

Many mountain ranges are known for their peaks—hikers eager to stand on a summit and marvel at all that lies before them. The Drakensberg, however, is uniquely different. While it boasts several notable summits, much of its undiscovered beauty lies in the passes: the routes that lead from the Little Berg to the escarpment.

Over the years, approximately 164 passes have been opened, 104 of which are marked on the latest Slingsby Maps. These passes vary wildly in character—from well-trodden smuggling routes and magnificent ridgelines, to boulder-choked riverbeds and overgrowth so dense that travelling at 1 km per hour feels like an achievement.

We've spent the last ten years falling deeply in love with Drakensberg passes. Basalt spires tower overhead while water cascades through nearby gullies. Vultures call above, and in summer there are more species of flowers than you can possibly count. Engulfed by the mountains—completely content, fully alive—we return time and again to exist between 2,300 m and 3,000 m above sea level. And yet, this hallowed place is frequented by so few.

In 2024, we had a wild idea. We had just completed a 107-hour unsupported Grand Traverse and found deep kinship within our crew. What if, instead of attempting a fast GT, we attempted the longest possible one? What if we hiked the entire Drakensberg, completing every marked pass along the way? Yes. Just yes. And so, *Walking Home* was born.

We plotted a route beginning in the Free State and ending at Bushman's Nek—one that would see us hike 107 passes (the 104 official passes, plus three extras for fun) over 40 days. We would traverse approximately 588 km and gain over 60,173 m of elevation. To put this into perspective: only four individuals are known to have completed over 100 Drakensberg passes—true legends of the range: Clem Robins, Andrew Porter, Jonathan Newman, and Toni Marshall. Each took years to complete this monumental task.

When you attempt something this audacious, it must be anchored in purpose—something to carry you through the darkest moments. We decided that *Walking Home* would be a journey to reconnect with the earth and to raise awareness around education for earth stewardship and sustainable futures. Woven into the story would be lessons about nature's gifts to humanity, the power of mental fortitude, and the remarkable capabilities of humans.

While showcasing the Drakensberg and sharing the mountain's story, we chose to raise funds for a project led by the Kinship Programme—aimed at inspiring and empowering underserved Early Childhood Development (ECD) teachers to integrate environmental education and nature into the daily practices of their centres.

So how do you turn a dream like this into reality? You lean on your community.

To achieve *Walking Home's* goals, we needed to master two elements: logistics and marketing.

Logistics

With our route mapped—painstakingly plotted by Arno on Gaia—we created a WhatsApp group of anyone who might be interested in supporting the expedition. We shared an appeal

for help with resupplies and were overwhelmed by the response. Fourteen resupplies were scheduled, with food parcels shipped across South Africa.

Several incredible sponsors came on board:

- **Salomon**, whose boxes of gear made the endeavour financially possible
- **Gegron**, who kept us fuelled with exceptional coffee, chocolate and stroopwafels
- **MCSA**, whose Young Explorers Award funded transport and accommodation
- **Garmin**, for the inReach devices
- **Forever Fresh**, makers of freeze-dried meals so good we'd happily eat them at home

Marketing

We wanted *Walking Home* to tell a story: to inspire others to venture into the mountains, to recognise their own capabilities, and to bring meaningful change to ECD centres in Inanda. To do this, we had to market the expedition—bizarre as that felt.

This aspect was time-consuming but deeply rewarding. We had the privilege of speaking with many mountain legends, including three of the four 100+ pass baggers, as well as Ryno Griesel and Ryan Sands. A full media team took shape—videographers, photographers, filmmakers, and social media wizards. For two people shy of a camera, it was daunting.

D-Day: 20 March 2025

The stage was set. The curtains opened—and almost everything went wrong.

In the week leading up to *Walking Home*, Mix contracted a severe chest infection. On the 18th, she woke up covered in a rash—an allergic reaction to the antibiotic she had taken, belatedly, in a last-ditch attempt to recover. Still, on the 19th, Arno and Mix met at Witsieshoek Mountain Lodge. The expedition had to go on.

Plagued by uncertainty—trying to be wise without letting the wheels fall off before we'd even begun—we made the call that Mix would miss the first two passes (Namahadi and Beacon Buttress Gully), ascend via the Chain Ladders, and head straight to Ifidi Cave, where Arno would meet her. We were buying time.

Lying in Ifidi Cave with a pounding headache, Mix received a message on her inReach:

“Not good this side. Fever. Heart rate is spiking.”

There was nothing she could do in her state to help. What a start to the expedition.

