture out on day walks using Douglas Smith as a base camp. Be aware that the weather can change rapidly in this area from sunny skies to mist in a matter of hours – so be prepared and make sure you have a daypack along with a jacket and supply of food and water to take with you.

Option 1: From Douglas Smith head out through the Arboretum and up onto the old Wagon Track (Grid B-6) to enjoy a loop on the grasslands, returning at the junction on Grid D-4 through a lovely forest section and back along the old railway line (contour path) and back to the cottage.

Option 2: From the cottage start walking up the Arboretum and look for the immediate left turn (signed Mondi Workshop). Continue in a southerly direction on the jeep track, admiring the Azaleas (which flower in September – October), to arrive at the pretty Florida Dam where a picnic can be enjoyed. It is recommended to return on the same route. For the intrepid hiker looking for a longer walk, pick up the trail towards Island Dam, then turning left (Grid G-6) to head home via Rainbow Dam and back through the forest and grasslands.

Option 3: (for the fit walker looking for a longer day walk) head out in a northerly direction to enjoy a section through the beautiful indigenous forest with options to either take a shorter return loop back (Grid E-4) or a longer route up to the top of the Blinkwater (Grid F-2) and the upper grasslands.



### **DAY WALKS**

Day walks are only available from Mountain Falls Farmhouse (Northern section). This would be for those looking to drive in for the day, park at Mountain Falls and walk from there to return to the same point and depart before night fall. It is possible to spend the night at Mountain Falls whilst enjoying out and back day walks from this point but this is considered as an overnight hike and as such, a booking is required. Park your vehicle at Mountain Falls and sign the register before heading out on your day walk.

Depending on fitness levels, the day walker can enjoy a short meander up through the pine and gum plantations to the upper grasslands and the top of the Blinkwater with magnificent views. Those wishing to do a longer walk can continue on the top of the Blinkwater, following the edge of the grassland plateau, while skirting the forest and looking down across Albert Falls Dam and surrounds in the distance. The grasslands are interspersed with pockets of indigenous bush. Reedbuck are often seen as are Jackal Buzzards, Steppe Buzzards and occasionally a Fish Eagle will make its' presence known. Crowned and Long Crested Eagles are often seen, besides the many grassland birds, Cisticola's, Francolins, Chats, amongst many more. For the fit and adventurous an extended loop to the radio tower at the tip of the Blinkwater will make for a full day out before returning back to Mountain Falls.



## MOUNTAIN BIKING

This area has the potential as a prime mountain biking destination. The plan is to develop marked routes for mountain bikers to enjoy this scenic area whilst making use of the accommodation at either Douglas Smith Cottage or Mountain Falls camp.



## TRAIL ETIQUETTE

Help us build the trail, add your stone to the cairns.

Remember; litter is offensive to this pristine environment. Take only photographs and leave only footprints.

PLEASE NOTE -Due to forest felling operations, the trail may have to be re-routed from time to time. Please follow the hazard tape markers should this be the case. Some plantation areas indicated on the map may have been felled in which case they will look different in reality.



## BOOKINGS & CONTACT

### TRAIL FEES:

#### **Overnight hikes:**

R100 per person per night.

Booking required.

#### **Day walks:**

R20 per adult, R10 per child (U12)

Pay cash on arrival at Mountain Falls Farmhouse & sign the day register.



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***Blinkwater Trails*** is a non-profit organisation.

*All proceeds generated are channelled back into trail maintenance and improvements.*