

Carolee, organiser-in-chief, in her methodical way had us allocated in groups for the trip up to Golden Gates. Most of the groups went the planned way through the Golden Gate National Park but an unmentioned group, having missed the turnoff, almost ended up in Bethlehem but still arrived on time. (FS!)

Cannibal Cave Weekend

28-30 March

Our arrival time at about 5pm was perfect as the setting sun lit up the hills surrounding Fort Saint - a picture postcard panorama. The board allocating the various parties to their accommodation informed us we were to be in Die Melkstal with other groups, totalling about 25 people in all. Comfort zones are made for breaking! Can't recall the last time I slept in a bunk or for that matter even tried to get up to the top without a ladder! The alternative was of course the trekker wagon accommodation which in some cases also had a bunk arrangement.



The boma gathering that evening was a perfect spot for sundowners, a braai and to get to know fellow hikers.



The hike started at the civilised hour of 8.30 after breakfast. There were a few stout hearted walkers, Brian being the instigator, who had already done a walk to Mushroom rock before many of us were up. Our luggage (filled with many luxury goods) was collected and delivered to the cave to await our arrival.





The beauty of the start of the walk is the climb up out of the valley. As we reached the midway point we had magnificent views down over the lush green valleys and out beyond to the rolling hills of the Golden Gates. Soon we were at the sandstone belt with its weather-sculpted and painted forms - a reminder of an ancient geological period. The first waterfall was a perfect example of nature being the ultimate sculptor. Once on top we had 360 views out towards Fouriesberg, Clarens and beyond.

What goes up..! And so it was back down into the valleys with the thick cool growth and a few scrambling, clambering and ladder challenges (not quite THE chainladder). After a few more ascents and descents we had the first view of the cave where history has it the cannibals of the not too distant past used to "dine"! Within an hour we had arrived.





Luxury cave - mattresses, toilets and showers. A glitch we soon discovered was that there was no water. This was going to give new meaning to the expression “bone dry”. If there was panic none of the 40 cave dwellers was showing it yet. A few adventurous people, attempting to look like water engineers, set off to resolve the problem. Their report - the JOJO supply tank was empty - no showers, no flushing loos. Time to panic? Certainly not. Out of the various bags, rucksacks and cooler boxes quite magically came water, sufficient to keep everyone happy. There was also a “drop-a-second” drip in the cave which had a queue of containers awaiting their turn to be filled.

Our first thought to resolve the problem was to call the farm manager. No cellphone signal. An enthusiastic, and young member of the other group volunteered to do a lightening dash up to a higher vantage point 25 minutes away. In true African style the good news was shouted across the valley. He had made contact and the relief of Cannibal Cave was imminent. Our relief was short lived as the delivery was no more than two milk pails filled with water, finished and klaar!

So it was that 40 people learned what can be done with a mug or bowl full of water. To stir your imagination a number of people were seen heading to the ablution block with their mug of water to “have a shower”! Indeed many came back smelling a lot sweeter.



The ambience of a golden sunset, simmering steaks on the braai and being with friends certainly confirmed why the outdoors can be described as GREAT and indeed why Midlands Hiking Club is a wonderful club. Many retired early after the day’s exertion and the previous evening’s occasionally disrupted sleep.



The three witches practising their smoke directing skills.

BUT THEN THERE WAS BRIAN!

His master plan for the evening was to wait for people to be warm and snug in their sleeping bags before enthusiastically announcing a night walk. There was understandably a heavy silence with the occasional fake snore.

This did not deter Brian. With his charm and encouragement he enticed four of us (Cathy, Sharon, Estelle and Alistair) to accompany him to unknown places.

So through the dark we obediently followed our leader till we arrived at The Bridge and WATER. It may seem logical to some when hearing running water and after having being denied such a luxury that we should take advantage. However when you experience how dark darkness can be there was every likelihood that any of us taking a dip might well disappear forever into the unknown.



We did have an eerie feeling that we were being watched but we soon dismissed that. Later photographic evidence proved our suspicions to be right. At least they didn't ask to share the sherry.

By now we had overcome our fear and with our travelling pub of whisky, sherry and wine we had become quite fortified. Torches off. The stars, planets and constellations revealed themselves. It is not possible to describe the magnificence and grandeur of a clear and crisp Freestate sky. With Cathy's cellphone app we were able to identify certain planets and stars. As our star gazing time extended so did the merriment, philosophy, astrophysics and other outrageously funny subjects. However all participants were sworn into secrecy with the newly concocted oath "What happened on the bridge stays on the bridge." Reluctantly we decided it was time to retire and prepare for our return the next morning.

The rising sun warming the valleys and the need for water was a great encouragement for us to set off early. The route back is just as spectacular and shorter than the previous day's walk. There was the enticement of the shortcut once we had reached the road while some did the final climb, over the hill and home.

Warm showers and a cup of coffee seemed to revive us. Clarens of course was a mandatory deviation on the way home where a Clarens Blonde (beer!) and lunch awaited us. It is a charming village which could have lured us to stay on for longer.



Home.

A weekend filled with magic moments and memories. I can feel a return trip calling.