A few hours later, Arno rolled into Ifidi Cave. Day 2 was set to be our biggest day yet. Departing from Ifidi Cave, we would descend Icdi Pass—the most difficult pass in the Drakensberg—and then ascend Ifidi Pass, the second most difficult in the range. We had no shadow of doubt that this lay within our realm of capability—on a good day. Still, we knew it was important: to prove to ourselves, and to others, that what we were setting out to achieve was possible. The stakes were high.

We set off at 4 a.m., circling the Icidi Crown before dipping into Icidi Pass at sunrise. We had a songline down the pass—until we were swallowed by a field of daisies. They towered well above our heads, their thorns grabbing at us at every opportunity. Arno, being extremely tall, bore the brunt of it.

Reaching the riverbed at the base of Icidi around 9:30 a.m., Mix knew something was wrong. The hiking viking—strong as nails—had stopped to rest. That simply didn't happen. We pushed on out of the Icidi Valley, taking a high line over the ridge into the Ifidi Valley. The heat was scorching, and we began making truly silly decisions. Out of breath on flat ground, we marched on.

Friends were waiting for us at Cycad Cave; they would help us get up the pass. The kilometres dragged on. Pale and coughing, we arrived around lunchtime. We had the time to ascend—but not the strength. Buoyed into jovial spirits by our crew—Merv Gavin, Mich Gordon, and Scotty Rogers—we settled into Cycad Cave for the night. By the end of Day 2, we were already one pass behind, and in no physical state to play catch-up.

With slight edits to our route, we devised a way to get back on track. Early the next morning, we set off up Ifidi, collected our bags at Ifidi Cave, and motored on toward Fangs Pass. As we approached Rat Hole Cave, a massive storm broke. Sheltering there for an hour, we watched three figures hiking toward us. Through hail, lightning, and downpour, they kept moving. These humans were out here for us. How incredibly blessed we were.

When the storm eased, we descended Fangs North Pass and climbed Fangs Pass to reach Fangs Cave. We would be back on track tomorrow—we just had to descend Mbundini, ascend Madonna Pass, and then descend Rwanqa Pass.

That evening, Mix's chest infection flared with vengeance. Mid-sentence she would stop, wracked by coughing. Arno soon joined in.

The next morning our alarms went off, and with them came an ultimatum. Scotty—Mix's fiancé at the time—laid down the law: *You can go and hike today, but then you are coming off this mountain.*

Stunned, we sat in silence until he added, "Well, get moving now. I'll see you at home tomorrow."

A resupply crew was waiting for us at the base of Rwanqa Pass. We'd given them a near-impossible task: establish a campsite in the middle of some of the most overgrown terrain imaginable. With a 100-litre pack loaded with treats and pangas, they had set off. Our eyes traced the ridgeline down Rwanqa and landed on the sweetest sight. The team—Cornel and Marliet Claasen, Brad Pearce, and Steve Cohen—had established a campsite we christened *Cornel Shrub Camp*. It sat at the split between Rwanqa and Black and Tan Wall Passes, sheltered by dense shrubs and a massive boulder.

At the river we were handed ice-cold Cokes. Then grapes. A pineapple. McDonald's burgers. Marliet set to work washing our clothes and tending to Arno's vicious blisters. Unbeknown to us, word had already reached the resupply crew that we were not well. Descending Rwanqa earlier that day, Scotty had given clear instructions: *Bring them off the mountain with you.*

As another storm built outside, we sat in our tent weighing the situation—too stubborn and stoic to admit we were being foolish. As chest pain raged, we took comfort in Scotty's orders and our friends' insistence that we come down and rest for a few days.

Downtrodden yet relieved, we hiked out the next morning and headed back to Durban.

We had built in buffer days, but we didn't want to disrupt the remaining resupplies. So what now? We would return—starting with the Bell Traverse—and come back later to finish the Mnweni region: Black and Tan Wall North Pass, Pins Pass, Manxome Pass, Mnweni Pass, Ledges Pass, Rockeries Pass, and Nguza Pass.

Back in Durban for three days, Arno began to recover. Mix, on the other hand, worsened. Struggling to breathe, she went for chest X-rays and was admitted for a heart Holter test and CT scan. Both came back clear. Upon discharge, we packed our bags and headed straight back to the mountains.

That evening we hiked to Sherman's Cave to position ourselves for another big day. We returned to a very wet mountain. In the middle of the night, we woke to water lapping around us. The pressure of our bodies on the cave floor had forced groundwater to the surface. We scrambled to relocate—though not before our sleeping bags were partially soaked.

