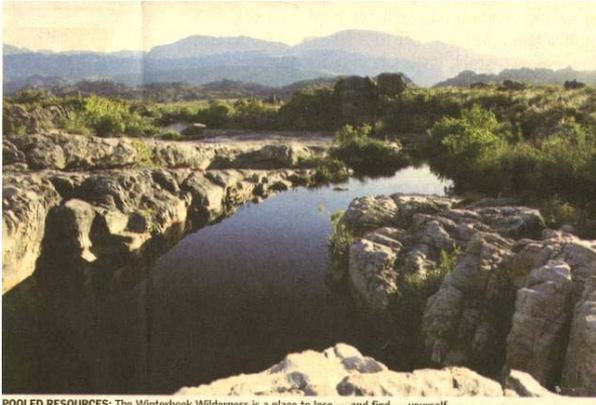


INTO THE WILDS

Geoff Dalglish goes solo into the mountains in search of a connection with nature



POOLED RESOURCES: The Winterhoek Wilderness is a place to lose — and find — yourself

The Western Cape's jagged Groot Winterhoek mountains can be hot, harsh and hostile - especially when you are camped out alone with no food or shelter.

This is literally being between a rock and a hard place, paying good money for the dubious pleasure of going solo in a remote wilderness area without so much as an energy bar between you and possible starvation.

The trappings of modern civilisation — watch, cell-phone, laptop and GPS — have also been voluntarily left behind, perhaps foolishly, so it's a matter of steering by intuition, not technology.

To compound the discomfort the self-inflating mattress has punctured; clothing is wet after an unexpected downpour; and legs are itchy and bleeding from trudging through scratchy fynbos vegetation.

Hey, nobody said Africa was for sissies ... the tan is coming along nicely, kilos are shedding from the beerboep and there'll be plenty to talk about when we get home — if we get home.

Our small group of individuals has signed up for an 11-day Vision Quest that is tailored to those seeking quiet time to review their lives, formulate fresh plans or simply ritualise a turning point like the transition from youth to adulthood, or perhaps to elderhood in the case of a person retiring or celebrating a 60th or 70th birthday.

For many modern-day questers the process helps deal with a career change, a health challenge, or the beginning or end of a relationship. In my case this is a birthday celebration, the Big Six-0, as well as time out to redefine goals while indulging an urge to survive in the wilderness. Going within is certainly a travel destination with a difference.

Others in my group, who range in age from a young man in his twenties to a gentle widow in her late sixties, have vastly different reasons for choosing this path.

We've signed up for an intensive programme facilitated by two Capetonians, Judy Bekker and Valerie Morris, who insist: "The need for deep reflection time is increasingly evident in our corporate societies and communities.

"The Vision Quest is a personal transformation process that is part of an ancient tradition with wilderness playing a significant role in the quest for a new direction in life."

The 11-day programme, which starts and finishes in Fishhoek, Cape Town, is a carefully guided experience, which includes four nights solo in the wilderness. It is based on the rites of passage practised by various indigenous peoples, among them the Native Americans.

As a hardened cynic, ritual and tradition doesn't figure high on my To-Do list, but it's hard not to be captivated by the wisdom Judy and Valerie have accumulated during 17 years of guiding questers.

Many who sign up are deeply fearful, especially about surviving four days without food.

Others are scared stiff of being alone, or of meeting snakes, scorpions or spiders, all of which call the Groot Winterhoek home. Then there's the horror of extreme boredom. What do you do when you can't switch on the TV or make a call?

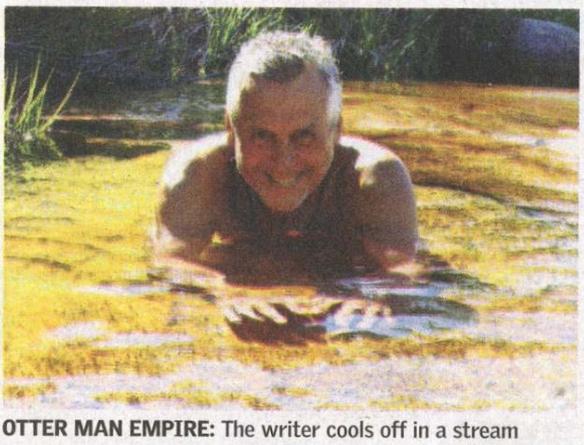
The most frequently asked question is: "How do you manage without food?"

At home it isn't possible to last four hours, never mind four days. But fasting is easy without the distraction of mealtimes, refrigerators and vending machines, although famine can cause light-headedness. Once I'm dizzily embarrassed to find myself crawling on hands and knees to avoid toppling off a high rock ledge.

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The idea behind fasting is symbolic as well as a healthy detox of body and mind —you need to empty yourself before filling up with fresh clarity.

Judy emphasises: "Fasting for four days and nights does not harm the body provided there are no medical reasons why the person shouldn't eat. We are overtly protective and in 17 years everybody has come back alive without any serious injury."



OTTER MAN EMPIRE: The writer cools off in a stream

The routine starts with three days of preparation in Cape Town with the group then driving two-and-a-half hours to near the Beaverlac resort.

Each individual then finds a suitable spot for a solo retreat, be it a cave or overhanging rock ledge, carrying 20 litres of water to their new home before returning to the base camp where a last supper and evening under the stars are shared.

Solo time begins the next morning when all shuffle into the dawn in different directions with a rucksack stuffed with a sleeping bag, inflatable mattress, tarpaulin and outdoor clothing for all seasons. Some are close to tears.

One turns back, insisting: "I can't do this," but is gently 'persuaded to try again.

In truth, we all have our private doubts and fears and may grapple with private demons. And we'll all be very comfortable at times.

For the first time in years time slows down to a crawl, four amazing days of wonder and adventure seeming to last forever, while the

nights are endless. What do you do to pass the time? How about getting to know each lizard on your rock ledge and studying the cycle of life from tadpole to frog in a rock pool.

It is a chance to celebrate the cycles of nature, the days not divided by mealtimes, but the position of the sun, moon and skies.

With each passing hour there is a growing calm and contentment, the participants increasingly sharing the belief that wilderness holds the key to humankind's tortured quest for inner peace.

Almost too soon Friday dawns and it is time to hike back to base camp and meet faces that are suntanned, radiant and triumphant. Chins are stubbled and hairstyles in disarray, but the intrepid travellers have all shed kilos and baggage. For many the experience is life-changing.

There's a powerful sense of camaraderie and excitement as we head back to Cape Town for a weekend of integration, discussion and story telling.

I'm reminded of the ancient African proverb: Treat the earth well. It was not given to you by your parents: it was loaned to you by your children.

If you go

Need to know:

The Vision Quest is not affiliated to and religious group but explores the concept of wilderness as a place to re-establish a connection with the land and ourselves. This is not a detox for alcoholics or drug addicts nor is it suitable for the emotionally unstable. You will also spend four nights alone in the mountains without food or formal shelter, but with plenty of water.

What to Take:

All weather outdoor clothing, a sleeping bag, waterproof tarpaulin and any essential medication, 20 litres of water, a whistle for emergencies – and a sense of humour.

Contact:

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