

WET AND WILD

FORGET ABOUT THE LEGENDARY RAFTING TRIPS ON THE COLORADO, THE NILE AND THE ZAMBEZI. IT'S TIME TO TRY THE LESSER-KNOWN, BUT EQUALLY AS EXHILARATING, RIVER ROUTES IN SOUTHERN AFRICA

TEXT **GRAEME ADDISON**



'IT'S CALLED THE COCKTAIL POSITION BECAUSE YOU SHOULD BE ABLE TO HOLD A CHAMPAGNE GLASS IN EACH HAND AND NOT SPILL A DROP'

Yes, there are crocodiles in the great Usuthu. No, you don't need any experience – of fighting off crocodiles or anything else. It probably wouldn't help, anyway. Yes, you can go whitewater rafting on dozens of fantastically wild rivers all over southern Africa. No, the opportunities aren't limited to crashing down the Zambezi in the equivalent of rubber tour buses or splash-splashing your way along the mildly thrilling Orange River in canoes the size of oil tankers.

During summer, when the rainy season starts in November and lasts until about April – even in drought years – rivers in the eastern half of the subcontinent rise and tumble down the mountainsides, through deep gorges, over scary drops and into those (rare) crocodile-infested pools people obsess about.

If you find yourself swimming after capsizing, keep your wits about you. Remember to drift feet-first with your butt ready to take the bumps from rocks and arms extended sideways to make it all seem totally graceful.

They call it the cocktail position because you should be able to hold a champagne glass in each hand and not spill a drop. Split the word cocktail and it takes another meaning (think about how it's better to bruise your rear-end than swim down chest-first with vital fleshy bits at risk).

This is all river guide talk, of course. What most people realise on their first crazy plunge into the waters that flow off the eastern escarpment, the Drakensberg and the Maluti Mountains, is that rafting is exhilarating – Red Bull with water wings.

Here is a selection of five rapid-filled routes among the hundreds of hidden marvels in our river-running repertoire.

USUTHU RIVER, near Mbabane, Swaziland

Darron Raw, the impresario of liquid locomotion on the Usuthu River, has been spotted paddling with a pet baby python tangled around his ears and helmet. Since 1991 Raw has run the popular half- and full-day trips on the Usuthu with anything from two to 40 people. The remote route starts between the villages of Sidvokodvo and Siphofaneni at Bulungapoort – a name that sounds like the ill-behaved torrent itself, booming among the rock faces.

Low and full levels differ dramatically, but there are always Grade 2 to 4 rapids. (In case you're wondering, Grade 1 is very simple, Grade 3 is big and exciting, and Grade 6 is the deadly limit for professional crazies. Needless to say: Grade 7 and you go to heaven.)

Pick-up at your hotel in Mbabane or Manzini is at 8.30am. There's only you and your partner to blame for flipping, which is why the crocs (two-man boats) are often referred to as 'divorce machines'. Safety kayakers lead you on the water, uttering soothing words, and feed you a picnic lunch on the full-day package. Other trips include the 'totally ballistic, high risk, for experienced paddlers only' Xtreme Rafting on the Upper Usuthu and weekday jaunts on the hydro-release Mbabane River. *Swazi Trails: 011-704-1795, www.swazitravel-link.co.sz*

TUGELA RIVER CANYON, near Weenen, KwaZulu-Natal

Mark and Linda Calverley own the dream-like Zingela Safari and River Lodge. This bush camp with luxury and plain tented





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chalets is set in the misty hills where the Midlands tumble down to the great river that the Zulus nicknamed, 'the frightening one'. You can hear the river from afar during the approach on the rocky 4x4 track (which is also great for mountain biking) to the lodge.

Hugely battered Land Cruisers, just back from the Korean War, are used to reach various put-in points up and down the torturous valley. The full-day canyon trip tackles gnarly rapids such as Washing Machine and Liquidiser – names that say it all. Meanwhile, happy little river nooks such as Marula Bend on the Smell-the-Roses two-hour outing can upend you in an instant.