We emerged into friendly rain, setting off up the Cathedral ridgeline and Orange Peel Gap in the dark. Bugger Gulley—which is notoriously dry—was now a river. Water gushed from every crevice, and the Bell Traverse was completely waterlogged. We reached Twins Cave at 9am, stowed our packs, and headed north to Ntonjelana Pass. We descended alongside the torrent.

Around midday the sun appeared, lighting the way up Twins Pass. Twins Pass is absolutely magnificent—completely untouched. A friendly man lives at its base. We bypassed waterfalls and climbed steep grass banks. A group of friends was meant to join us for the next few days. Arno walked slowly behind Mix, subtly pushing her up the final slog by his presence alone.

Would our friends be there when we arrived? As we drew closer, we strained our ears for voices. Nothing. We arrived back at Twins at 2pm and were met with a message:

“We won't make it. Rivers are flooded. We can't reach the hotel.”

The mist descended again. Cold and exhausted, we climbed into our sleeping bags. It was the kind of cold that leaves you shivering—aware you should pitch a tent, but unable to summon the will to get out of your bag. Eventually, we forced ourselves to make camp. Another message arrived:

“We made it to the hotel. Hiking to the contour path. See you in the morning.”

The rain continued through the night, drenching the mountain further. We woke early to a massive day: our first of four passes—and not easy ones. Mlambonja Pass, Xeni North, Xeni South, and Cockade Pass, plus the variation route.

We set off down Mlambonja in the dark, assuming it would be a “walk in the park.” Instead, the river was already raging. Every crossing had us thigh-deep in water. Mist obscured the view, and what is usually a pleasant descent became grim. We were falling behind schedule. To lift our spirits, we thought of our friends camping just a few kilometres away. Would they have hot coffee waiting? Would their presence revive us?

Finally, out of the pass and onto the contour path, we caught sight of their camp. Tents were still up; there was no urgency. They had decided the day ahead was too hectic and planned to meet us on top of Cockade Pass that evening instead. Slightly downtrodden, we pushed on.

The waterfalls before the Cockade/Xeni split were raging, forcing some seriously dodgy scrambling up side banks. We built rock arrows to guide our friends—and almost immediately regretted it. This was dangerous. Very dangerous. Too unsettled to downclimb, we left the arrows in place.

The sun broke through briefly when we reached the base of Xeni Pass. We laid out all our clothes to dry, anchoring them under rocks. Mix was broken and almost decided not to attempt Xeni. Arno would go on alone. But in true *Walking Home* fashion, perseverance won.

We started up Xeni Pass. The steep grass-and-rock climb before the pinnacle was terrifyingly wet. Passing through the saddle—home to a plague of insects—the clouds descended again. We decided it wasn't the day for Xeni North and continued up Xeni South instead, allowing us to walk through the majestic Elephant Gully before descending Cockade Pass. Klipspringers leapt between the rock spires.

Descending Cockade Pass (via the variation route), we kept an eye out for our friends. They should have been on their way up by now. Maybe we'd missed them in the gully? Maybe they'd reached the flooded waterfall and made the wiser call. We reached the base, gathered our finally dry belongings, and began climbing again. Oreos got us up Cockade. We reached the escarpment around 4pm. Still no sign of them.

A false overhang lured us up another ridge, but the view was spectacular. Arno went searching for signal and found some near the escarpment edge. A video loaded in our group chat. Pixelated, we tried to make sense of it: a helicopter.

One of the group had fallen while boulder-hopping, badly dislocating her shoulder. No one could get it back in place. She began drifting in and out of consciousness. With the rivers flooded, they couldn't get her off the mountain. Luckily, Mountain Rescue was training nearby and airlifted her out. The rest of the group hiked down to Cathedral Peak Hotel. She was safe.

Selfishly, this wasn't good news for us. That group carried our resupplies, now a day overdue. Our biggest concern was power: watches and phones were nearly dead, and our power banks completely depleted. We had another food resupply hidden in Lower Ndumeni Cave, which we'd reach the next day—but no power source there.

The next morning was chilly and windy as we summited Cleft Peak. A magnificent sunrise greeted us before we descended Tseketseke Pass. Still unwell, Mix was completely depleted. Three friends—Angie Slabbert, Amanda Hawke, and Grae Holliday—did the noble thing and hiked up to meet us. Seeing them lifted our spirits enormously. They joined us for the start of Camel Pass, buoying us with cheerful chatter.

As Angie and Amanda turned back and Grae continued behind us, exhaustion overwhelmed Mix. Then another surprise appeared: Frederik and his wife from Gegronde. They had stowed our resupply in Lower Ndumeni Cave and were descending via a scenic route. After chatting, we continued upward.

