

Fishing the Mhlwazini River

Cathedral Peak Hotel
Central Berg.

On the weekend of the 26/04/2003 through to the 28/04/2003, 2 friends and myself shook off our city dust and literally took to the hills. I am Mark Bowen, dubious 2001 Golden Boot award winner and I will try to be as truthful about this trip as possible. The other 2 chaps were long standing member of the FFA, Graeme Kerr, and new to fly fishing, not yet a member of FFA, Gavin Hagen.

Graeme had pre booked our trip. I believe we only have to give them our names, as we were not sleeping in caves or other accommodation that needed special booking.

We left Durban at 15:00, 2 hours later than we wanted to, and arrived at our destination at 18:00. After stopping to borrow salt and pepper from the Takeaways at the garages just before the turn off to Winterton /Central Berg, we where shown to the reservation/reception office at the new Didima Camp. Is this place impressive or what. It is certainly setting new levels of accommodation at KZN Nature Conservation Services. The 2 girls at the front desk were extremely helpful and always ready to banter back at 3 boys looking forward to a great weekend in the mountains. In the Reservation building complex we found a nice bar that has lovely cold beers and a restaurant that looked very smart. The special that evening was Fillet Steak with black mushrooms for R60.00, I bet our braai would be a lot better than that anyway.

By now it was dark, about 8 o'clock, so we left the pub as we had to find a campsite in the camping area, put up our 3-man tent and start the gas braai that Gavin had brought up with him. Once this was done we set about cooking our boerewors and braai chops. It was at this point that Graeme asked about the salad. I mean 3 boys camping and I had bought the rations: of course there was no salad. We were lucky to have 2 bread rolls each. Just maybe the Fillet steak and black mushroom may have been the better option and no washing up needed. An option next time.

At the campsite, on the ablution side, was a young couple who were well organised. They had gas hot plates and all other home comforts. They "slept in" well after we had left the next day. On the other side was a group of hikers that were equally challenged. 6 men and 6 women, I think. They stayed out late and also made a noise when they came home. In the

This routine really got to me as I'm an old model car, quite reliable, but I need a lot of fuel. I followed the hiking trail up for about 1km and then climbed down into an area of the river that had big pools and also big boulders. I used quite a lot of energy getting there. The place is brilliant and had a lot of fish rising in a long deep pool.

On about my 3rd cast I hooked a little fish and I could feel the excitement rising in my body. I landed and released a little Rainbow hen. Next time you catch a fish take 5 seconds to look closely at it, it is quite amazing how great they look. I only catch a few, so when I do, I look at them closely.

I fished the same area for a while and lost a few fish. Here is my excuse: if you fish barbless as I do, and you are not on top of your game, the little blighters are long gone by the time you wake up and wipe the sleep out of your eyes. But then I suppose that is what the cold water is for!

I moved back through the bush again and tried to clamber over some big boulders ... (I am going to use writer's license here to try and give you a feeling of how tired I was) under some tough bushes and over some unstable rocks. I heard the ratchet on my reel go and then had to double back to unhook my favourite fly from a branch that was under, over and through some shrubs. I then tried to climb half way out of the gorge and flip-it, by then I was really hungry and starting to shake... So I rambled back to the hiking trail with pictures of food running through my mind, stumbled into camp and immediately started to eat peanuts, raisins and everything else I could get my hands on. It took me about an hour to recover. This taught me a good lesson - always carry snack food with you.

This day also happened to be Sunday and after chatting to Graeme and Gavin, it dawned on us that we had better change to "big flies for big fish". Sunday supper, according to Graeme's menu was Brown Rice and Trout, hence the reason why we needed the salt and pepper from the Takeaways. So off to hard-core non-stop fishing, supper was out there waiting for us.

Graeme and I walked back up the hiking trail for about 2km and then I took the first 1km beat. Graeme went up past the bend and fished his beat. I got a few small ones and had a lot of fun with these very keen fish attacking my fly. Needless to say there was nothing big enough to feed 3 hungry mountain men.

Graeme had gone down to his beat and as he approached the river walked into a troop of Baboons. Two of the big males were a little irritated with his sudden appearance on the other side of the river bank so they barked at him. Graeme would not tell me what he did, but remember this river is only about 5 meters wide at the most and maybe 2 foot deep at the deep parts.

I am lead to believe the baboons then fortunately moved off and left Graeme to his fishing beat.

Later in the day fly fishermen came tumbling out of the undergrowth, bleeding and sore, dragging behind them their empty bags... Dam, how does this happen?

Never mind, we are men of the mountains, and thanks to Gavin for having brought 3 extra packets of soup with him. We had Brown Rice ala cup-of-soup with stale rolls and some peanuts and raisins (non-salted of course).

Monday morning we only started at about 07:00 with coffee and breakfast, packed up the tent and collected our rubbish and at about 09:30 we hiked back out to the Hut. Gavin kindly fetched the truck for us. This takes about 2 and ½ hours because you have to sign in on the mountain register and try and source an ice-cold beer for each of the tired very thirsty mountain men.

We drove back to "somewhere near Rosette" and had lunch at Nottingham Road pub. After the home made Chicken Pie of the day and watching a kid fall out of the tree we made a little stop at the new Gowrie Estate Garden and Home show where we were given a lots of free cheese and left a little later than we expected to.

All in all it was another great weekend in the mountains with friends.

Now one must always ask oneself, "If I had the chance to do it again, what would I do differently?" We want to make this a yearly pilgrimage, so here is what I think we must get right next year. Getting there we will not rush next time. Drive up and arrive at about 19:30 or so and eat in the restaurant. It just makes life a little easier. A for food for the hike: everybody takes their own breakfast, lunch and snacks. Have a communal supper and make sure trout is not part of it or have a back up. Coffee etc is communal. If you want tea, take a few tea bags for yourself.

Each day wake up at your leisure, have coffee, rusks etc, and then pack a small daypack. Go out and fish the day from about 09:30 to about 15:00, with snack food in between for lunch. Take your time on the river; even take the odd quick dip in the 10-14 degree water. It is refreshing and it gets really hot during the day.

Drink - try and split the whiskey (or what ever you are drinking) into daily quantities, it is easier to pack.

Daypack - take a small daypack (I have a Tripper) and try and rig it out so it is like a fly vest/backpack.

Water – take at least 2 x 2lt plastic bottle for easy water around the camp area. If you squash them they are quite small and easy to carry. Take a 500ml personal water bottle for daily drinking.

Bedding – take a good hiking mattress, it may cost a little more but when you are sleeping on stones it is worth the extra cost. Those cheap ones are not the most comfortable. Gavin spoke to a colleague of his that does power hiking (15 – 30 km a day) and he said that they all have one luxury: their sleeping mattress.

The cost of this trip is about R160.00 per person for the weekend. That covers Camping at the main campsite, daily hiking costs, fishing and food. If you plan it well it is a lot of fun and a good break. I would suggest that you all have a go at it. I bought a map, read Peter's article and off we went, loaded down like mules. Now every time we do the trip it is easier and I would like to think we are wiser.

P.S. The Parks Board asked us not to drive to the hut. That road is for Parks Board Management only. I have asked them to sign post the gate so that this mistake is not done again.