

The Hex Voyage - March 2007

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I think it was an old cricket mate who first mentioned to me that he had run into a few trout where the Roode Elsburg Dam spills into the Hex River Mountains. I believed him enough to pay the South African National Geographic Institute in Mowbray a visit, and soon found myself poring over a 1:50 000 map of the area. If ever you decide to do the same, you'll see a dam snake its way through the Hex Mountains for a kilometre or two; and if you look carefully you might also notice a solid blue line about 6 – 8 km in length flowing between Laken Vlei on the Ceres side and the Roode Elsburg dam on the Hex Valley side. Of all the many lines on the map it was this one that caught my attention.

Three years before I was to eventually set foot in the area I set about telephoning the authorities, partly for information, partly for permission, I guess. In time I was to gather information from the Hexvallei Besproeiingsraad, various landowners, historians, flyfishing enthusiasts, civil engineers, adventure racers, and kayakers. Ed Herbst and Tom Sutcliffe also found themselves fielding questions at some or other stage. The remoteness of the area was established when the owner of the property confirmed never having been up the river itself.

All non-flyfishers seemed to concur that the steep gorge made the dam impossible to circumnavigate on foot; and if there existed anyone stupid enough to want to get to the other side, they would have to do it by boat. They also mentioned that the dam wall was in excess of 80m high and getting a boat down to the water's edge was improbable, if not impossible, depending on the vessel. Funnily enough, all flyfishermen were in agreement that I should let them know how if I succeeded.

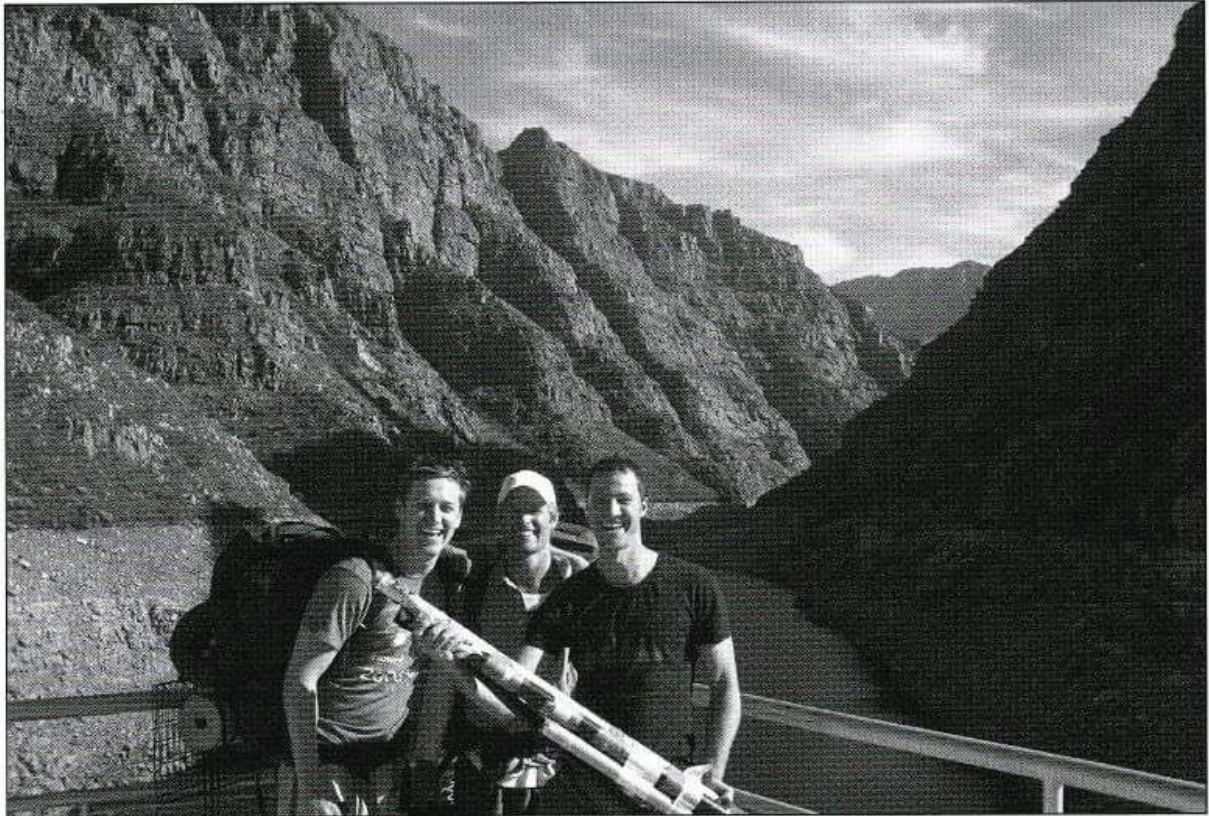
Fast forward to the end of 2006, and a group of freshly qualified professionals on the highveld decide that some sort of floatable is necessary if we wish to have any kind of story-telling success on an upcoming fishing expedition into Mozambican waters.

