

Vertigo on the Jan du Toit's

by Chris Bateman

You could say it's all in the mind – focus on the handholds and forget about the 120 metre cliff you're swinging your body above – except that reality has a way of intruding.

The roar of the waterfall below in the Jan du Toit's Kloof reminds you that what you are hearing is water on hard, cold granite – a long, long way beneath your precarious perch on the sun-baked fynbos mountain-side.

CPS fellow-member Jonathan Cohen, a relative veteran of this tricky manoeuvre on the way upstream to the top reaches of the Jan du Toit's River, had it down pat. Put your rod down on the far ledge, get a handhold on either side, weight on your right leg and swing ... confidently. He set the example.

After I'd done it I told myself, "It's all in your head," – and that I'd got worked up for nothing. Funny thing though, when the shadows got longer and it came time to return to camp, my stomach knotted once again at the prospect of crossing "that barrier", below which most anglers sensibly devoted more hours for less fish ...

Yet Jonathan had proved his point.

About 20 minutes of boulder hopping further up the kloof and several pristine pools later, he hooked and released a 12 inch rainbow, the rich and pure colours of which I'd never seen anywhere before – not even in Lesotho's Makhotlong.

There's something to be said for "inaccessibility" to man.

When Jonathan, his partner Judith and I backpacked our way up the Jan du Toit's river earlier this year it was high summer and the fynbos and reeds had grown thick along the river banks from the last year's particularly wet winter.

Nature has an impeccable way of humbling you when you get impatient or frustrated. I soon learnt that no matter how sweaty I got and how many times my backpack got hooked up in the thick fynbos while scrabbling on all fours between yet another bush and boulder – cursing and fighting were simply NOT going to help.

It took us five hours to get to the caves where we camped above a deep and crystal clear "swimming" pool, high enough to be at eye-to-wing-tip level with black eagles, a pair of which cruised down the valley early one morning.

The stars at night alone were worth all the sweaty scrabbling and fruitless cursing.

We spotted a lot of small trout in the lower reaches of the river, and literally stumbled upon some 10-12 inchers (big for this stream), cruising those open pools that suddenly appear through the foliage.

Getting a fly to one can be hysterically funny, frustrating and breathtaking – depending on whether you're the spectator/guide or the tip-toeing, stalking angler.

One fish I put a fly over (my having given up all pretence of trying to blend with a clump of reeds) simply refused to "spook" and dash off into cover – he just ignored fly after fly

– knowing that something was way out of kilter below him.

There are some pools which could conceivably hold fish of over two kilograms – but they're below the caves where most hiker/anglers camp – and I reckon these breeders have been long since "hoiked" out with spinners – but I still put a Mrs Simpson down deep several times.

All in all a highly rewarding experience – one that requires delicate and conscious footwork, a keen sense of team work and care for one another (a twisted or broken ankle could seriously lengthen and complicate the hike).

I don't know whether a cell phone works up there – we didn't have one – though I very much doubt it.

It's a hike which I'd repeat maybe once every second season – oh, and there's some serious bog-type quick-sandy stuff at the confluence of the Jan's and another stream where you start out ... (tip – go several hundred metres up the other stream before crossing).

If you're looking to change your angling routine of a weekend – this will definitely do it!