

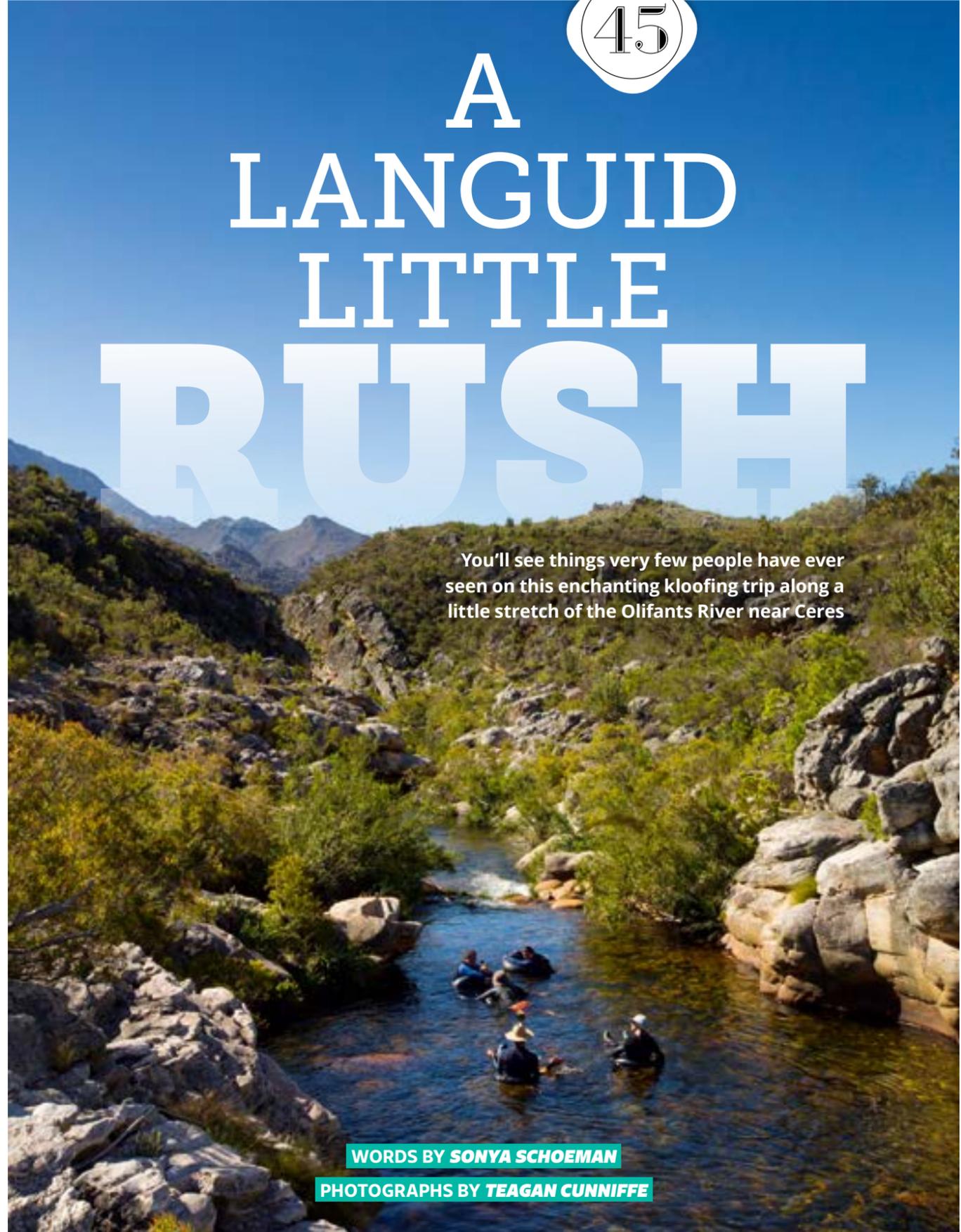
45

A LANGUID LITTLE RUSH

You'll see things very few people have ever seen on this enchanting kloofing trip along a little stretch of the Olifants River near Ceres

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**EXCLUSIVE:
NEW KLOOFING
EXPERIENCE!**

In Cape Town today, at the end of a hard day's work, we stand over buckets of water in the bath. Twenty litres or so to wash off the day's desk grime. This water must then be collected and poured into the cistern that's to be flushed for only the most piquant of ablutions.

