

A River Runs Through Us

ON A CHALLENGING MULTI-DAY HIKE THROUGH MAKUYA NATURE RESERVE IN NORTHERN LIMPOPO,
DIANNE TIPPING-WOODS AND SEVEN OTHER WOMEN REDISCOVER THEIR WILD NATURES

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(Photo: Alex Shapiro)

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The more subtle you are, the more you're going to fit into this landscape.' Did naked in the Luvuvhu River count as subtle? I wasn't sure, but Lowveld Trails Company guide Wayne te Brake, wasn't around to ask. He'd given our group of eight loosely acquainted women this piece of advice as we set off on a primitive backpack trail through Makuya Nature Reserve, following the course of the river that flows like a lifeline through this 16 000ha provincial park in northern Limpopo.

We'd left him at our campsite – a grassy patch a few hundred metres from the water, with twin baobab sentinels – and followed his colleague, guide Julie Bryden, down to the river. There, she'd found a shallow, hippo-and-croc-free pool, and we'd stripped off and bathed in the cooling waters that had kept us company for the last 36 hours.

Why were we here, on this back-to-basics hike, following this river through the baobab-studded wilderness, to where it enters the spectacular Luvuvhu Gorge? Our answers were as varied as we were. We wanted quiet, we wanted novelty, we wanted to meet our wild selves, leaving behind our identities as writers, photographers, physiotherapists, marketers and entrepreneurs. We wanted immersion, we wanted adventure and we wanted to connect.

Whatever our reasons, this unsupported trail – no tents, no ablutions, no smartphones and just what we could carry – had brought us all together, in a place none of us had ever been before.

Tempting as it was to enjoy the water, the banter and the freedom, we didn't linger long at the river. We'd already walked through the golden light of the late afternoon, and then we'd walked further, crossing game paths littered with elephant dung and navigating the reedy verges of hippo trails. Dusk was approaching. 'Fill up your bottles where the water's flowing a bit faster,' advised Julie, before leading us home through the twilight.

The Luvuvhu flows for about 200 kilometres through a range of landscapes and joins the Limpopo River in the Fever Tree Forest area, near Pafuri in Kruger National Park. The section we were hiking connects northern Kruger and Makuya, allowing



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animals to move between the protected areas. Although wildlife density is low, we'd already seen the remains of a nyala, tracks from hyenas, kudus, elephants and crocodiles, and watched hippos watch us from within quiet pools. 'You can see where this mother hippo lay down with her calf just a few hours ago,' said Wayne, crouching to read their story in the sand. 'It's thrilling to know we're sharing space with these animals.'

Wayne has walked more hours in the wilderness than many in the business. As for Julie, she seems forged from the landscape, sometimes flowing like the river, sometimes still as a stone.

She's also one of the most highly qualified female guides on the African continent. We couldn't have been in safer hands.

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Earlier, Wayne had explained: 'Humans are actually part of this ecosystem. We evolved with these landscapes.' We'd been hiking in the shadow of a hill called Makahane and had stopped to watch a pair of Verreaux's eagles that had a nest halfway down the cliff. The long-abandoned site is still revered by nearby communities, and its stone-wall remains are reminiscent of other settlements in Zimbabwe and Limpopo, including one of Kruger's most famous sites, Thulamela. Scholars suggest an even more ancient history for us in the Limpopo River Basin, one that's featured continuous hominid occupation for more than 1.5 million years. And before that? 'That's the story these rock formations tell, going back hundreds of millions of years,' said Wayne. That night, we sat around a small fire with the water of the Lu-vuvhu drying in our hair and I wondered: Was our presence in this landscape an extension of this rich history? Did we really belong?

I hadn't felt like it much before this moment. Prepared to be completely self-sufficient for the three nights of the trail, my pack had weighed a comfortable 14 kilograms. I had water purification tablets (the water was so clean we didn't need them), gators and blister packs for my feet. I had sunscreen, single servings of trail mix and even a small, collapsible kitchen sink.

But when we had started walking, I felt loud, clumsy and alien. A herd of impala crashed away from us through the undergrowth, but I hadn't seen them because I'd been looking where to put my feet. We passed through a copse of the reserve's enormous baobab trees. 'There's just a different feeling, a different energy, walking among these trees, isn't there?' asked Wayne. I tried to feel it, reaching out to touch their silky-smooth bark. I wondered at the sure-footedness and strength of the women I was walking with. I saw how Wayne and Julie belonged.