At the top of Windy Gap we heard a crowd of cheerful Basotho voices. Spurred by the thought—*have they found our resupply?*—we pressed on. It's hard to describe the joy of finding food after days like these: carefully unpacking each item, remembering what you'd gifted yourself—and discovering what others had added. Frederik had hidden biltong and camembert in the cave. We devoured it, followed by an avo, tomato, and tuna wrap each.

Real food.

Everyone cracks. But you never want it to be you. And in the cracks, doubt and darkness creep in.

This was Thuthumi. Yet every step was still taken.

We realised we probably wouldn't be able to ascend Didima Gully — the mountains were saturated, water pouring from every seam. Rest was needed. So at 10am, two passes down, we put our feet up for the day in Upper Endumeni Dome Cave. We ate. We slept. We ate some more. We didn't hike Smugglers Pass — a short 400-metre section near the cave.

That evening, Mix received a message from her pulmonologist: a double chest infection. She would need strong antibiotics to eradicate it. The antibiotic — *Advil* — carried a risk of tendon rupture, meaning she would need to hike off the mountain.

But after a day of real rest, she felt rejuvenated. Perhaps the message could be ignored. Listening to the body is never easy. Mix silently asked for a sign.

We set off early the next morning, heading for Gray's Pass and Keith Bush Camp, where our next resupply would meet us. Again, we didn't do Smugglers — I think we simply forgot. At 5am, the sign arrived.

Approaching Yoddlers, we crossed a horseshoe bend in the river. As we crested a small rise, eyes locked on us and barking erupted. Everything blurred. Time slowed.

Get back to the river.

Retreat.

Walk back.

Wait — Arno is running.

Run. Reroute.

Then, quiet. Calm.

The ground underfoot was sodden and unstable. With one step, Mix rolled her ankle. Shouts echoed behind us. The dogs barked again. Mix tried to stand. She couldn't — but there was no option. Each step was agony until adrenaline took over. Uphills and flats were manageable, as long as her foot landed in *exactly* the right position.

A few hours later, near Didima Dome, we stopped for breakfast. Two vultures circled overhead. We decided to look at Mix's ankle. Tennis-ball round.

Oh well — only another 15km to Keith's.

At the top of Gray's Pass we accepted that we needed a backup plan. That plan was Daven. We phoned Daven Stroh and asked if he fancied hiking Cowl and Ships Pass the following day.

Gray's took a long time to descend. Painfully slow. Our friends' tents never seemed to get closer. Eventually, we reached camp and were rewarded with over a dozen donuts from Valley Bakery — once again supplied by the Claasens.

At around 8pm, a light appeared in the distance. It approached quickly, and within minutes was unpacking its bag and offering everyone fresh fruit salad.

Daven had arrived. And he was ready.

Arno and Daven would continue. Mix would reassess in the morning.

The alarm sounded to the patter of unpleasant rain. The compression bandage came off. Instantly, we knew.

Mix wouldn't be continuing.

Her journey would take her down to Monk's Cowl campsite, and then to Umhlanga Hospital casualty.

Arno and Daven set off up Cowl Pass around 5 a.m., into a massive day that would test every ounce of resolve. The weather offered no mercy—thick cloud clung to the base, swallowing any hope of visibility. We circled and probed for the right line, losing precious time in the blind groping for the correct line. Higher up, the mist finally relented, and we popped above the clouds into brilliant sunlight. A brief pause at the top to breathe it in, then the descent began, thick bush clawing at us until we reached the contour path and turned toward the infamous Ship's Prow.

Before the base of the pass, a foul, lingering stench hit us—a dead buck, rotting in the undergrowth, impossible to identify but impossible to ignore. We pushed through quickly, desperate to escape the smell. Navigation up Ships Pass proved brutal: perpetual mist, no landmarks, just endless steepness. It is a long, grinding pass compared to many others, and it made us pay for every metre. The final couple of hundred metres dragged painfully slowly, and we still had to summit Champagne Castle beyond. At last we broke free of the cloud, and to our disbelief, we spotted our first non-Walking Home hikers of the day—another pair

ascending Ships in the same whiteout. We couldn't see anything around us, but there they were: ghosts in the fog. We topped out on Champagne, then pushed another 3 km along the escarpment in search of a suitable campsite. By day's end, we had covered 18 km and racked up around 2600 m of elevation gain. It was time for some desperately needed rest.

