

Suicide Gorge

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The first description that comes to mind when thinking about Suicide Gorge and Riviersonderend Kloof is that of a summer water wonderland, a natural theme park with thrills, spills and enough excitement for anyone who enjoys adventuring in the great outdoors.

Anticipating a day in the sun and paying attention to a sms received the night before, "we travel light," I threw the basics into a small bag. Bearing in mind that everything has to go in the water I also brought a dry bag.

Arriving at the entrance to the Hottentots Holland Nature Reserve, the anticipated sunshine and blue skies were replaced by a low hanging ceiling of grey cloud, dampening my idea of a fun day in the sun. Suddenly I had visions of being cold, wet and miserable for hours on end.

It didn't help when the more experienced members of our group, mountain rescuers who had hiked Suicide Gorge many times before, in addition to performing many rescues in the region, told us they all had wet suits. Wet suits for a hike? Yes, said rescuer Kevin, "My body temperature drops quickly, so as you are wet most of the time I like to stay warm." Thanks, I was feeling woefully unprepared.

The rest of the group, those without wets suits, were more optimistic, muttering "oh the sun will come out", "it will burn off" and other such untruths.

The weather settled as we started our 2-hour walk-in to the start of the gorge. We arrived there to find the rescuers who had gone ahead suiting up like they were going scuba diving. I tightened my shoe laces.

Luckily the wind and cold stayed away and soon we hit our first jump. Still weary of the weather I was determined to stay dry for as long as I could. It is possible to avoid the early jumps and swims by scrambling around the ever present water hazards but I kind of felt I was missing out on the fun.

So while me and the rest of our crowd known as the yellow crowd after my not so trusty dry bag, skirted round the chilly looking rock pools, the wet-suited warriors went the direct route, jumping from rocks and sliding down a very cool moss-covered rock into the waiting pool, the bum slide.

The gorge itself is stunning and the death defying jumps aside, probably deserves a better name. The river is a fast flowing mass of tannin-coloured water, fresh and cool to the taste and refreshing to swim in without being cold. There are waterfalls and ancient rock formations shaped by thousands of years of the free flowing river. We spotted two beautiful Disas in the prime of their short life but despite keeping an eye out, we didn't spot anymore.

About 20 minutes into the gorge we enjoyed our first swim in the gorge's cool waters; once you're wet you pretty much stay that way so there's no point in trying to dry off. A few jumps, swims, rock scrambles and slips and slides later and we reached the "compulsory" high jump. Luckily one of the yellow crew had done this before so he led us down a slippery path to a slightly lower jump. "That's why we regularly rescue people in Suicide Gorge, they're looking for a lower jump" warned rescuer Nick before launching himself off a 10m ledge into the dark pool below. I felt safer having the rescuers along but often wondered who might need the rescuing.

Finally, after a compulsory bum slide down a small rapid, one best performed in slow motion, we reached Junction Pool for a well earned lunch break and chance to dry off, although the slight drizzle didn't help much.

This is also the spot where many leave the gorge and hike back to the start. Not us, the rescuers were soon heading up Riviersonderend Kloof and we happily followed. The rocks slippery from the rain were tricky to negotiate; trying to stay dry was not that important anymore, trying to stay upright was. Riviersonderend Kloof is as beautiful if not more so than Suicide Gorge and the way up the gorge is both challenging and satisfying.

With the weather closing in and the temperature starting to drop we didn't hike all the way up the Kloof but found an escape route out about two thirds of the way up.

Charles, who had run ahead and gone missing for a short while, appeared out of the bush after running round to the end of the gorge and swimming down stream. While most of us were putting warm gear on, Charles continued without a shirt.

The walk out was a pleasant stroll after hours of clambering and scrambling up the kloof. The kloofs

themselves are not particularly strenuous as you can only move so fast, but it is a long day out, especially if you attempt both kloofs in a day. I was kind of thinking that we had done most of the second kloof when Nick piped up that we had left the kloof with the best part still to do as it gets even more beautiful the higher up you are. So I have a reason to go back, although once you've done these kloofs you'll certainly need no more reason than just to spend a day out in beautiful nature, a day that will test you if you are not a seasoned adventurer, but the rewards are plentiful.

A good dry bag is essential as the bags go in the water first. You want your gear to stay dry but be able to carry it on your back. Most had dry bags which went inside their backpacks.

My dry bag did the job for two of us but without a proper tie system it cannot be fully waterproof. If you do get cold quickly a wet suit is a good idea but if the sun is shining and you can keep your warm clothes dry, then swimming shorts and some quick dry t-shirt should do the trick. Cotton is not advised.

Permits cost R80 at the entrance to the Hottentots Holland Nature Reserve and it is advised to go with someone who has done the kloofs before. You can comfortably do either gorge in a day or for the fit and keen do both kloofs in one day. Start early.

The route is open from 1 November to 30 April check out www.capenature.co.za for more.