

Horseshoe & Gorge

The rain poured down from early hours Saturday morning, the first cancellation call came in at 05:05 and within 30 min, 5 attendees had dropped out. I was very tempted to yet again cancel the hike, it would be the 3rd time and the thought that this hike is jinxed, crossed my mind." In order to beat it I had to persevere regardless of the weather, the message went out to confirm who was still attending.



5 hikers including myself set off at 07:15, the weather held and we ambled up the first hill to warm up the lungs. A short stroll through the chalets and along the ridge led us down the path to Horse Bend. At the pump house we left the dirt road and traced a path through river reeds and eucalyptus trees, the path disappeared into the thicket and my first thoughts were: "Oh no the path has grown closed!" A deep breath, I glanced around to recall landmarks, a short back track and a duck under the thorn tree and there the infamous red ladder leading the way was, almost as if someone had laid out the red carpet for us. We reached the Horseshoe Cottage and stopped for the first drinks break, which seemed to have invited the rain.



Around the bend up and out the bend took us up to the Saligna campsite, thankfully empty, which awarded us the opportunity to view the wild bucket shower, where we boiled our own water to enjoy a warm shower. The veranda of the site is high up with spectacular views of Umgeni Valley and the route of the river as it snakes through the valleys.



The rain still falling, boots wet, raincoats soaked, pack covers working very hard to keep things dry, we plodded on to the top of the drop off into the gorge, descending down the rocky path, loose rocks, freshly cut grass and red clay mud caking our boots made things very slippery, the worst was yet to come. Once at the bottom the rocks disappeared and we had thick grass to contend with. Not long after, one of the team spotted the tail of a snake disappearing in to and under the freshly cut grass. Once uncovering and exposing the slithery serpent it was a beautiful specimen of a young rock python. After a few pics and a short video, I released it back to its grassy hiding place.

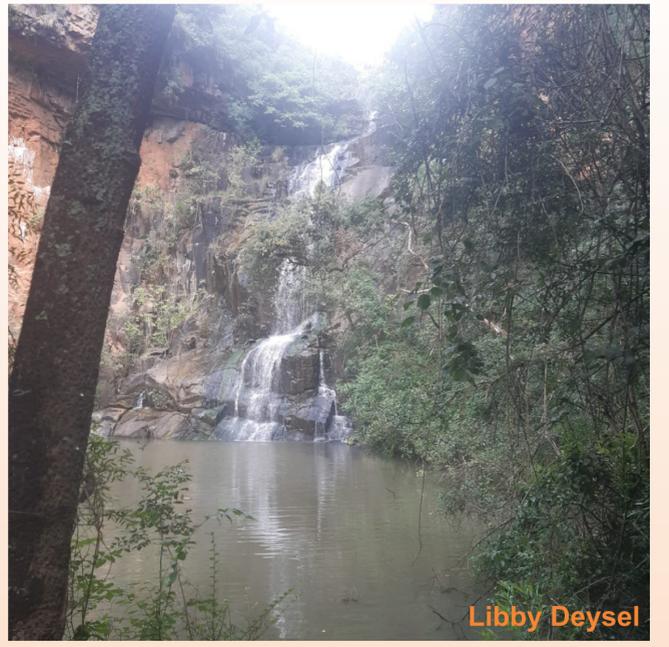




Andrew Loots



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We followed the river until the ravine where the trail led us across to the far side and up towards the waterfall. This is where the fun really began, wide steps, slippery moss covered rocks, thorn trees and bushes that when hooked stopped you in your tracks, river crossings, ducking under and climbing over tree branches shrubs and rocks. It was not long before the first casualty, not from mother nature but from a fellow hiker who accidentally ended up gouging the leg of another, it was a serious one, quick thinking and fast actions, first aid kit out gauze soaked in Dettol and bandage did the job.



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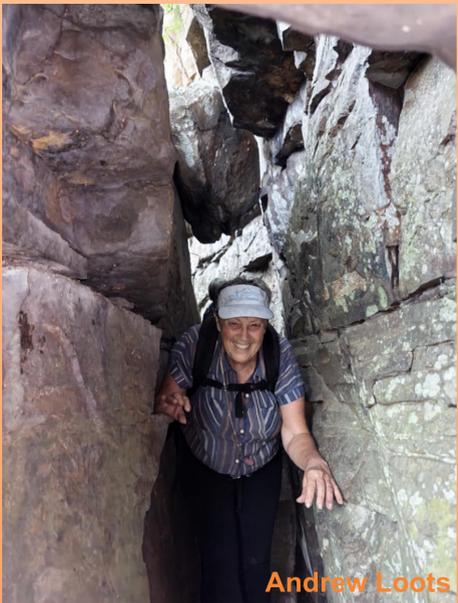
On we scrambled until reaching the waterfall where we enjoyed brunch, water and a re-assessment of our bumps and bruises. Not long and we were on the move again, sitting still proved rather chilly, best keep moving. We hugged the base of a cliff this time on the opposite side of the ravine. Heading back to the cars, however, was easier said than done. The rock falls provided spectacular views of the valley and the rock formations. One can't help but think or imagine spending a night in one of the over hangs listening to the sounds of the roaring waterfall in the gorge. A good few technical sections, a rope with knots tied in it would have definitely helped the situation. For extra safety, a tight squeeze through a narrow gully covered by a wedged rock ceiling, thank goodness for a small group.



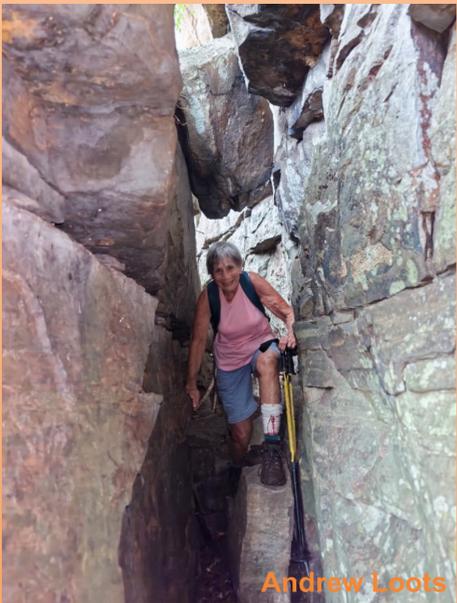
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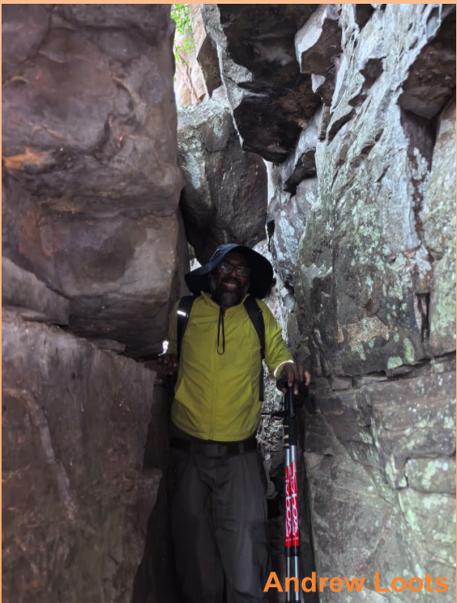
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Rounding the final corner and a last heave and ho over the huge rocks that clutter the route out to the top of the gorge. Once up we were rewarded with a seat to catch our breath, rehydrate or a snack. Thoughts, breath and body realignment complete, the final stroll back to our cars passed a few breathtaking views of the ravine from above.



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