

MALETSUNYANE FALLS

Smoke on the water



Maletsunyane Falls in Lesotho is a majestic waterfall that plummets 186m into an ice-cold pool, creating a permanent smoke-like mist. It is also the location of the highest commercial single-drop abseil in the world. Geoff Earnshaw decided to gather his courage and take the plunge

Text: Geoff Earnshaw

Photography: Geoff and Elise Earnshaw



Above: Geoff and Elise Earnshaw with Jonathan Halse from Semonkong Lodge. The lodge is the official operator of the abseil. Below: Cool as a cucumber. With a history in mountain rescue, Geoff isn't intimidated by heights. Left: Geoff gets strapped into his safety equipment.

The Maletsunyane Waterfall is high. Very high. It is about 186m from top to bottom, and as if the vertigo-inducing height isn't bad enough, the water also creates an eerie mist that gives the waterfall an otherworldly feel.

So Maletsunyane Falls really is an awesome (and intimidating) sight. And for those in search of a unique view of this natural wonder, the world's highest commercial abseil (according to the Guinness World Book of Records) runs parallel to the waterfall.

INTO THE MOUNTAINS

With Maletsunyane Falls (and its abseil) in our sights, Elise and I recently headed for the lofty kingdom of Lesotho. Once I had conquered this daunting drop, we would enjoy a slightly more sedate pony trek, followed by a venture down Sani Pass.

After filling up at Ladybrand, we entered Lesotho at the Maseru border post and travelled on the road from Maseru to Roma. At Roma we turned onto the road that led to Semonkong and the Maletsunyane Falls. Although the route was tarred at first, it deteriorated fairly quickly into a rough gravel road. But despite this, it couldn't be described as a "bad" road. A 4x2 would easily be able to traverse it, though it must be added that snow or rain would change the situation substantially.

The 130km trip took about three hours. You



At a height of 204m, the abseil at Maletsunyane Falls is the highest commercially operated single-drop abseil in the world. Compared with the huge cliffs, Geoff Earnshaw appears ant-like in size.



would, however, be able to complete it in less time, but the scenery is so beautiful that we stopped quite a few times to take pictures. The mountain passes, such as Thaba Putsoa (which has an elevation of 3096m), and isolated villages, such as Ramabanta, are very picturesque.

Arriving at the small town of Semonkong, we checked into the Semonkong Lodge. The lodge – which was once a trading store – has a rustic feel, but still offers modern conveniences like electricity and hot showers. Most importantly, however, Semonkong Lodge is the official operator of the Maletsunyane Falls abseil.

Once we were booked in, I immediately signed up for the abseil. But Semonkong's team of experts won't allow one to simply saunter over to the waterfall and take the plunge. No, quite a bit of preparation goes into the activity.

To ensure that the abseil is performed safely, visitors are first familiarised with the techniques and equipment on "nursery" rock the day before. You are kitted out in all the gear and rappelled down slightly less imposing cliffs.

The next day you are transported to the abseil point at the crack of dawn. The point is perched on a natural rock platform and has been installed specifically for the abseil. Once you are on the platform, you are once again kitted out in harness, helmet waterproof anorak, gloves and top rope.

And then it's time to go. You have to lean out over the imposing precipice and begin your descent.

To be sure, this is quite an unnerving position to be in. After all, the ground is roughly 200m below you! But that being said, the process is very safe so the challenge really is all in the mind. If you approach it with a positive mental attitude you will have a wonderful time.

I didn't find the experience particularly adrenaline inducing – I have a history in mountaineering and mountain rescue, so I'm used to abseiling – but I did find it incredibly tranquil. It is wonderful to be alone against a massive cliff with just the beautiful scenery and rumbling waterfall for company. And since you descend at your own pace, you can admire the views as long as you like.

I descended fairly quickly, and after about ten minutes, I was on the ground and wriggling out of my harness. But the experience wasn't over. A steep ascent up a rocky path had to be completed.

Elise, who had trekked down and photographed my abseil from different positions, met me at the bottom.

"The abseil was the easy part," she joked. "It's the climb back up that's going to be difficult."

And she was right. The climb was tough! While it took ten minutes to get down, it took about 75 minutes to get back up. We both vowed to start exercising regularly.

PONY POWER

The following day we set off on a pony trek to the top of Mount Quoang, the highest mountain in the area.

Basutho ponies are one of the main forms of transportation in Lesotho. You will find them wherever you look. And because of this ubiquity (as well as their novelty to visitors) they are a major tourist attraction. Semonkong Lodge, for instance, works closely with the local community to offer a wide variety of pony-based trips.

Getting to the top took about three hours. Our ponies deftly traversed streams, steep hills and rocky tracks as we climbed to the summit of Mount Quoang. Needless to say the views were amazing. We couldn't stop taking pictures!

Near the top we also photographed the spiral aloe, which is an endangered plant endemic to Lesotho. This aloe has a symmetrical appearance with its broad leaves set in a clockwise or anti-clockwise spiral arrangement.

After spending some time on the 3000m summit, we headed back down for our last night at Semonkong Lodge.



STRAIGHT TO THE TOP

Our final destination was Sani Top. Leaving Semonkong, we retraced our steps to Roma. Once there, we started the 260km trek towards the famous lodge. We traversed Bushmans Pass, God Help Me Pass, Mulimo Nthuse Pass and Blue Mountain Pass in a relatively short time and arrived at Marakabei Lodge early in the day.

Sadly, Marakabei was not a great place to spend the night. I would definitely not recommend it. In retrospect, we should simply have pushed on to Sani Top, but we had been worried about the roads and the weather. These worries, however, were unfounded. The roads were in surprisingly good condition. They are clearly being upgraded on a regular basis.

From Marakabei Lodge we travelled across Cheche Pass, the Pass of Jackals and Mokhoabong Pass. After that we descended to Thaba-Tseka, where we crossed the Senqu River and passed through the Manoaneng Pass. Finally, we arrived at the T-junction of the gravel road from Mokhotlong to Sani Pass. We turned right and drove the 45km to Sani Top.

The lodge was very busy, but the atmosphere was relaxed. The bar was fantastic. A large log fire warmed the room while the patrons chatted convivially.

Next day, after a quick breakfast, we cleared customs and headed down Sani Pass. Although it had been raining, the pass didn't pose too much of a challenge. We had to switch to low-range gearing once or twice, but the road was in good overall condition. It took us about 45 minutes to reach the bottom. Once there, we quickly received our mandatory passport

stamps and headed for our home in Ramsgate.

It had been a fun trip. And we would be back in the very near future.



Left: Pony treks are a great way of exploring the Lesotho mountains. Below: Semonkong Lodge is located in the village of Semonkong, right on the banks of the Maletsunyane River. Insert, top: Spiral aloe is an endangered species that is unique to the highlands of Lesotho.



TRAVEL PLANNER

GETTING THERE

To get to Semonkong Lodge, enter Lesotho at the Maseru border and travel on the road from Maseru to Roma. At Roma, turn onto the road that leads to Semonkong and the Maletsunyane Falls.

ACTIVITIES

Pony treks, mountain hikes, rock climbing and trout fishing can all be arranged at the lodge. The most exciting activity, however, is abseiling at the Maletsunyane Falls. At a height of 204m, it is the highest commercially operated single-drop abseil in the world.

CONTACT

Tel. +266 2700-6037; e-mail bookings@placeofsmoke.co.ls; www.placeofsmoke.co.ls