Both crocs and larger inflatables are used. At Finger Rock, where the half-day trip ends, a beckoning pinnacle of hard black rock dares you to enter – and you do. Back at the lapa stone circle, the bar and braai make for boisterous stories deep into the night. Lightning shatters the horizon, bringing next day's muddy flood and if you stay for days, you'll forget your other life.

*Zingela: 036-354-7005,
www.zingelasafaris.co.za*

VAAL RIVER, below Vaal Dam, Gauteng

Dolf Jordaan is the kind of old salt you'd expect to meet onboard a fishing schooner: grey-bearded, full of blarney and sporting a ►



purple bandanna. He is now probably the only operator offering regular day trips on the crisp whitewater below Vaal Dam, an hour from Johannesburg. He also offers the over-sold Parys rapids run (which is like a four-lane highway for rafts on some weekends).

The name of Dolf's company, Ingwenya, means – you guessed it – 'crocodile'. But the only crocs hereabouts, apart from the boats, are the broken-down corporate directors who have retired to nurse their souls quietly flyfishing for geelvis (yellows) in the Vaal's riffles.

This river is not the dirty industrial ditch it's taken for. Water quality out of the dam is high and the scenery is surprisingly rural, with highveld grassland and rocky outcrops skirting the rapids. The Chute is fast-'n'-easy, but Vischgat is a memorable twist-'n'-turn that can dump you at the last moment into a rip-roaring hole. Give it a go. It beats Joburg's Zoo Lake.
Ingwenya Tours: 082-773-8656, www.ingwenyatours.co.za

ASH RIVER, Clarens, Free State

Kallie Zwahlen – the name is German; his parents settled in South Africa after World War II – is a lean, blond-haired hippy-looking guy with a hard-bitten glint and an accounting degree. Of the Ash River he says coolly, 'It shouldn't be underestimated.'

No, indeed. There are gigantic pour-overs, barrelling sluices, and nasty suck-backs everywhere. The Ash River (or 'As', in Afrikaans – meaning 'axle' for the number of Boer wagons that broke shafts crossing it) is augmented from Lesotho via the Caledon River water transfer tunnel. As these are the foothills of the Maluti Mountains, the gradient is steep and the channel narrow. The river is cold, fast and superbly exciting.

Graeme Addison has been running rivers since the '60s. His favourite river is the challenging Senqunyane River in Lesotho, which he has done twice. Graeme is planning another expedition in early 2008. For more information, visit <http://xpedventures.blogharbor.com> or call 084-245-2490.

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Despite – or because of – the risks, Kallie prefers the figures he sees rafting to bean-counting on paper. So he settled in Clarens in the southern Free State, where the living is adventuresome and the water is always up and humping. Trips are usually run in five-seater guided inflatables and can take a few hours or a whole adrenaline-draining day. Party time on the Ash is any time, winter or summer.

Outrageous Adventures: 083-485-9654, www.outrageousadventures.co.za

ORANGE RIVER, Northern Cape/Namibia

Danie van Zyl and Craig Eksteen are two of the happiest men alive. They bought a long-established Kalahari adventure outfit for a song, and now a day at the office means floating down the Orange River, South Africa's Nile. It snakes between the arid Northern Cape and the vastness of the Kalahari and Namib Deserts.

The Orange, or !Gariep is 2 200km long from source to sea. It constantly surprises. Rising in high mountain snows it drops to torrid plains and goes on to gouge out violent gorges in the desert rocks. In the region of Augrabies Falls, some 850km from Johannesburg, the river alternates between placid pools, rippling channels between islands, and spectacular canyons.

A great three-and-a-half day whitewater camping safari takes you to the Ghoum-Ghoum Falls (don't worry, you go past them, not down them). Craig, of the curly dreadlocks, will explain the name of the falls by making rumbling noises and doing a raindance to celebrate the loneliness of the long-distance river-runner. The rapids are exhilarating Grade 2-4 but are never too big.

Kalahari Outventures: 054-431-1961, www.kalahari.co.za ●