I drool over The Seahawk for days. Sportsman's Warehouse even have a rod coming out the back as if to say "Let me at 'em", and of course it has Manager's Special emblazoned all over it. Sporty reminds me it is the kind of marketing that makes you buy the nutmeg and clove boerewors over the coriander and rosemary - I think my boss calls it 'semantics'?

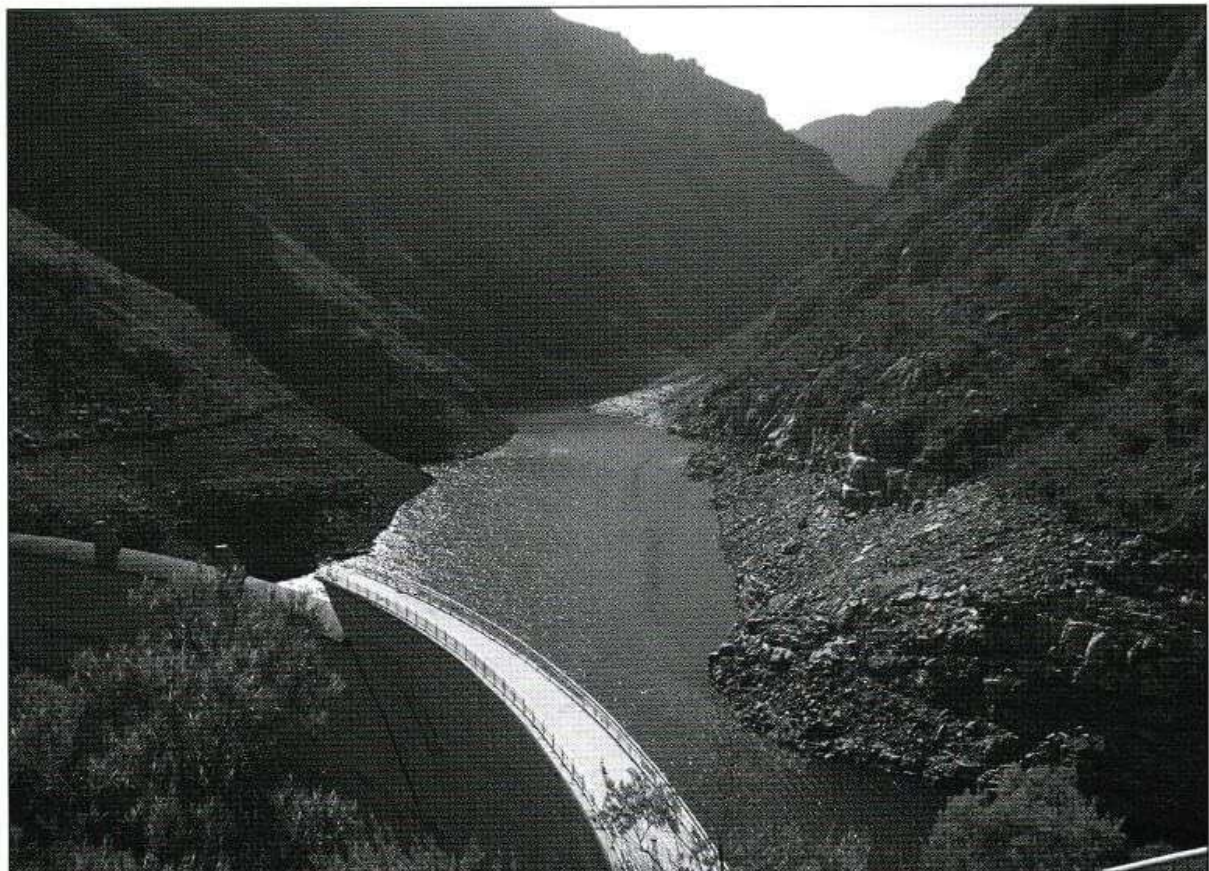
But The Hawk is out of our range. Robbo says that a 33 % share in the vessel would be 50 % of his tour cost. I say it's insulting to quantify something like The Hawk. But I am outvoted.

