

MOUNTAINEERING CONDITIONS IN THE UNION OF SOUTH AFRICA

By D. GORDON MILLS

How do mountaineering conditions in the Union of South Africa compare with those of other countries? This question is frequently asked of the South African climber by the visitor to this country.

A direct comparison with other countries would not be of value without personal and intimate knowledge and experience of conditions prevailing elsewhere; such knowledge is not easily acquired by South Africans. It might, nevertheless, be of interest to detail simply some of the conditions found in this country, and to ascertain whether some advantages at least do not emerge. In the Union the land rises in great steps from the coast. The Coast Belt is narrow, and seldom rises more than a few hundred feet above sea level; the Little Karroo averages 2000 ft. upwards, and the Great Karroo or High Veld 4000 ft. upwards above sea level. (The altitude of Johannesburg is 5735 ft.) Generally speaking, the mountains are found arising out of or near the Coast Belt. Other inland points appearing on the map with high altitudes are often found to be mere hills rising above the surrounding high country.

The Drakensbergen system—150 miles long—constitutes the great barrier between Natal and the Orange Free State. It is the highest and most extensive mountainous area in the Union. The other important groups and chains are found mostly in the Western Province of the Cape, and in or near the Coast Belt. The Union contains no great mountains from the point of view of altitude when compared with other countries. The Drakensbergen system is the only one containing peaks over 10,000 ft., the highest point being approximately 11,000 ft. The other higher mountains of importance are mostly between 5000 and 7500 ft. in altitude. No peak in the Union raises its summit into the perpetual snow line.

The attraction and advantages of high altitudes from the mountaineer's point of view appear, however, to be amply compensated for by other factors. Our mountains are of easy access and consequently are available to all classes of the community. No expensive expeditions are necessary to reach them, and railway and motor bring them within cheap and easy reach of all. Cape Town is specially favoured by having Table Mountain with its varied climbs, including first-class rock scrambles, in its immediate vicinity. Country towns such as Worcester, Paarl, Ladismith and many others have splendid mountains closely adjacent. This unique advantage of easy access is sometimes overlooked. Railways grant every facility to the mountaineer, and the roads on the whole are good, despite statements to the contrary



Photo, A. B. Berrisford.]

DRAKENSBERG, NATAL.

From left to right : Champagne Castle, Monk's Cowl (unclimbed), Cathkin Peak, Sterkhorn.

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Photo, A. B. Berrisford.]

THE SUMMIT OF WAIHOCHI PEAK, 6408 FT., WESTERN PROVINCE, IN WINTER.



Photo, A. B. Berrisford.]

DRAKENSBERG, NATAL. A VIEW UP THE LITTLE TUGELA RIVER.
Left to right : Champagne Castle, Monk's Cowl (unclimbed), Cathkin Peak.



Photo, A. B. Berrisford.]

SIMONSBERG (4500 FT.), WESTERN PROVINCE.

