

Friday 13th

Uncharacteristically organized, we had packed Suzi, our little blue Suzuki, the night before and were able to hit the road shortly after 15h30, excited about our first camping weekend with MHC and some much needed (and equally well deserved) time away from Sleepy Hollow. Our last two hikes having been rather strenuous cave hikes, we hoped for a little more relaxation this time, and were not disappointed.

Although Suzi has torque, she prefers a slow drive and so it was only after two hours squinting at the setting sun,



another hour and a bit gazing at the rising of a spectacularly rust-coloured full moon (appropriate for Friday 13th I thought), and our customary 5km missed-the-turnoff detour that we eventually arrived at TO Strand!

Tent up, showered and a relatively cold non-alcoholic beer in hand, we settled down for some chit-chat with Pat, Bushy and Brian who had all arrived some time earlier, and then to bed by 10pm.

Saturday 14th



Dressed, breakfasted and awaiting the arrival of the last few members, we discussed the weather and plans for the weekend. With all parties at the ready by 9h30ish, we compressed 12 people into two (thankfully spacious) cars and set off for the Umtamvuna Nature Reserve. It was a beautifully sunny day, but not overly warm, and jerseys were soon stripped off and packed away. The approximately 8km hike first took us along the river edge, past a privately owned pont ferrying the locals back and forth, and then into the depths of a cool shady forest.

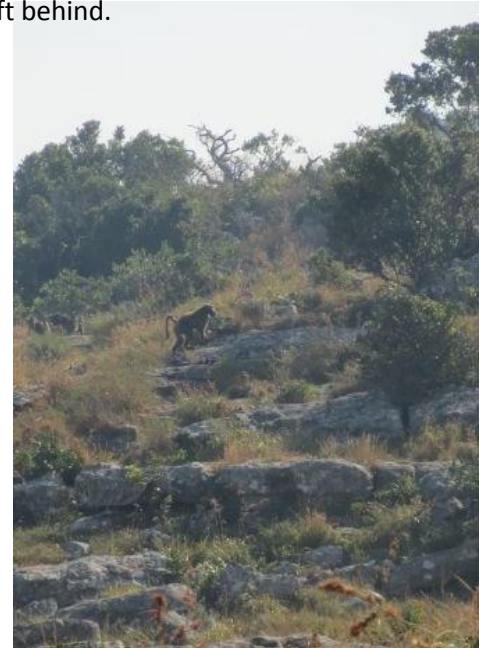


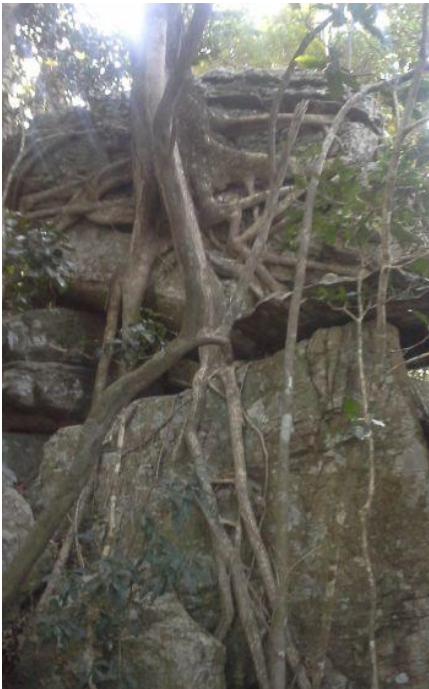


At this stage there was the unfortunate presence of other human life in the form of “Eye of the tiger” blasting through the airwaves at us from somewhere below. However we soon reached a level of elevation where silence prevailed (apart from Charlie occasionally humming ‘Imagine Dragons’ “I’m on top of the world,eh”).



From up top we had beautiful (alas, a little smoky) views of the sparkling clean river down below and as we sat quietly taking in the sights, so too did we start to tune in to the variety of bird tweets, monkey cries and baboon grunts, being especially blessed with a call from a fish eagle happy to be heard and not seen. Just in case we should lose our way, the baboons up ahead were gracious enough to drop their macadamia shells on route to our lunch stop, though we noted with disappointment that not even one solitary uneaten nut was left behind.