'Apparently there's a drought in the Western Cape,' says Coll Macdonald dryly. He's entitled to his irony because right in front of his family holiday cottage in that very same province flows the Olifants River, and it appears to know nothing of this drought. It's so abundant that you can hear its soft rush during the night when you lie asleep snug in your bed of fine linen, tucked up against a hot-water bottle, with the doors wide open and the breeze blowing softly in.

There are some things I'd never imagined happening in my lifetime. That Cape Town's taps could run dry, or that the sound of running water might become so rare that at my house sometimes we play an app that simulates its song just for memory's sake. But in the Koue Bokkeveld region it's an entirely different matter. >

Don't be put off by the jumps. There were two people who suffered from a fear of heights and they managed perfectly, partly because you can choose an easier height to leap off, should you be daunted.

“There are few moments in life when you realise, “This is perfect. This is as good as it gets””

This is Bollemakiesie Point, where three fountains come spouting out the rock and the formations from centuries of water are truly wondrous.



The stretch of river on this adventure is a mere 2,5 kilometres

There the river runs strong and sleek and cold, and thanks to Coll letting out this pretty little hut perched over the Visgat, a deep well of beautiful gold-tinted liquid from which a skilled fisher can pluck out a trout for dinner, you can hear it running all night and day if you like. It's worth hiring the place for this alone.

But photographer Teagan Cunniffe and I are here for another reason: the official inaugural tubing adventure down the Olifants River. 'Here' is the farm Visgat, which borders CapeNature's Groot Winterhoek Wilderness area. Coll inherited this not insubstantial patch of rock and fynbos from his Scottish father Donald Macdonald (really), who scouted it out in 1967. GlenDonald Cottage is set between the arid Witzenberg mountains, which rise up like great grey dragons' spines, and the Skurweberg. In the sharp gully where the two meet and where the cottage is built, lies the sparkling little necklace that is the Olifants, with water so pure that you can plant your head face-first into it and drink. It's true that it's also the home of two endemic fish, the sawfin and yellowfish, that breed only in these upper parts but despite the sex and scatology this implies, the water still tastes superb, which is to say it doesn't taste of anything at all.

After a beautiful drive through Bainskloof and Ceres and quaintly named Prince Alfred Hamlet, we arrive at GlenDonald Cottage at 2pm. There's bread and cheese set out under the willow tree, and a host of open faces. There's Bridget and Neil, Kylie and Roger, Lizette and Anthony, Steven and James, lovers of good whisky and music so bad it's good. There's Ian, our guide, and Helen, his ever-smiling wife, and Coll and his wife Judy. We break the ice under the willow's shade, and by 3pm we're pulling on wetsuits and headed down a little winding path about a kilometre up from the house. We hear the rush of water and look down smooth, warm grey rocks into the clear stream below. And jump. We come up gasping and laughing from the initial shock of cold and bubbling



ABOVE AND LEFT Coll pulls a trout from the Visgat, which he then cooked over the fire in butter – heaven. Fishers should note that spinners are not allowed.

water, then pull our tubes under us. We're soon thankful we have wetsuits. On a run with friends in the past, says Coll, a woman became hypothermic and they had to walk her out. But now, in November, the water feels manageable. This is a test run. Tomorrow is the real all-day deal.

There are few moments in life when you realise, 'This is perfect. This is as good as it gets. If you strike me down now, Great Entity of the Universe (because it's also at moments like these the mind might wander into spiritualism), I will be satisfied that I Have Lived.' This river could well be a vein jacked straight into this godly realm because, as I floated down it the following day, I had many moments like these. Like the time I went a little >





The farm is protected through a partnership with CapeNature

ahead and found myself alone between two curvaceous bodies of rock that reached high above me and leaned in towards each other so that only a sliver of sunlight filtered in down one side, illuminating delicate ferns and acid-green moss through which light rivulets of mountain water dripped, tinkling into the water next to me like a tune. And another, when I floated into a chasm where a tree grew out of rock at an incomprehensible angle, and on one of its branches perched a singing yellow canary and a paradise flycatcher that angled its cobalt-lined eye at me, and then flew away to its mate. I felt deeply, mystically, as I floated down this river, that we were one of the lucky few who had ever seen, or will ever see, such precious things.

