

## PAST SECRETS OF THE JAN DUTOITS KLOOF

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The dangerous "ladder" at the top of the ravine. It had been replaced in 1970 by a thick hemp rope; only a remnant of wood and wire remaining at the bottom. Note the white shirt of the man at the top left corner.

(Photo: Archie Coetzee)

AS well as being adorned with high peaks and steep cliffs, the mountains of the Boland also harbour deep and mysterious kloofs, some of which have not known the tread of the human foot. A lifetime could be devoted to discovering all the secrets they hide.

The Jan Dutoits, Groothoek and Witels kloofs alone would take months of extensive exploration by the mountainer who wishes to learn all about them, however experienced and tough he may be.

The Jan Dutoits Kloof should not be confused with Du Toits Kloof. The latter is a great and beautiful valley through which the National Road between Paarl and Worcester passes on the way to the north. It is bordered by the giant Du Toits peak to the south and by the Witteberg and other peaks to the north.

Although Du Toits Kloof is, without doubt, something outstanding and surely one of the loveliest in our land, it cannot actually be compared with Jan Dutoits Kloof. The former has an immense but friendly appearance whereas the latter is lugubrious and overwhelming. In Du Toits Kloof there are numerous farms and there are no more secrets, while Jan Dutoits is still largely *terra incognita*.

They are virtually opposite to each other across the Breede River valley, into which Du Toits Kloof debouches a few miles from Goudini; the entrance to Jan Dutoits Kloof being approximately five miles north of Goudiniweg railway station, and lies between the Chavonnesberg and Waaihoek ridge.

There are many legends and romantic tales attached to Jan Dutoits Kloof. Between the years 1820 and 1830 a nest of so-called "drosters", runaways or deserters, was uncovered in the Waaihoek mountains, Worcester district. These consisted mainly of Bushmen and Hottentots, who chose this area between high, desolate mountains as their hiding place after stealing and pillaging in the surrounding districts. Quite content, they lived there and not without good reason, for when darkness came they would sneak down from the mountains and take whatever they required. At dawn they were again deep in the kloofs up in the mountains. They chose a place where even a big fire could not be seen from a distance.

Just how long they stayed there cannot be ascertained. The fact that peach and lemon trees were discovered later in their haunts would indicate that these had existed for some time. During the course of several years many oxen, sheep and goats disappeared regularly from farms in the vicinity, although the drosters did not steal horses. The owners never found the spoor of the rascals or the stolen animals. Although the authorities tried all they could to put a stop to the thieving, their attempts seemed to be fruitless. Brutal murders were committed and cruel assaults took place without a trace being left of the criminals. For years these mysterious runaways were the terror of the community, and some of them came in disguise to work for farmers to get information to help them in future raids.

One evening a Hottentot was caught redhanded whilst stealing cattle in the Wagenmakersvallei, and he was harshly compelled to betray his accomplices. This Hottentot was handed over to a certain Field Cornet Gabriel Hugo, the owner of the farm "Waaihoek" at that time. Hugo duly received orders to assemble a commando to follow the man to his nest in the mountains. This was no easy task, in view of the fact that they were informed that their quarry was well armed, and shrewd tactics would have to be adopted.

Twenty-five zealous young farmers were got together and supplied with arms and provisions, and they set off up the kloof with the captured Hottentot forced as their guide. At first all went well, but later the party had to clamber over difficult stretches of rock and between high walls by a narrow path. Fearing that they were being led into an ambush, Hugo suddenly grabbed the Hottentot and threatened him with death unless he showed them the correct track immediately. Begging for mercy, the Hottentot pleaded with the company to follow him—there was no other path but that they were on.

At last, after a tiring climb, they arrived at dusk within striking distance of the drosters' haunt. They were tired, but nevertheless immediate action had to be taken. Hugo gave the order to charge before the inhabitants could retaliate, and so it happened that all ran smoothly. Soon the farmers were busily engaged in holding at bay and binding the men in the group, while the women and children were brought to one side and guarded. It was already too dark to search further.

At daybreak it became evident that the inhabitants had built huts in the kloof and some lived in caves. Fruit and vegetables were being cultivated. Large quantities of skins, horns and miscellaneous stolen articles were also found. In addition there were weapons of all sorts and a large cache of ammunition stored in a cave. Luckily the commando had achieved a surprise attack, otherwise the assignment would not have been so easy. The return journey was very difficult and it was no easy task to hurry the women and children down the steep, rocky footpath. It was impossible to reach the bottom end of the kloof that evening, so they slept overnight at a suitable place. Early the next morning

they moved on again with the most difficult stretch accomplished. No less than 150 people were captured, including women and many children who had never seen Europeans before.



If Jan Dutoits Kloof is viewed from Goudiniweg station it appears to be a fairly open kloof with sharp or wide bends here and there, while the top end rises sharply and steeply to a narrow nek in a ridge, approximately 5,000 feet above sea level. But this kloof is very deceptive when seen at a distance. It has so many ridges coming from the massive mountains towards the stream that they all appear to merge into one. It is only when one enters the kloof that its unusual size and form can be appreciated. Towards the summit it branches out abundantly, like the cracks in the bed of a dry dam, some of the fissures being a thousand feet deep.



