



Lewis Pugh takes the only possible path through Suicide Gorge.

TRAVEL

Taking the Leap

IN SOUTH AFRICA, SWIMMING THE HOTTENTOTS NATURE RESERVE IS ONE WAY TO CRANK UP YOUR HEART RATE.

By Todd Pitcock

IN A PLACE called Suicide Gorge, water coursing through a sandstone ravine and cascading over steep cliffs has formed a series of deep pools. From the striated-rock ledge where we stood, it would be quite a fall. But the risk of falling wasn't the problem. The problem was that the only way forward was to jump.

We had done a couple of jumps earlier on the trail, 15 feet high or so, and knew that the Big One, a leap equal to five stories, was yet to come.

"Is this It?," I asked my friend Lewis Pugh.

"Not yet," he said. It was hard to guess how high we were. But it felt like

we were looking into the moat from the castle tower.

"Okay, it's your turn to go first. On the count of five! One! Two! Three—"

I had met Lewis, the world's premier cold-water swimmer, several years ago in Norway, where he was training for a North Pole swim, which he did wearing a Speedo, cap, and goggles. He served in Britain's Special Air Service elite forces and now, at 41, campaigns for climate-change awareness while making a living as a motivational speaker. He had invited me to come kloofing, or canyoning, in Suicide Gorge, a couple of hours from where he'd grown up in Cape Town.

"Hold on," I said. "Let me get my bearings."

From above, the water was black. At eye level, it had a faint red-orange color. "Why does the water look like rust?" I asked.

"The fynbos," he said.

To get into the gorge, we had walked through a panorama of fynbos, the indigenous flora of South Africa's Western Cape province. In December—summer in the Southern Hemisphere—it was in full bloom, the fields carpeted with yellows like buttercups, sprouts of fuchsia, and some plant with a blood-red stem and green leaves.

"The fynbos? Really?"

"I have no idea."

"Or maybe there's a nuclear plant upstream."

"Todd, if you don't go, you're going to psych me and Michael out."

Michael Walker, a photographer with the *Cape Times*, had gone to high

school with Lewis. Last year the two had traveled to Nepal for Lewis's death-defying swim in a glacial lake at Mount Everest. A few weeks before this trip, Michael had covered a riot that deteriorated into urban warfare. That I was psyching them out by sitting there was strangely emboldening.

"Come on, man, on the count of five! One! Two!—"

"Don't count," I said. "I'm going." I had to go, or face the cost, never mind the humiliation, of calling in a rescue.

South Africans have a high adventure quotient. The country is a risk playground, and the Cape is the monkey bars. People rappel off Table Mountain and paraglide off Lion's Head, high above the southern Atlantic. They dive to see shipwrecks and sharks, they surf, and they kayak among pods of whales migrating from Antarctica. And once a year, athletes swim nearly five miles to the mainland from Robben Island, the former prison, in the gelid and turbulent Table Bay.

Or they go kloofing. Suicide Gorge, in the Hottentots Holland Nature Reserve, is the gold standard. (A handful of people are let in each day, and getting a permit requires advance reservations—well in advance.)

"Lewis," I asked, "what happens if you jump and miss?"

"Todd," he said, "you can't plan for success and failure in the same moment."

Yet jumping did indeed require two apparent opposites: control your body but surrender to the circumstances.



In summer, the reserve is blanketed with fynbos—the indigenous flora.

Lewis started counting again. It felt like an ultimatum. "On five! Four! Three!—"

I looked below, drew two deep breaths, and leaped, as far out as I could to clear the rocks below. My viscera seemed to rise as the rest of me fell, as if the laws of gravity were, for an eternal moment, suspended just for my abdominal organs. I drew my heels together and my hands to my sides to enter the pool vertically.

As my body rose back to the surface, I realized that cliff-jumping was the least of my worries. The water was bracing until the cold settled in, and then it was like having my skin brushed with refrigerated paint. And then I

had to swim several hundred feet surrounded by sheer rock walls to get to dry land.

I lost count of how many jumps we did, but they became less fearsome as the jumping became more familiar, and the hypothermic water became less shocking, but no less wearying. Along the way, we took some wrong turns. Hours passed, but the only wristwatch among us had stopped working, so we didn't know how many.

At last we came on a field of big stones bleached white by streams of sunlight that were rare in the rest of the gorge. We emptied our soaked rucksacks, and lay like lizards on the warm boulders.

We had a snack of biltong, or jerky, which was slimy and unappetizing after a day in the water, and began walking again, glad to be peaceful and dry. Then we heard the sound of more waterfalls, and came upon a startling sight: the Big One, the five-story jump.

As we had gone lower, the gorge's walls—terraced by crusty Table Mountain sandstone and landscaped with thorny, gnarled trees—had grown higher. By now there was no more ceremony or pause, and there was still no choice; this was, as well as we could guess, only the halfway point.

We tossed down our rucksacks, heard them clap on the water, and found a flat, solid place from which to launch. And one after the other, we jumped. ▣



MICHAEL WALKER