The night before our trip, Pips says she has a surprise for me. I like all the goodies she buys me, I promise, and that's not why I whoop with joy when I see the packaging.

I'm not even disappointed it isn't The Seahawk, nor that it is as soft bellied as a Sun City



Setting off in anticipation of the fabled fishing at the dam inlet.



The view from the dam wall – a formidable journey for four men in an overloaded craft.

lilo, nor that it costs as much as a Friday night on the town (R499 if you hurry), nor that it has a maximum weight limit (handdrawn) of one adult + one child + a suitcase. Heaven knows what the adult, or the child for that matter, is doing with the suitcase. The Challenger is the most beautiful piece of plastic I have seen in a long time. It comes with inflatable cushions, so I suppose comfort was considered somewhere along the line.

I'm surprised it took me as long as it did, but in saying that, it didn't take me long to realise that the compact Challenger was built for air and road travel to the Cape. And dare I say it, the steep-sided Roode Elsburg, seemed to have been built for the Challenger?

By the time The Challenger is turning heads at OR Tambo domestic departures it has quite an employable CV: First bought as a Mozambican trawling apparatus, it has since expedited the demise of the odd spotted grunter on a Transkei estuary, shown its racing prowess on a kilometre or so stretch of a brisk Lunsclip river in Dullstroom, and more recently survived a Knysna booze cruise/leerie expedition.

If there is anywhere I wanted The Challenger to sink it was on its way up the Roode Elsburg. As far as dams in the Republic go, the Roode Elsburg has got to be up there as far as sheer depth is concerned. Picture building a dam wall across your favourite kloof (while hugging wood it never happens), and you'll have some kind of idea as to the proportions of the dam. As Sporty was later to comment – "If I really really wanted to hide a body, it wouldn't be hard with a couple of sinkers up in these parts."

Accounting articles have found me seeking experience on the highveld, hard-strapped for cash (still paying off the monthly instalments on the Challenger), and being forced to monitor annual leave in hours, rather than days. The result is that I am only able to make the 10h00 flight from Johannesburg arriving in Cape Town around midday on Saturday. The return flight leaves at 05h45 on Monday morning. I remind the boys that Everest has a similarly small window period.

Recruiting travelling partners takes only a few 'man versus mouse' taunts before we have a three-strong team. My brother, Sporty, has recently returned from a year in China and is yearning for some normality. I have to assure him he has found it. I'm sure the only reason Joffre, who has recently relocated to the Cape, joins the tour is because he is still to find permanent accommodation; and his volunteering to make breakfast is beginning to wear off as a means of appeasing his hosts. Anyway, I've lived with Joff for a bit in Johannesburg and I've seen enough of his Somalian photo's, and tasted more than enough of his Vienna hot dogs, to know that a night in the cold won't scare him.