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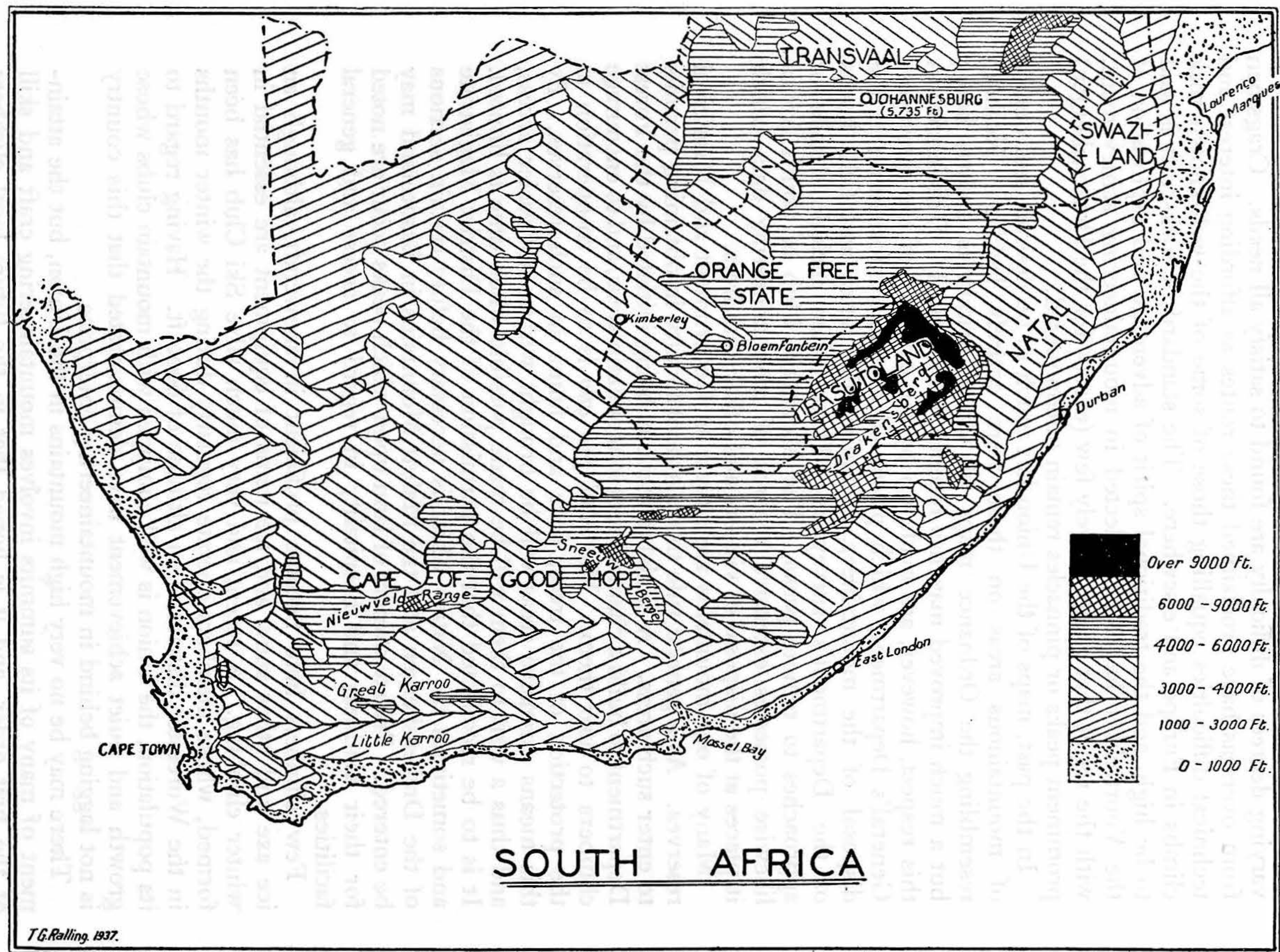
by the casual and sometimes irresponsible visitor, who apparently expects concrete or macadamised roads in a country of great distances and with a population of only two million Europeans.

After leaving the rail-head or motor, the climber is seldom faced with any serious river crossings. Foothills and approaches are all moderately short. Actual ascents may be made in daylight from favourable bases. The midnight start is seldom heard of in South Africa except in very special emergency or circumstance. To reach these bases may involve a day and sometimes two days' trek on foot, but generally they are only a few hours' walk from mechanical transport. Coloured porters may be obtained, but this is seldom necessary. In certain areas donkey transport is both cheap and efficient. In the Drakensbergen and Malutis Basuto ponies are used.