As we camped on a sandy beach close to the river at the end of day one, I felt I had prepared for everything except the place itself. I could feel it in my hamstrings from where we'd had to scramble over large boulders and navigate ankle-twisting sections



(Photo: Alex Shapiro)



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of rounded river rocks. I could feel it where I’d bashed my knees, having hooked my foot through a root on a tangled pathway of indigenous undergrowth and fallen. Twice.

During night watch – the solitary hour when each member of the group watches over everyone else – I felt existentially insignificant. The darkness held a kind of tranquillity, but it was tinged with fear... of wandering hippos, curious hyenas, of the landscape itself. The hour dragged as I slowly shone my torch in a circle, searching for eyes in its borrowed light. I put a small piece of wood onto the fire. I shone again. When I slept, the ground was hard, and cold.

Now though, on night two, surrounded by flickering fireflies and shooting stars, I knew something had changed. So far, I’d been cowed, awed and humbled by our immersion in this wild landscape of rocky outcrops, sandstone cliffs and verdant riverside. Belonging was a new sensation.

I wasn’t sure when it had begun. Perhaps it had been while walking under the winter-flowering ana trees, the gnarled nyala berries, the sprawling matumi trees and dexterous wild figs. ‘We really are

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About the trail

Lowveld Trails Company’s guided backpack trails take place across wild, exclusive properties in the Greater Kruger National Park and Makuya Nature Reserve. Groups generally set their own pace and explore according to their interests and capabilities, for between four and seven days. There are no demarcated campsites or routes and each night is spent under the stars (no tents) with participants sharing night watch. The trails are restricted to group bookings which may include up to eight participants.

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walking among giants here,’ I’d thought, absorbing the sheer diversity of life they support, from birds, butterflies, bees and other insects, to elephants.

Or was it when I began enjoying the pleasant ache of my often-sedentary body, moving as it should though the landscape, less afraid to fall, quicker to accept a helping hand?

‘It’s fundamental to our philosophy as Lowveld Trails Company that we become part of this landscape as participants, not observers. If there is one thing we are certain of, it’s that immersive experiences in wild places change the way people think and behave,’ Wayne had said.

The moon rose on my watch that night, and the ground felt less hostile. I’d washed off more than just accumulated grime and sweat.

My fellow hikers had similar experiences. Some found the trail physically challenging. The distances aren’t long, but the terrain requires moderate fitness. For others, night watch was deeply unsettling. For others still, it was hard to feel vulnerable and exposed with people who’d started the walk as strangers. By the third morning though, we were infused with energy as though confronted with our own vulnerabilities, we’d found an unexpected strength. We bonded over the citrusy scent of the crushed leaves of a hairy knobwood *Zanthoxylum humile*, known as the gin-and-tonic bush, laughed at some (loudly) orgasmic baboons, and marvelled at a heap of fibres that had once been a baobab.

When we entered the Luvuvhu Gorge, a staggering feat of natural engineering and awesome beauty, I felt my consciousness expand to take it in. People can only access this area on foot, and I knew every step had been worth it.

The river was too high for us to go as far as Wayne had planned. He left us under Julie’s watchful eye, to scout a new route out of the gorge. We sprawled on the sun-warmed rocks, while the water rushed by.



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‘Look at how everyone is relaxed and in community. This is what the wilderness does,’ said Julie, with a Mona Lisa smile. We washed again, and the water felt like redemption.

When Wayne returned, we found another campsite by the river for our final night in the wilderness. Some grey headed parrots, then a Dickenson’s kestrel flew by, delighting the birders. Julie had soaked, roasted and ground the seeds of a baobab pod to make us fragrant, wild coffee. I’d warmed a river stone by the fire and popped it in the bottom of my sleeping bag. That night, I slept in the perfect embrace of the landscape, soothed by the lilting rush of the ever-present river.

On day four, you could see by how we climbed out of the gorge that we all felt more connected to the environment. We’d navigated dead ends, wrong turns

and our own insecurities. We’d tripped up, we’d sweated and we’d survived. We’d also fallen in love with these stripped-bare versions of ourselves.

The view from the top down into the gorge was everything. As I looked down at the river that had welcomed, watered and washed us, I had a moment of reciprocity with nature, and its cycle of life, death and rebirth that runs through all of us. Like a river. **G**

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(Photo: Alex Shapiro)