The next morning greeted us with a stunner of a sunrise. There is something truly magical about waking above the clouds, perched on the edge of the escarpment: the stillness, the slow shift of colours across the sky, a slight breeze whispering through your beard. We savoured the moment over a cup of Gegrond coffee, then turned our attention to Ape's Pass. Not many have done this one—including Arno and Daven before this trip. With the Molar rising in the distance and the world still floating beneath a sea of white, we began the descent, knowing visibility would vanish as soon as we dropped lower.

The pass was a river—water pouring from every seam, turning steep grassy banks into treacherous slides. Arno and Daven ended up committed to the gully, but it grew seriously dodgy. We knew that if we pushed a few more moves, retreat would become impossible; we'd be stuck. Andrew Porter had noted an alternative line on Ape's, so we tried that instead—staying high on the grassy ridge above the gully. Visibility was down to barely 3 metres; everything beyond was swallowed by mist. With cellphone signal flickering in and out, we called Andrew. He knew exactly where we were and gave clear advice: make the wise call, head back up, leave Ape's for another day.

It is the worst feeling in the mountains—to bail on something you know is so close, yet recognise you are pushing past your limits. The ascent back out was gnarly, every step a battle against wet grass and fatigue. We made our way across the escarpment and descended Leslie's Pass. At the base, Daven would leave Arno and head home from Injisuthi camp.

From here, Arno would carry on alone.

It is difficult to reconcile the vast freedom of the mountains with the confinement of a wheelchair. Fresh air replaced by a dingy hospital corridor. Initiative in every sense of the word, replaced by being told to wait.

The disbelief at the sudden shift in reality.

The farewell of a dream.

The heartbreak of letting go.

The days blurred together — endless waiting for X-ray and MRI results. The unknown. Could I return? When? Would Arno manage alone?

I would have to draw on strength to be a positive force from the sidelines.

Walking Home is bigger than me and my wishes. It is about so much more. It had to continue. But it wasn't the same.

Five days later, the MRI results came in.

In June 2024, I had unknowingly torn my ATFL off the bone. I continued running and hiking until July, when something finally felt wrong. Surgery followed. Three weeks in a cast. Ten weeks in a moonboot.

With one ankle roll, I undid it all — tearing the ATFL off the bone again.

Fortunately, my surgeon had the foresight to attach a mesh alongside the ligament. This time, we could attempt a conservative recovery. Perhaps the ligament would grow back along the mesh and reattach itself.

But I wasn't going back to the mountains.

I was going back into a moonboot.

Arno headed back up Leslie's Pass, bound for the summit of Mafadi—South Africa's highest point. Visibility remained zero the entire way; the world existed only in the few metres directly in front of his boots. At one stage he nearly walked straight into a troop of baboons, and later, in the fading light, his mind began playing tricks: shadowy figures that looked for all the world like robed wizards drifting across the escarpment. They turned out to be Basotho herders, wide-brimmed hats and long hiking sticks silhouetted against the mist. The mind does strange things when you are utterly alone up there, especially as darkness creeps in and the kilometres still stretch ahead.

After a brief, warm exchange—sweet words and shared smiles with the herders—Arno pushed on to the summit cairn, then turned his steps toward Upper Injisuthi Cave for the night. The plan had been to meet a small crew there, a group doing an unsupported Grand Traverse led by Michael Baker. But a message from Mix arrived on the inReach:

“They are not coming. They're about 30 km behind schedule because of the weather. Camping near Didima ridge.”

So Arno would spend the night alone in the cave. Not the worst place in the world to be solitary, he told himself.

An early alarm brought the first real break in the relentless rain. For the first time on the entire journey, the rain pants came out. Anyone who knows Arno knows he never wears long pants—ever. This was a special day. The escarpment had become a vast, sodden swamp that went on for kilometres. Everything was soaked through. Hands froze, but the mind stayed strong.

The plan was to descend Around the Corner Pass, hike back up Corner Pass, then drop down Judge to Bannerman Hut. Arno reached the top of Around the Corner. It was no longer a pass; it was a waterfall, a roaring river pouring off the edge. Nothing visible except flowing water and mist. He considered giving it a go—then thought better of it. Alone on the escarpment in these conditions? A quick call to Merv and Mix, and the decision was unanimous: skip it, go down Judge instead, and take a long, restful day at Bannerman.

Judge, too, was a river and a waterfall. The volume of water cascading off the mountains was almost unbelievable. Yet the walk to the hut felt almost pleasant. The rain eased for a while, and the sheer scale of these peaks—when you are the only human moving through them—is something profound.

