HOME ON THE RANGE





SHIN UP: Megan Beaumont, above, limbers up to climb the Maltese Cross in the Cederberg mountains. Mountain Club of SA members, left, enjoy a climb in the Cederberg, 300km north of Cape Town. The club is celebrating its 125th anniversary this year by travelling to Patagonia

Top of the world

The Mountain Club of SA is celebrating its 125th birthday, writes **Claire Keeton**

MOUNTAIN Club of SA members climbed more than 300 peaks, hills and routes in South Africa, and as far afield as Ben Nevis in Scotland and South Korea, this month to celebrate the club's 125th birthday.

The highest point reached was 5 400m on Thorung la pass in Nepal.

A pair of rock climbers got up 125 routes in a single day at Waterval Boven in Mpumalanga. It involved more distance than an ultramarathon.

Merv Prior, 91, was the veteran participant when he climbed Arch Rock at Keurboomstrand. Four generations of Priors joined in the "1-2-5" challenge.

The club was founded so long ago that it predates the South African War.

"At that time Tchaikovsky was still alive, Coca-Cola wasn't yet a brand, viruses hadn't been discovered, women could not vote and the Swiss Army knife was invented," MCSA media liaison Adelle Horlor said.

The MCSA is a national club with the motto: "Explore — discover — connect — protect — climb!"

Johannesburg member Paul Fatti, a former MCSA president, said: "Protecting the mountains has always been a priority."

The 14 sections of the club have been actively involved in the conservation and rehabilitation of habitats.

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Fatti has been a member of the club for 50 years, joining the MCSA after he left the Wits University mountain club.

"The club enables you to go on expeditions you couldn't do easily on your own. Climbing is not a mainline sport, it is largely a social sport."

In the early 1990s, the MCSA was invited to join the International Climbing and Mountaineering Federation and now has strong partners overseas, a development which opens up opportunities for South African climbers.

During the apartheid era only white people were admitted to the club, but in recent decades the MCSA has made an effort to transform and be accessible through an outreach programme.

Hiking co-ordinator Andile Nqoxo, 30, said that the club led and sponsored hiking activities for students in his community in Cape Town's Philippi. The Table Mountain National Park is their stomping ground.

"They take kids hiking and I was a beneficiary of this before I was employed here," said Nqoxo, who works at the SA Education and Environmental Programme.

"I have been co-ordinating hiking since 2011. For people of my background it's a different hobby and it is relaxing. I'm doing as much hiking as I can with my friends and colleagues," he said.

MCSA member Camilla Adelle has been involved with the outreach, offering hikes to schools, homes and youth clubs.

She said: "We have lots of fun reaching new members."

The programme has been active for more than 10 years and each year several hundred young people get involved for hikes on Saturdays.

The MCSA also has an efficient search and rescue operation, which has been involved in about 3 000 rescues since it was formed.

The operation has six teams of highly trained volunteers who work with the likes of the SA Air Force. Providing support to mountaineers in trouble was one of the reasons for the club's formation.

Apparently in 1889, a party of ladies and gentlemen got trapped overnight on Table Mountain when the "table cloth" descended. This mishap was the catalyst to launching the club in 1891.

For a final birthday celebration in December the MCSA is heading to Patagonia in Chile on an expedition.

● *For details see: http://cen.mcsa.org.za*
Keeton is a member of the MCSA.