



SPOONFULS OF TALENT
Mdantsane's Aurriender Belewa sets sights on 'SA's Kitchen Queens' title: P12

VINE TIME: Sam Venter's wine column returns on June 7

My Weekend



DOROTHY'S RETURN
Latest walk down yellow brick road leads to an Oz minus heart: P13

Nature's wonders off a beaten path

Zunga River hike a stone's throw from PE lays bare terrain's magnificence, writes **Guy Rogers**

WE SWAM for a kilometre through dense waterlilies, their dangling roots tugging at our legs and arms, pushing our packs – floated on rain cover rafts – ahead of us.

We crossed a promontory and slipped into a narrower creek rimmed by forest. Now in places it was shallow enough to stand but it was still hard going. Each step we took sank into the boggy dam bed releasing a geyser whoosh of bubbles and the smell of methane.

Our surprise dip in this remote corner of Groendal Dam was a twist in the tale of an epic hike we recently completed down the Zunga River. The dam is a key water supplier for Nelson Mandela Bay Municipality and the Zunga is the main tributary of the Swartkops River. So when I initiated our hike I had in mind water security and water quality not least the heavy pollution that blights the Swartkops.

But it was mostly about the adventure. Where was the source? What was it like up there? Nobody seemed to know. So four of us including with me Arthur Rump from the Swartkops Conservancy, NMMU architecture head Prof Gavin McLachlan and ecologist and top all-round naturalist Dr Paul Martin – all three experienced hikers with the Mountain Club – set off to find out.

We got a lift out of Port Elizabeth to Rocklands then north along the Elandsrivier road. We hopped off at Houtkloof Farm where the farmer had given us access permission and from there we hiked up and over the Zungaberg hills and gazed down for the first time into the wild Zunga River Valley.

To our left, the highest peak in the region, Cockscomb, crested majestically. Across from us the Grootwintehoekeberge, a chain of rugged grey-green folds, stretched south-east into the distance. Below us, the valley reared to a dead-end. This was the source of the Zunga, formed by hundreds of seeps leaching out the mountains as if from a mighty sponge.

We had just had heavy rain and there were funnel-web spider webs everywhere glistening with raindrops. Mazes of fieldmouse burrows ran through the matted grass and there were bushpig



VALLEY OF PLENTY: A waterfall tumbles from a cliff in the upper Zunga

rooting patches and aardvark holes, tierhout and keurboom trees and waterfalls tumbling from cliffs. Occasionally we picked up a man-made path, but mostly we were trekking through wilderness where, it seemed clear, few people had ever been.

We found a chameleon, which Bayworld herpetologist Dr Werner Conradie later identified as the rare Smith's dwarf chameleon, and that first night we slept in a cave. In

the morning, we had a wonderful surprise as a Bushman painting revealed itself on the ceiling, a frieze of eland and elephant, lit by the first rays of the sun.

That was last spring. It had been tough going and we had hiked just 32km in two days including the walk out at a point Paul had charted on his GPS from Google Earth. My companions' map-reading and GPS capabilities had proven vital. But nothing

prepared us for the challenges of the lower Zunga.

Finally, last month we managed to coordinate the time to tackle the rest of the way to Groendal Dam. The Four-Wheel Drive Club of South Africa kindly ferried us in to where we had exited with access permission this time through Meadowlands Farm.

From this point there was more and more indigenous forest and soon the black wattle which is the

one blight on the upper Zunga had disappeared. Now the valley was thick with yellowwoods, epiphytic orchids clung to branches, "monkey ropes" trailed between.

The lower Zunga is the kingdom of the Cape clawless otter. Although we never saw one, we often saw spoor and their crab shell middens were visible everywhere.

Now and then the river would slip underground beneath a metre-deep layer of peat. When the



GOOD COMPANY: Our group comprised myself and from left, Dr Paul Martin, Arthur Rump and Prof Gavin McLachlan



ENDEMIC: A rare Smith's dwarf chameleon

incline got steeper and the flow accelerated, it eroded the peat and the river revealed itself again running along bedrock.