A resupply crew arrived at the hut around 1–2 p.m.: Albert, JP, Dickens, and Caryn. Relief flooded through Arno when he saw them. They had brought pizza, Coke, Ultra Mel—pure insanity in the best possible way. That night they played Uno by headlamp while a massive storm raged outside, shaking the stone walls.

The next morning Dickens and Caryn headed out. Arno took Albert and JP up Gypaetus Pass and down Bannerman Pass. Gypaetus was pure joy—fun scrambling, and for about five glorious minutes the sun broke through. The warmth on skin felt like a gift from another world. Then the clouds rolled back in, and it was back to the scheduled programming: no visibility. They topped out quickly and dropped straight down Bannerman Pass—no point lingering with zero views. The pass was, of course, another river. Arno had grown almost numb to the water by now, but the gasps and wide eyes from Albert and JP reminded him: this was not normal. Waterfalls poured from every seam; dry feet were a fantasy.

At the base, Arno called Mix. Things were not great, she said. They danced around the topic of stopping the mission, neither quite willing to say it out loud. They would wait for the final word from her MRI.

The rest of the day passed at the hut. More surprises: Albert had brought pancake ingredients. They spent probably four hours making pancakes on a tiny pan, slowly filling stomachs in the perfect weather for the meal. It was perfect.

Arno would go alone again the next stretch.

A beautiful sunrise kicked off a four-pass day: Thumb, South Hlubi, Langies, and Bond. All straightforward, and good weather made everything feel quick and light. Remarkable how much difference clear skies can make. The mist rolled in again as he descended Bond; visibility dropped to nothing. He had to trust GPX files (which, in the Berg, are never gospel) and pick his way carefully through the multiple lines at the top. He stashed his pack at the base of Langies earlier, retrieved it, then pushed on to the base of Jarateng to make camp. Finding a truly dry, flat spot proved impossible, but the patch he chose did the job.

A three-pass day loomed: North Jarateng, Central Jarateng, South Jarateng, and to Katana Cave. The weather turned miserable again; progress was slow. Arno had momentarily forgotten he also had to cross Mount Dunford, only remembering as he topped out North Jarateng. These are steep passes but straightforward—pick a line, commit, stay on it. He collected his pack at the base of Central, moved on to South. The top of South was painful: thousands of thorny bushes in a narrowing gully, clawing at everything. The plan had been to descend the top of Katana and sleep at Katana Cave, but the entry looked like a vertical drop in these conditions. Arno made the call: continue to Giants Summit Cave and leave Katana for later.

Mix and Arno stayed in constant contact about her injury, both hoping against hope that she would be able to return to the mountains.

The next day Arno started and finished at the same spot—Giants Summit Cave—so he left his pack hidden behind a rock. He dropped down Giant’s Pass, followed the contour path all the way to Elandshoek Pass. It was beautiful country, rarely seen: the ruins of the old Giant’s Hut, open views, distant waterfalls. Pure magic. He summited Giant’s Castle on the way back—completely clouded in, again—then met Patrick at the cave for resupply. Patrick arrived with a bucket of KFC. Cold KFC has never tasted so good on a mountain.

They shared an incredible sunset, followed by an even better sunrise the next morning. Arno was now ahead of schedule (thanks to skipping Katana), so the day’s goal was simply Lotheni Cave—a short walk. He slept in, rested, and wrestled with the news from Mix. The MRI confirmed it: she had torn her ATFL. She would not be coming back to the mountains.

Arno reached out to friends—everyone had a different opinion:

“You have to go ahead—you discussed injuries before starting, right?”

“The best thing is to continue later with Mix.”

“That next section is too dangerous to do solo.”

He called Mix. She said she would stand by whatever he decided—continue alone or come down. Arno chose to head down. The expedition could wait. It wasn’t meant to be this time. Nothing had gone to plan. Mix contacted the sponsors; they stood behind the decision completely. Safety first.

Mix and her friend Paige drove up to collect him at Giant’s Castle Resort, then headed back to Durban.

Seeing Mix in a moonboot, on crutches, hurt. They had poured months of planning and effort into *Walking Home*, only for weather, sickness, injury, and sheer chaos to unravel it all. Everything that went wrong was out of their hands. They had controlled what they could, and still it wasn’t enough.

It was time to regroup.

Walking Home had to take another shape.

For us, the timeline was never the goal — completing every pass was.

“If you’d managed to achieve it the first time, the task would have been too easy.”

— Andrew Porter

While Mix recovered, we put out an invitation for others to complete Drakensberg passes on our behalf. In doing so, *Walking Home* became bigger than us — and helped raise more funds for the Kinship Programme.

By June, we were ready to go again.