Jan Dutoits Kloof was explored properly in 1922 by J. W. Fraser and a party of three others. They penetrated it with much difficulty up to where it shoots up suddenly in a series of high waterfalls to the heights of the Horseshoe and Brodie peaks.

After an exacting trip of two days the party reached the deep and narrow section. A few hundred yards further the kloof turned away sharply to the north. From here onwards they had to make their way through a chain of slit gorges. To speak of a "kloof" here would be meaningless, since at this point the walls of one particular slit were merely 20 feet apart and shot up vertically for more than a thousand feet. The slit was 50 feet long and was connected with a second one which was at right angles to it. Into the second slit the sun was shining. It was queer to look up through the shorter slit and see the sunlight bright over the furthest end, a blinding shaft of light in an otherwise depressing twilight. On the left of a 40-foot high waterfall narrow ledges ascended upward to about 15 feet from the top. Here the party could crawl through a narrow hole, after first emptying their rucksacks. Another 50 yards further the kloof again turned sharply to the left, the walls overhanging and the bottom smooth.

Then came the surprise—not 100 yards from the bend the walls of the gorge were closed in to about 20 feet apart and bridged by a solid rock face. Secured to this face was a ladder, all of 60 feet high. To its right the water cut a deep groove in the rock face, plummeting straight down into a deep, round pool.

To the left of the waterfall the rock face would have been unscalable had it not been for this ladder. At once they thought of the stories of the "drosters" who once frequented the kloof, and asked themselves whether someone would attack them up there and push them into the depths below should they ascend the ladder. It was a rickety affair, and with some misgiving the party ascended it, carefully negotiating the 60-foot face.

It became evident that the contraption had been there for quite some time, since the wood was rotten in places and the wire holding it together was badly rusted. A few times it threatened to give way, but miraculously everything just hung there. Fraser wrote that the most unnerving bit was the last six feet, where the poles leaned outward, and too much pressure here was to be avoided. They made use of a small handhold on

a narrow ledge, and here for the first time they could breathe again. At the broadest part the ledge was a mere two feet wide, and above them the rock was overhanging.

Before a comfortable resting place could be reached a difficult and dangerous traverse had to be made. The ledge disappeared, the handholds were loose and unsafe and the footholds small. Once over the obstacle the party covered some distance without much difficulty. The following day the high waterfalls became so numerous and on top of each other, making their passage extremely difficult that the party decided—"so far and no further". It was during this last leg of their journey that, to their surprise, they discovered evidence of previous camp sites, indicating that the builders of the ladder had been there previously.

Only years later did the secret come out, as a result of the investigation by C. A. Pauw and A. N. Field. From their research it appeared that early this century a party, under the leadership of one Abraham Klaasen, a Coloured man from Wellington, used to gather wild buchu in the mountainous regions around Buffelskloof. This medicinal herb was searched for everywhere on the mountain slopes and in the kloofs. Their activities were well planned, every man to his own task. On Sundays they congregated for divine service.

These buchu gatherers usually stayed in the kloofs for ten days at a time, then returned to store the buchu at a central place. While in the kloofs they existed on bread, coffee and meat. In 1906 a certain Abel Marthinus joined the buchu gatherers. He was capable and enterprising and soon replaced Abraham Klaasen as leader. As a result of one of the party meeting with an accident, Abel and his followers decided to confine their gathering to the Waaihoek in ftuure. At first they searched the open slopes and the lower kloofs, but gradually they penetrated deeper and deeper into Jan Dutoits Kloof.

Later they were confronted by a high waterfall beyond which they could not go, and there were signs and promise of much more buchu to be had higher up in the kloof. There and then Abel decided that the obstacle must be overcome. A narrow ledge of 100 feet long and running upwards along the left-hand wall was studied. This ledge continued upward until it was above the waterfall, but midway along its length there was no more than a roughness in the surface of the rock face. Not to be outdone, Abel challenged the ledge and succeeded in climbing out above the fall. No mean feat—later considered to be difficult to imitate. Abel and a companion used this ledge quite a few times to gather buchu above the fall. The others in the party would not chance the risky climb, so the idea of a ladder was considered.

In December 1913 the ladder was built, keeping eight men occupied for four days. Taking into account that local material was used, excluding a quantity of wire, and they had to support the ladder from the bottom singly, it was truly a great feat of engineering. The ladder was used until April 1914, when the buchu began to run out and new pastures had to be sought.

The buchu gatherers had apparently penetrated to some of the furthest inner depths—"Ultima Thule". Their camping places, later discovered by Fraser and party and others after them, bear witness.

Who knows what other secrets the Jan Dutoits Kloof holds?



(Note.—The old ladder was given temporary repairs by Mountain Club members late in 1970, and further, more permanent, materials had been ordered.—Ed.)