After much deliberation we add a fourth, Riddler. I check the weight restrictions advised on the Challenger again and again, but Riddler manages to persuade me that the 'Maximum Capacity' is only a suggested *comfortable* weight. I agree late, I want him hungry.

Previous tours have taken their toll on The Challenger's packaging. I have strapped him together with enough masking tape to make the hospital cartoon character in the white layers, broken leg suspended, appear underdressed. The poor packaging requires me to explain apologetically to the SAA check-in assistant that he is simply 'bursting with excitement'.



Contemplation. Not much holding water for fish...



Joffre sleeps off the disappointment...

Nonetheless our flight arrives on time, and by mid-afternoon, we have picked up the key to the gate leading up to the Roode Elsburg, which Delia Brand, a delightful lady at the Hexvallei Besproeiingsraad, I must add, has left for us under the mat outside her office in De Doorns. Things are running so smoothly I half expected her to have left a box of Romany Creams for the tour party. But thanks to a few bunches of local grapes, stolen by Joffre Masureik, 082 313 1305, we don't go hungry.

I must say, not even the Google earth images I had studied have prepared me for the enormity of the dam wall. The water itself is inky in the afternoon shadow of the kloof. The dam is about as wide as a rugby field is long, and far ahead, it narrows before disappearing around a turn in the gorge. We pump up The Challenger, while cursing any sharp stones on the road; and begin to prioritise luggage.

Joffre's *Long Walk To Freedom* is conservatively estimated at a kilogram and only after much tears and scratching does the team grudgingly allow it on board. Riddler tries to sneak in a pillow without us seeing – which leads to four pillows being dumped in the boat, and question marks over his integrity when the going gets tough.

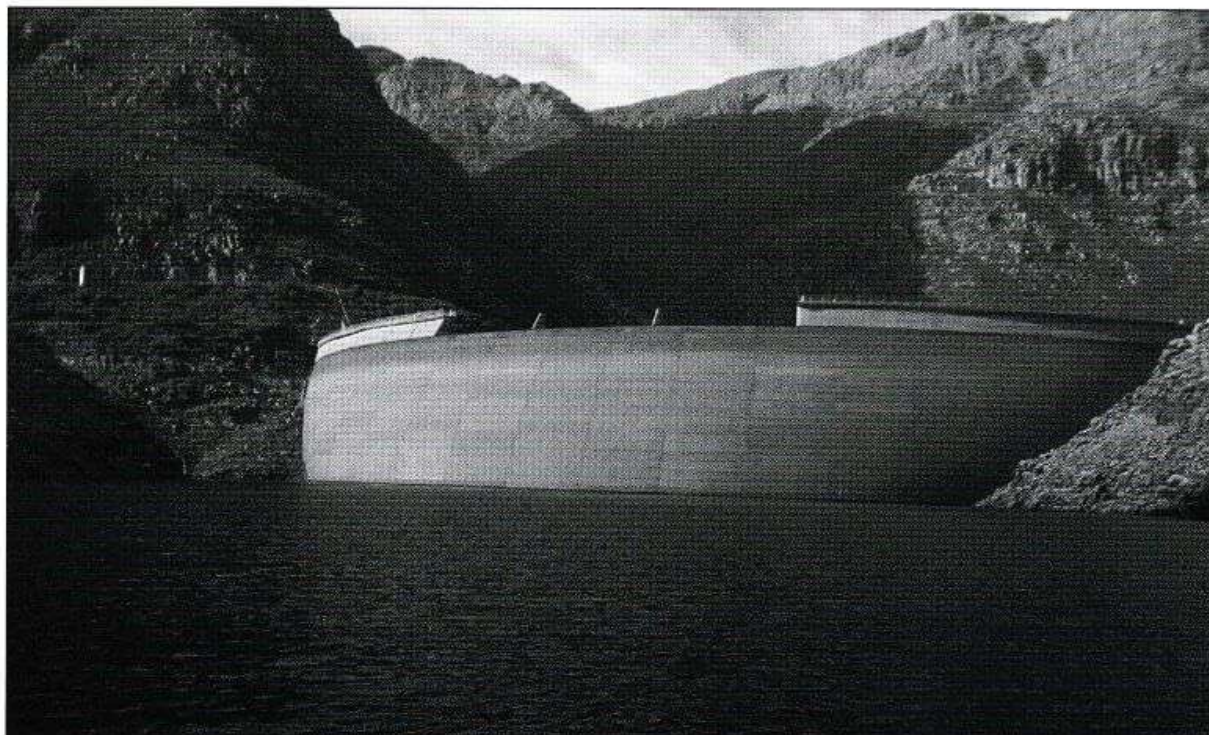
Sporty is lamented for only bringing a half jack of Old Brown Sherry. He reminds Riddler that he has only catered for three, and Joffre that he has sacrificed a regular bottle for the longest book ever written on our shores. Let us know when you finish it.