The revised plan: complete every pass in the Northern and Central Drakensberg before returning for *Walking Home 2.0*. This meant hiking every pass as far south as Giant's Pass.

Walking Home 2.0 will be a 19-day expedition, beginning at Elandshoek Pass and completing every Southern Berg pass.

With leave nearly depleted, we became weekend warriors.

With Mix back in action, the fire was reignited. We set out to catch her up on the passes she had missed, starting with the Giants area. The passes were much easier and gentle here. Perfect for Mix to regain some confidence. Snow was forecast, promising some interesting adventures. We kicked off on a Friday evening, hiking in under clear skies to Bannerman Hut—stars blazing overhead for once, and a porcupine rustling across the path as a special welcome.

Mix, Arno, Scott, and Sophie would tackle Gypaetus and Bannerman the next day, then link up with Cornel and Marliet at the hut to continue together on Thumb and South Hlubi.

The snow slowed everything down, but it was pure joy. Blue skies, perfect temperatures, almost no wind—ideal conditions. Careful steps through the white stuff carried us up Gypaetus. Descending Bannerman turned into an absolute playground: skiing down on bums, sliding on feet, laughing all the way. Spirits soared. It felt so good to be back.

We met Cornel and Marliet at the hut, then pushed on to Thumb Pass. The top narrows dramatically, choked with snow and mud. After a tricky ascent, you emerge onto an outcrop with one of the most spectacular views in the range—then route-find onto the next section to reach the escarpment proper. With the snow, Arno's April line looked unsafe, and we weren't sure of the standard route. We decided to camp right there on the outcrop, melt snow for water, and sort it out in the morning. Mix was already in touch with mountain rescue, quietly checking protocols in case we couldn't self-rescue. Descending the way we came up felt even riskier.

The next morning we found a safe line and got everyone to the top. Then down South Hlubi, blanketed in snow—perhaps the most fun we've had in ages. Our cups were filled and overflowing.

It got a bit overwhelming for some in the group, so they peeled off back to the resort while Arno, Mix, and Scott pressed on to Langies. Bond looked too unsafe in the conditions, so we continued to North Jarateng, then up Central Jarateng to spend the night in Jarateng Cave. The next day we finished the upper part of Central, eyed South Jarateng—but Arno knew the tight, thorny gully at the top would be a nightmare with snow. It looked like an extreme skier's dream, but not for us. Katana was still on the list for the weekend, but we all agreed: not today. The snow was simply too much. Hopefully it would be 3rd time lucky for Katana for Arno when we attempt it again. We dropped down Giants Pass and made our way back to the cars. An incredible weekend in the mountains.

In July, with Mix stronger, we felt ready for some of the tougher passes in the Mweni area. A crew of three: Arno, Mix, and Paige. The plan was ambitious—a big long weekend: Day 1

ascend Nguza and descend Rockeries; Day 2 up Black and Tan Wall (North) and down Manxome; Day 3 up Ledgers Pass and down Mnweni Pass.

Nguza was a treat—a pass that deserves way more love. The infamous “Death Scramble” posed no real drama. Ice and snow lingered everywhere, but we made good time and dropped down Rockeries faster than expected. We even squeezed in a quick swim at the pools below.

The next day would be much, much longer.

We hiked out and stashed our packs at the Rwanqa/Mnweni split—lighter loads for the beast that is Black and Tan North Pass. Perfect conditions, an amazing line, and the final section blanketed in snow. Crampons on, we topped out safely. Then the wind hit—next-level, relentless. We raced across the escarpment to Manxome Pass. Arno, still wearing his crampons, tripped over them and face-planted hard. The wind didn’t pause for sympathy; we laughed it off and continued down. Stunning views, especially from the “Balcony”. We made it to the bottom safely, retrieved our packs, and camped.

Day three dawned bright. We were buzzing for the ridgeline on Ledgers Pass—finally ticking it off. Down Mnweni Pass we went, collected our packs, and hiked out to the cultural centre. A weekend that gave so much.

Next up was a weekend mission to finally tick off Pins Pass—the last marked pass in the Mnweni area still waiting on our list.

Our original plan had been to head to Injisuthi for Ape’s, Corner, Around the Corner, and Leslie’s, but snow was still clinging stubbornly to those northern faces. We knew they wouldn’t be passable, so we shifted focus to Pins: steep, long, and uncompromising. The crew for this one would be Mix, Arno, Scott, and Patrick. We filled our tummies with a potjie that Patrick made on Friday evening.

