

## NOT QUITE A FISHING TRIP

by Marius van Tonder

At first it was quite entertaining to sit and watch the group of hikers navigating the icy pool. We had a grand-stand view of the operation from the rock where we were resting after a morning's hard fishing. At this point the kloof suddenly narrows into a deep slit-gorge forming a series of long, dark pools with sheer rockfaces rising from the water on either side. Swimming is the only way through. The sun remains permanently blocked by the tall cliffs and the pools are freezing.

The hikers we were watching, had only one inner-tube between the four of them, which meant that each one, except the last person, had to brave the cold pool three times - once to float his backpack through, back again to return the tube for the next person and then the final swim back. By the time they were all safely at our end of the pool, our amusement turned to pity as they were literally blue with cold and shivering wildly. To make matters worse, it had started drizzling earlier and a biting breeze, which had assisted our up-stream casting, was now slicing through their damp clothing.

They were a sorry looking group of teenage boys who were obviously ill-equipped and unprepared for the tough trip down the kloof. Their leader seemed to be the only one with some mountaineering experience. At least he had a decent pair of hiking boots and a proper rain jacket. The others were wearing old running shoes and wet jerseys. One had even lost a shoe in a pool further up and was forced to walk the rest of the way with a beach-thong on one foot. They told us they had arranged to meet their parents on the road at the end of the kloof, a further two days of strenuous hiking away. We left them trying to light a fire in the rain and returned to the comfort of our camp lower down the kloof.

As we walked back the rain and wind increased rapidly and we reached camp in a furious storm. The three of us huddled in our little tent bemoaning the cruelty of our fate and discussing the gloomy prospects for the rest of our fishing trip. Before we left, the long-term weather forecast gave us fair warning of the possibility of deteriorating weather, but, after weeks of eager anticipation, there was no way that such a minor detail was going to upset our plans. We did, however, decide to prepare for the eventuality with the result that we were well equipped and stocked with plenty of extra rations and liquid comforts. After a good meal and a few cups of hot coffee, fortified with ample quantities of "noggin", our spirits were restored and we snuggled in to wait out the storm raging outside.

Much later that afternoon the four boys came scrambling through our camp. They looked utterly miserable with tattered refuse bags wrapped over their drenched clothing to keep out the worst of the driving rain. Their leader adamantly refused all offers of shelter and warm soup. He said they were behind schedule and had to move on quickly to reach their planned stop-over before nightfall. The other three kept quiet and followed their leader like sheep after eyeing our cosy tent longingly.

It rained and blew hard that entire night and it was bitterly cold. We noticed that the river was rising rapidly. Our torch beams showed a foaming torrent of water hurtling down the kloof in front of the camp, where there was a placid pool earlier in the day. We realised with extreme concern



that the four boys would be trapped if they crossed another compulsory swim further down the kloof, as they had intended. There would be no way back against the swollen river and downstream progress would also have been impossible as it requires frequent crossings of the river.

By the next morning the rain stopped now and then and when the clouds lifted somewhat we could see snow on the peaks around us. We had just completed a hearty breakfast of bacon and eggs when, to our relief, the boys stumbled into camp. They, fortunately, did not make it past the compulsory swim before nightfall and had spent a freezing night under an overhanging rock in wet clothes and sleeping bags. They looked dreadful. Covered in mud and shaking uncontrollably, they were barely able to speak. Only the leader, who was better equipped than the rest, seemed to have any strength left. He was determined to cross the river and walk out of the kloof the way we had come in, a four-hour trek over a steep ridge in the mountains. No amount of persuasion could change his mind so he left his backpack with us and dived headlong into the churning water and thrashed wildly for the other side. He got washed against the opposite bank about fifty metres lower down where he clung grimly to some rocks and branches before dragging himself to safety. He beckoned his companions frantically, but they were in no state to copy his reckless act and stared at him blankly. After a while he gave up and set off alone in the direction of the trail.

We boiled some hot chilli soup for our unexpected charges but they shook so badly that most of it was spilt. We realised we had to act quickly to prevent them collapsing on our doorstep. Unable to do anything for themselves we first stripped them naked and washed the worst mud off in the icy river before dressing them in our spare clothes. We bundled them into our tent, covered them with our sleeping bags and made them some more soup. Further showers forced us inside as well and for the rest of the day we provided body heat by lying squashed between and on top of them - six people plus our three backpacks crammed into a three-man tent!

In the evening the rain stopped and we eventually managed to get a fire going after carefully drying some kindling with our gas stoves. We cooked a huge meal of toppers, rice and mash and the boys emerged from the tent to wolf it down as if they'd seen food for the first time. They were much improved but still exhausted and soon crawled back into bed while we avoided the uncomfortable tent for as long as possible. Drizzle eventually drove us inside where we spent a squashed and sleepless night. Our minds were constantly on the boy who left us that morning. We knew how easily he could lose the trail in the mist and driving rain on the exposed ridge he had to cross, especially in the impaired state he was in when he left us.

We were up at first light with our bones aching after the most uncomfortable night of our lives. The sky was clear and a couple of strong coffees, and a good breakfast soon improved our outlook on life. We struck camp and prepared for the hazardous crossing of the still swollen river. As a last gesture before leaving I drifted a heavy nymph through some slack water and, to my surprise, a strong ten-incher took it on my second attempt. We all managed to cross the river safely and set off on the steep slog up the mountainside. As we climbed we watched for signs of the boy and inwardly cheered at every boot-print in the mud which indicated that he had passed that point.

Suddenly, an airforce helicopter clattered over the ridge and swooped in a wide arc towards us. We realised, with immense relief, that the boy must have made it through and had alerted the authorities. The helicopter landed a little distance from us and a crew member indicated that there was room for only three. We said goodbye to our charges who were still a bit jelly-kneed after their experience and pleased to avoid the rest of the walk. When they left we continued our climb with a sense of relief and a new enjoyment of the crisp, clear mountain scenery. A while later the helicopter returned, but we signalled that we were okay and it flew off over the snow-capped mountains.

We arrived back in civilisation to find that the incident had been reported on in several newspapers and even on TV. The hero of the story was, of course, the leader of the foursome who braved swollen rivers and crossed snow covered mountains in a blizzard, to find help for his trapped companions. We were mentioned as three anonymous men with whom the other boys found refuge while he went for help. All true, of course, but the reports failed to disclose that tragedy was prevented by only two things, his luck and our foresight.