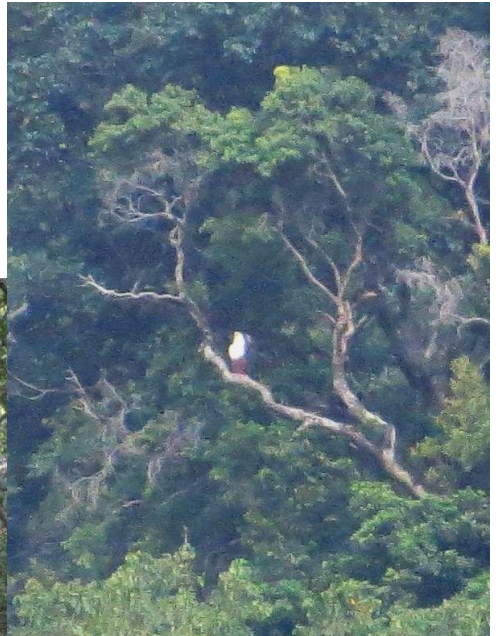




We passed an interesting little art/restaurant café on the way to our lunch spot which only served to make me wish for an ice cold beer as opposed to the bland water we had packed, but with time only for a toilet break, it was back on the path. Lunch was eaten at a sunny/shady spot on the rocks, under which Charlie found what we assumed to be pieces of a very old broken clay pot.



It was then time to head back down to the river, via a very steep path through the forest, though luckily nature had taken we hikers into account and had grown a number of handles and hang-ons in convenient places. Just before the knees gave in, we reached ground level and took a moment or two to look into the river and back up from whence we came. It was here also that the elusive fish eagle was spotted, though this time having been seen, he refused to be heard!



An hour or so later and our weary legs reached the car and we headed back to camp for an ice cold beer or three before prepping the braai. Everyone cozied up around the fire as the cold breeze reared its head once again, and warmed up our tummies with braai vleis and salads, and for dessert... toasted marshmallows!



Sunday 15th

A howling wind crept up on us overnight and we were rudely awoken at 1h30 by Suzie's trumpeting – obviously offended at the icy breeze forcing its way under her soft-top. We later heard that it caused a near disaster as Bushy, thinking it was his car alarm going off, fell out of his highrise bed in his haste to get to his keys. Lucky all was fine and we soon drifted off back to sleep.



At around 8h30 we set off, this time to the Wild Coast Sun Casino. No, not to gamble, but for a guided tour of the Petrified Forest (officially known as the Mzamba Cretaceous Deposits). We were fortunate to be there at spring tide and so had full exposure to the fossils, all meticulously pointed out by our knowledgeable guide, Benny.



I think each one of us was in awe at the history under our feet, that, but for Benny, would have been completely ignored. Worms petrified along with the tree logs they were feeding on, sharks' teeth embedded in the rock, a giant clam and ammonite hidden in the sands; it was amazing!





On a sadder note, Benny shared his heartbreak at the current trend of locals boring into the fossil beds with a hammer and chisel to extract little red worms burrowed inside. They collect these to use and sell as bait, though in doing so are destroying a natural heritage that can't be replaced. No sooner had he told us this, we came across a brazen local unashamedly smashing open the rocks. I guess history doesn't feed an empty stomach, and more needs to be done to protect both the locals and the marine beds. We walked on to inspect and photograph the White Man Caves and then stopped for a snack at the river mouth where a few braved the chilly waters for a swim.



Heading back we came across some local women who Benny said would be sure to have fresh crayfish in the bags on their heads. Apparently they dive for the crayfish themselves and pluck them out the sea by hand (no gloves) and then sell what they can and take the rest home for dinner. We obliged by buying 8 crayfish and watched in guilty horror as they expertly cleaned them – a case of snapping off its horn which is then inserted swiftly up the rear and extracted with innards in tow. A little gruesome, but if you're going to be eating it you should be able to watch how it dies.



Back at camp we spent the afternoon resting, some of us headed off to the beach, others did as little as possible. Charlie and I headed off to the local Spar to stock up on garlic, butter and fresh cheesy onion bread to go with our crayfish braai. Charlie did the honours of both prepping and braaing and I think we all agreed they were a good end to a great weekend.



Monday 16th

Most packed up early and headed home, including Charlie and me, though not before stopping at Mac Banana café, as recommended by Pat. It was well worth the stop and we enjoyed a delicious breakfast of fruit smoothies and an enormous brie & cranberry pancake shared between us while the peacocks strutted about. Thanks again to our leaders, Bushy and Pat, who ensured that a fantastic weekend was had by all, and it was lovely to meet some more of our fellow hiking members and some old faces.