Initially in the pools shoals of endangered redfin minnow, glinting crimson in shafts of sunlight, were often visible. Then at about 43km we came to a waterfall and soon

after that was a pool where for the first time we saw bass, bulky and predatory. This invasive fish is one of the main threats to the survival of the redfin and the minnow is only protected in waters where the bass cannot access. This waterfall seemed to be the obstacle protecting the upper reaches of the Zunga. We saw no more redfin after that.

Crossing through the reedbeds nearly brought us to our knees. Towering above our heads reeds, sedge and fynbos were packed

together for hundreds of metres at a time in places, criss-crossed with camouflaged channels into which you could suddenly plunge your boot and the reeds were razor sharp.

Our last night on the Zunga we slept on the side of the river in a stand of yellowwoods. A wood owl called, frogs peeped. In the morning, the mist was curling over the water.

There was more and more wading to do and we needed to pick up the pace, so we stopped swopping our boots each time for sandals and pull-ons, pausing only now and then to empty them of water. The dam when we reached it had pushed higher up the Zunga than we had anticipated and the surrounding cliffs and impenetrable bush meant swimming was the only option.



NATURAL COLOUR: Brunia fynbos



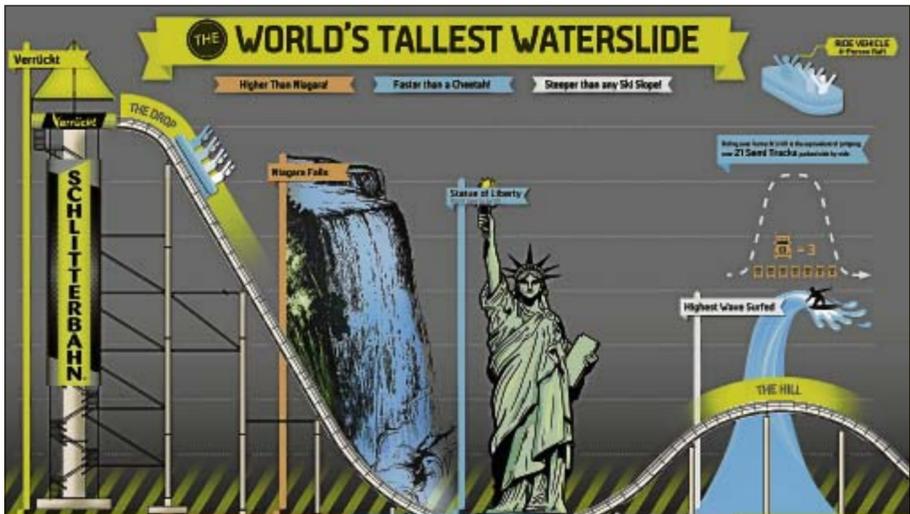
WILD WORLD: The Grootwintehoekeberge stretch south-east down the Zunga River Valley



DIFFERENT STROKES: Paul favoured pulling rather than pushing his pack for our big swim and he wrapped it in a plastic sleeping sack before floating it on his rain cover

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Verrückt is taller than the Statue of Liberty (93m) and the Eiffel Tower (324m). It is the tallest waterslide in the world.

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Once open, next month, the ride will steal the crown from Kilimanjaro, a 49.9m slide in Brazil.

'Insane' water slide sets new world record

THE world's tallest waterslide: would you ride it? Verrückt, the Schlitterbahn Theme Park's newest attraction, is taller than the Statue of Liberty Standing at 51.38m, the newest ride at a Kansas City theme park has been verified by Guinness World Records as the tallest waterslide in the world. After tackling the 264 steps to the top, riders will be strapped to a four-person raft before they plunge down the slide at around 100km/h. First is a near-vertical drop of 51.2m. Next comes "The Hill" – a climb and drop equivalent to five storeys. Rides will last approximately 11 seconds. The name of the ride – Verrückt – is German and means "insane". Once open, next month, the ride will steal the crown from Kilimanjaro, a 49.9m slide in Brazil.

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