We sped through the Mnweni valley—terrain so familiar now it felt like muscle memory—until we stood at the base of the pass. Steep. Very steep. The day was beautiful, weather perfect, spirits high. We began the slow, deliberate climb up those relentless grassy banks.

Higher up, we hit the aftermath of a rockslide. Arno picked what looked like a viable line—until it wasn’t. Loose, slippery rock gave way beneath him; he teetered on the edge of getting properly stuck. With careful moves, hands and feet finding purchase where they could, he wove himself free and back onto safer ground. A reminder: even in familiar mountains, the Berg keeps you honest.

Turning into the final section of Pins, boulder hopping gave way to patches of lingering snow. Then more steep grass to the top. The plan had been to spend the night in Pins Cave, but when we arrived it was half-buried in snow—no chance of making it habitable. Backup plan: Manxome Cave. A short, exposed scramble to reach the entrance, but inside it offered warmth, shelter, and the quiet relief of walls around us.

The next morning we set off across the escarpment, heading for Ledges Pass—a favourite we were happy to walk again. The descent was glorious, the ridgeline giving us those

sweeping views that make you feel small in the best possible way. Three snakes crossed our path on the way down, a quiet reminder that the mountains are alive and watchful.

We reached the Mnweni bridge, met our lift, and rolled back to the cultural centre—another piece of the puzzle slotted into place, another weekend that left us grateful, tired, and already dreaming of the next one.

Arno still had Katana Pass waiting, while Mix needed Katana, South Jarateng, and Bond. We gathered a big group at the resort and split into two teams: one heading straight for Katana and Bond on day one, the rest heading directly for Jarateng Cave.

The weather was kind—snow no longer an issue—and Arno breathed a quiet sigh of relief. This would be his third attempt at Katana; he was more than ready to put it behind him. The approach is wonderfully straightforward: a semi-steep grassy bank that ends abruptly at a dead-end cliff face. From there you traverse around Katana Peak, then scramble the final short section to the escarpment. A very cool pass, clean and satisfying.

We also poked our heads into Katana Cave—spacious but littered with rocks, leaving little room for comfortable sleeping. Only three of us pressed on to Bond Pass: Arno, Mix, and Paige. As we crested the top, a bearded vulture glided silently past, close enough to feel the majesty of it. Visibility made all the difference on Bond; the pass revealed itself in full—those few scrambles at the top, the open views, the sheer fun of it. We made our way to Jarateng Cave to rejoin the group, shared a beautiful sunset, marvelled at the stars, and woke to an equally stunning sunrise.

Mix had scouted an epic line from the cave that looped around to South Jarateng Pass. We followed it up, tagged the top, and descended the same way back to the resort—another piece completed, another loop closed.

The final weekend mission of 2025 took us to the Didima area for Didima, Tlanyaku, and Xeni North—two massive days ahead. We based ourselves at Cambalala Hut on Friday night, then set off early the next morning. The crew was a proper squad: Arno, Mix, Paige, Daven, Mich, Amanda, and Scott.

Didima Pass is pure magic. It has everything: boulder hopping to reach the start, steep grassy banks, scrambles, obstacles, and views that stretch forever. The final stretch was carpeted in pink flowers—so beautiful it stopped us in our tracks. After a quick bite at the top, we dropped down Tlanyaku Pass. The views of Didima Falls—one of the top 100 highest waterfalls on earth—are simply breathtaking. Mix nearly stepped on a rinkhals, then spotted a massive mole snake just minutes later—nature reminding us to stay sharp.

We reached the bottom in perfect time for afternoon tea at Cathedral Peak Hotel, feet up, smiles wide.

The next morning Arno, Mix, Paige, Daven, and Scott set out for Xeni North—infamous for its steepness and unrelenting difficulty. We climbed higher, pushing through clouds that parted just enough to tease the scale of the landscape. Daven dialled in an amazing line—much cleaner than the usual routes—carrying us smoothly to the top. Towering peaks broke through the mist every few minutes, reminding us how small we are among these

giants. The gully threw in a few heart-racing obstacles, including the famous wormhole, but we moved well.

We descended via Mlambonja Pass and rolled straight into the restaurant for chips and milkshakes—cold, salty, perfect. One of the best weekends we had in 2025.

Walking Home 2.0 is set to begin in May 2026. Two trips remain: Injisuthi (Apes, Corner, and Around the Corner) and Didima (Smugglers).

To date, we have hiked **X km**, gained **Y m** of elevation, completed **Z passes**, and raised **R A** for the Kinship Programme's Community-Embedded Environmental Education Programme. The project continues, a living testament to movement, attention, and stewardship in the mountains.