But life has its little balances, and the river offered these too: a hard knock as I rushed down a rapid into a rock that left a bruise that throbbled with every step I took the next day; leaps of faith into unfathomable wells of water; and at the end of a glorious, easy float, a steep and challenging climb out the ravine. It took resolve not to apply cheesy, lazy metaphors to the experience on that hot walk back home. But that night we ate fresh, buttered trout and drank good whisky, and I couldn't stop myself as I lay my bruised body down on that beautiful, soft bed. 'Life is like a river...' went my brain, but before it could do worse, I fell into the deepest, most satisfying sleep. **A**

ABOVE There are many chasms through which the river runs, with exquisite ferns and plants growing from the rocks – we savoured these sights.

RIGHT The rooms at GlenDonald Cottage (pictured opposite) are extremely comfortable and very prettily fitted out by the deft hand of Judy Macdonald



Plan your trip

GETTING THERE

Take the N1 from Cape Town, through the Huguenot Tunnel and just before Worcester, turn left onto the R43. Take the R46 and pass through Ceres, then left onto the R303 to Prince Alfred Hamlet. From there take the Witzenberg Valley Road, and follow the specific directions that will be sent to you if you book GlenDonald Cottage. You'll need a high-clearance vehicle. I took my Polo 1.4 and made it down, but there were some unavoidable scrapes on the last 500 metres down towards the cottage.

NEED TO KNOW

This adventure is for someone of reasonable fitness. The range of ages on the trip was 25 to 57; everyone coped but we all got a bruise or two, so it's not for someone afraid of rapids. Jumping heights are manageable. The most challenging part of the adventure was the hike out, which is quite sheer. Pack extra snacks for the main day. Bananas and energy bars are provided, but I was thankful for the sandwich I packed. Take a Thermos filled with something warm to drink.

GEAR

You spend a long time in the water. We got into the water at 10am, and out again at about 4pm. So the gear is important. Here's what you'll need:

WETSUIT You're wet pretty much all the time, although there are a couple of sunning breaks on the way, so a good wetsuit is vital. Despite this, some people still got cold, so think of the gaps: one smart guy wore booties with ankle covers, and then his wet shoes over that.

GLOVES A few people said they wished they had these, to push away from rocks and help keep you warm.

WET SHOES Don't skimp on the wet shoes; you'll regret it. It's cold and you want resilient shoes with decent soles. I bought cheap wet shoes, and these weren't adequate for the hike back through the veld. One of the crew had on Salomon TechAmphibians 3 (R1 499, trappers.co.za), which he highly recommended.

DRY BAG We all had small backpacks but the one that worked best was a Salomon Agile AW20 Waterproof (R2 599, salomonsports.co.za). It has a dry-bag element, plus nice waist support. I used an Adidas Terrex 35, which is small and neat, but I definitely needed a dry bag, which will keep a sandwich water-free. The Ark (ark.co.za) and Sea-to-Summit (adventureinc.co.za) options worked best.

HAT Some felt a cap worked better than a brimmed hat, which can get waterlogged. But you do get burnt, so make sure you have one.

SUN PROTECTION There's not only the sun from above but reflection from the water. And because you're always wiping your face, lotion tends to come



off. I used Diego Dalla Palma Sun SPF30 (R575, from skin-care clinics), which is water resistant, but I needed to apply it often. Once out the water, I put on Falke Arm Protectors (R225, falke.co.za). I wet them, which kept me cool, and the sun off my arms.

WHEN TO GO

There'll be four trips offered a year. We went in November, and the water was about 18°C, but the sun was hot and we warmed up on rocks along the way. The next trips are 16 – 18 and 23 – 25 November. Tailored weekday trips can also be booked. For more info go to glendonaldcottage.co.za.

WHAT IT COSTS

Each expedition caters to a group of eight. It costs R2 800 pp, including food and accommodation. BYO booze.

WHERE TO STAY

GlenDonald Cottage sleeps 10 adults and three kids. Four of the rooms are en-suite. For more privacy and a great deal of charm, opt for the two new outside rooms. I especially loved the bathrooms, which look out onto the mountain range. It's self-catering; there's a gas stove and three wonderful dining settings in and around the cottage. From R4 000 per night, minimum two-night stay. glendonaldcottage.co.za