The Union being situate within the temperate zone, the climatic conditions are unsurpassed for mountaineering. The days of sunshine, cloudless sky and distant visibility predominate. Spells of adverse weather seldom last many days, and conditions can as a general rule be fairly accurately foretold. Violent winds and storms are naturally encountered in our mountains, but these seldom occur without due warning, and in any event apparently they are not as sudden, nor as violent, as those occurring in other mountains of the world; they are seldom, if ever, accompanied by danger to the climber. Rains are seasonal in all mountain areas and the wet periods can be avoided. At other times sunshine and settled weather are the rule. Owing to the comparatively warm climate, equipment may be reduced to a minimum. For example, the climber needs no more clothing than khaki shirt and shorts, with a couple of sweaters which can be carried in the rucksack during the climb.

Camping conditions are ideal, and the base is usually situated in some splendid wooded kloof with its mountain stream, good shelter and wood supply. The camp fire is the inevitable accompaniment of the mountaineer here. Light-weight tents are carried but are often found to be unnecessary in summer. Ample bathing and swimming facilities are encountered in the mountain streams, and sunbathing is indulged in as a matter of course. In the summer and autumn in the Coast Belt the ground is dry and warm, and many shrubs are found which constitute suitable and comfortable bedding. Four-day packs may be comfortably carried to high altitude camps which are often within reasonable access of several peaks. Modern light-weight equipment and a favourable climate encourage high bases for extended periods, and camps at 5000 ft. upwards may be undertaken with a maximum of comfort. A two-weeks' trip may be experienced without one day of wet or adverse weather. The most settled months at the Cape are from November to April. In the Drakensbergen they are April to July. In the Coast Belt of the Western Province, which is the cradle of mountaineering enterprise in South Africa, climbing is indulged in regularly throughout the year.

The best rock for the cragsman is fortunately that most commonly found and known as the Table Mountain series. This is a hard



sandstone suitable for the needs of the climber. Stretches of 3000-4000 ft. of this clean continuous rock are provided by many climbs, and varying degrees of difficulty are found to satisfy all needs. Cragmen from overseas have proclaimed these routes as affording interest and technical difficulties equalling those of some of the well-known rock climbs in Europe and elsewhere. The standard of rock-craft is said to be high, and the traditional spirit of adventure and exploration of the Voortrekker has been reflected in mountaineering achievement, with the result that comparatively few (except for the Drakensbergen) prominent peaks or pinnacles remain unconquered.

In the past, maps of the Union left much to be desired, and details of mountainous areas on these were entirely lacking. Nothing resembling the Ordnance maps of Great Britain is known here; but a much improved map has recently been issued. Deficiencies in this respect, however, are made up by the courtesy of the Surveyor-General's Department, which places all available information at the disposal of the mountaineer, including the notes and field books of the Department's surveyors. These often include details of approaches to remote peaks. The Mountain Club of South Africa likewise possesses extensive records of mountaineering data which it places at the disposal of visitors and other enquirers.

Many of our mountains are situate in Government and Municipal reserves. As a general rule there is no difficulty in obtaining permits to enter such areas. A laudable move is being initiated by the Forest Department to build a chain of huts in mountain areas, and to encourage climbers to use them. The *quid pro quo* is to be co-operation in the protection of the trees, flora and fauna in such reserves. By this means extensive areas will be brought within still easier access, and thus a visit to them will be made possible when time is limited. It is to be recollected that the permission of the District Magistrate and sometimes the Native Chief is necessary before certain sections of the Drakensbergen and the Maluti Mountains in Basutoland may be entered. Private owners of land upon which peaks occur are noted for their kindness and hospitality in regard to access and general facilities.

Few climbers here become proficient in snowcraft, although an ice axe and other snow and ice items of equipment are essential in winter climbing. A recent and very much alive Ski Club has been formed, whose members operate regularly during the winter months in the Worcester district at an altitude of 6000 ft. Having regard to its population, the Union is well equipped with mountain clubs whose growth and quiet achievement have demonstrated that this country is not lagging behind in mountaineering enterprise.

There may be no very high mountains in the Union, but the attainment of many of its summits involves mountaineering craft and skill of the first order, and it is hoped that in the future local climbers will have the pleasure of meeting a greater number of their colleagues from overseas.