The journey down the wall costs us one broken oar, I still maintain even plastic is like a guillotine coming from that height. Judging by the looks on the boys' faces you could have sworn they'd rather I had one hand left than we take on the voyage with only one oar. I agree to sacrifice the remaining masking tape this early in the journey for something so crucial.

After negotiating the treacherous descent intact, The Challenger has by this stage picked up an elongated 'sh' rather than the abrupt 'ch' its manufacturers had dubbed it. The Challenger - more like a French wine, less like a piece of plastic.

With four adults and luggage we estimate that we have exceeded the maximum capacity almost threefold. I would be lying if I said we didn't take in water during the hour-long journey. A dubiously diminishing air pressure in capsule three requires us to hug the shoreline. There are still question marks over the tightening of the air valve on capsule three, and I am thankful we survive without a more thorough enquiry as I was chiefly responsible for the inflating. Sporty is still harassing the tour fund to cover the physio required on his back after carrying much of the paddling workload on day 1. I remind him of the Challenger instalments.

We arrive at the top of the dam with enough sunlight left to walk about a one kilometre stretch of the river. I have to say it is barren, and seemingly fishless. Not that the others care much as they collect firewood and play with the echo in the kloof. The riverbed is predominantly sand, certainly not the rocky boulders I have become accustomed to on any one of the many fantastic Cape streams. Average depth is shin deep, with a pool creeping just above the knee, but unlikely to ever require the bizarre tip-toe stance that we see daily on our rivers. It is flowing, even in mid-March, but with what I suspect could be barely



The enormity of the dam wall ...

enough tempo to keep it alive in a particularly dry summer. I do see one fish in the river – certainly not a trout however. It behaves like a bass, spooking only when I reach out to actually touch it. I wonder if the loneliness has driven it mad. We see no sign of trout in the dam itself; although we do once again see, hugging the dam wall, small fish that look like bass.

In order to entice crew members, I had offered Joffre naming rights once we got to the river. By nightfall on day 1, he is undecided on whether he wants to go with 'Geenvisrivier' or 'Eenvisrivier' after the bass sighting. Whatever he chooses, I think that the current name used on the 1:50 000 maps – The Sanddrifrivier – is not far from the truth either.

Of course campfires that night speak of wild animals and escaped convicts, of future plans, and of old friends' whereabouts. Riddler even tries to sell me some timeshare – amazing where they'll find you.

Joffre finds a clever way to skewer marshmallows and toast them evenly without getting his hand burnt. Riddler sleeps in The Challenger, maintaining that he doesn't want it to blow away. Sporty, who knows me as well as anyone, asks me if I am disappointed there is no fishable river after all the effort. I follow Joffre's distant headlight as it looks for more firewood, and watch Riddler blowing contently into his cup of Milo, and I shake my head. He smiles, because he knows.

We leave for a beat on the Smalblaar as the sun begins to creep into the kloof the next day. I must say it is nice to see a few fish again. But I am sad to leave the kloof. We return the key under the mat at the Besproeingsraad as we had found it. A *Thank You* note and a smiley face on an old receipt left next to the key just don't seem enough. Maybe, like The Challenger, times like these are hard to quantify.