Chapter 1 - Lesotho

In 1990, this Kalahari-born rock doctor from the Western Transvaal Goldfields left his birth country for the first time. Annabelle, (Kamermaatjie, as I lovingly refer to my wife) and I took our first tentative baby steps beyond our borders. At that stage, I still called it simply 'abroad'. It was only six years later that we truly went overseas, by completely leaving Africa.

A Cape-based geotechnical firm, aptly named MJ Mountain, offered me work in the mountains, deep inside the tunnels of the Lesotho Highlands Water Project. We packed most of our belongings, stored the rest with family and friends and off we went, straight into the unknown.

This was not entirely new territory. We had crossed borders before. Mostly for holidays on the other side of the globe. The first time was in 1986, when we spent six weeks in Canada attending a mining conference. It was unforgettable, yes, but by week four in Toronto, we were already homesick for our own food, our own people and our own bed. For how much longer were we going to cope this time?
It was easier than expected, as my new job was just across the South African border.

Within two hour's drive you were back in the Free State, back on home soil. We even rented an apartment for my mother-in-law in Ficksburg, which gave us a familiar anchor and a place to visit regularly.

On the water project, we were granted three or four days leave at the end of every month to stock up on supplies in South Africa. It really hits you the moment you have to put away your identity document and replace it with a passport. You are no longer only travelling, you have stepped away from your people, your routines and your certainties. To adapt takes a lot of effort. You are now an expat. And expats play by different rules and norms as we would learn very quickly.

For the first while, I stayed in a small hotel outside Butha-Buthe. That was where I learned to drink bottled water. These days, we do not think twice about it, but back then it had become our first true expat habit.

In the second month, Annabelle joined me, and we moved into a park home at a road construction camp in Leribe. The camp was situated right in the middle of a village, surrounded by mud-brick houses and corrugated-iron shacks, much like today's informal settlements in South Africa.

Despite more than twenty years of independence, Lesotho was still very much Third World. The construction camp belonged to an Irish contractor who was building the tar road over the Mafika Lisiu Mountain Pass, the same road that leads to the Katse

Dam today. Mafika is 3,500 meters above sea level and is regularly snowed in during winter. It is also where we often spotted the rare lammergeyer, circling high above us.

On one side of the security fence around our camp lay a large open stretch of land, the village soccer field. Children from the many nearby schools gathered there every afternoon, and there was always movement, always people, especially children close to the fence.

As suspicious white folk from the so-called civilized world, we were initially nervous. We slept lightly with one eye always open.

Leribe lies about sixty kilometres on the other side of the border, and it was there that we had our first real taste of what it meant to live and work alongside people from all over the world. Coming from the mines, where a Lesotho citizen had always been 'just a labourer', I suddenly found the roles reversed. Here, he was not merely my equal, he was also my employer. That required swift and serious adjustment.

Even though they understood mining Fanagalo perfectly, no one would ever admit that he knew the language, especially not among their own people. Fanagalo was the language of the oppressor, the slave driver on the mines.

Our first and most important lesson: In another man's country you are and will always remain the visitor. Behave accordingly and you will be accepted. Be obstinate, complain or assume that you know better, and you will not survive.

To make the mix even more interesting, the place was a miniature international community: Germans, French, Russians, Italians, Filipinos, Chinese, all squeezed together into one small construction camp.

Thankfully, there was also a handful of South Africans, all searching for greener pastures and better pay. In times of need, we could still circle the wagons. It was the perfect blend of cultures to gently detach ourselves from our old habits. Slowly, we climbed out of our comfort trenches.

While the permanent camp near Ha Lejone was still under construction, I had to commute daily in a Toyota four-wheel-drive bakkie, the officially recognized and universally trusted workhorse of the project. Ironically, it took longer to drive to and from work than it did to actually work once I got there.

Our site offices consisted of two shipping containers that were dropped next to the river. The Malibamatso River and its valley were still completely untouched and it was difficult to imagine that within a few years a massive dam wall would stand where there was now only a winding river, a scattering of small settlements and a few cornfields clinging to the treeless mountain slopes.

Speaking of trees, there are almost as few trees in Lesotho as there are crocodiles. Despite the crocodile emblazoned on the national flag, there is no record of a crocodile ever having been spotted in the country. The locals, however, insist that a monster of a creature lives in the Malibamatso River.

Stone-throwing and curfews

Our first real test came quickly. Xenophobic unrest broke out across Lesotho. Foreigners, especially Chinese and Indian shop owners, were targeted. Stones flew. Shops were torched. Gunshots echoed. You were afraid to walk upright inside your own home. Our walls were nothing more than thin caravan aluminium. We stayed hunched over, moving only when absolutely necessary. When shots sounded too close, we dropped down and crawled across the floor like crocodiles.

Roadblocks were set up by the army. A curfew was imposed and everyone had to be back in camp well before dark.

On the third evening of unrest, just before dusk, someone knocked urgently on the back door of our park home. Our unit stood right next to the camp fence. With a pounding heart, I decided to open the door. What else could one do? If people really wanted to get in, a strand of wire fencing was not going to stop them.

Grabbing the biggest kitchen knife I could find, I opened the door on a crack. A small Filipino family of three stood on the steps, father, mother, and a little girl. The father was a foreman working with us. Fear was visible in his eyes as he asked if they could please come inside.

We made coffee. Still shaking, they told us how they had to flee their home in Leribe. They had been mistaken for Chinese and it was the Chinese whose shops were being attacked and burned.

When their little girl heard the word Chinese, she suddenly straightened up, arched her back and declared with proud indignation, “Me no China! Me Pilipino!”

Filipinos cannot pronounce the letter f.

We invited them to stay. Clearly relieved, he told us how locals had hidden behind rocks and threatened them with knives. Thankfully, we had a small spare room and the family stayed with us for a full week until things began to calm down.

Ironically, the roadblocks brought their own small pleasures. Where I would normally have left for the mountains before sunrise, I was now forced to stay put, long enough to enjoy a proper breakfast which Kamermaatjie whipped up with enthusiasm.

A few of us still commuted daily over the Mafika Pass, which was still under construction. Early mornings, it was mostly school children whom you encountered along the road. Almost all wore some form of uniform, a legacy of the many missionary schools and British colonial influence.

Lesotho boasts one of the highest literacy rates in Africa. The tragedy is that for most, there simply is not work. Despite strict instructions not to pick up people along the road, I often could not bring myself to drive past, especially on those biting cold Lesotho mornings, when the wind felt like it came straight from the South Pole.

The problem was this: Once you stopped, everyone wanted to climb in. I learned to choose a small enough group not to overload the bakkie. Naturally, there was always some scuffling as the fastest and most alert four or five wedged themselves against the side doors while someone else tried to squeeze in one more body. I made sure that the door on their side was properly closed and checked so that everyone on the back found a perch. They sat packed together like puffed-up sparrows on a wire.

Down in the lowlands, one of my colleagues overturned his bakkie with a load of schoolchildren in the back. Thankfully, they escaped with minor injuries, but the aftermath dragged on endlessly between parents, the company and my poor colleague.

I preferred to give a lift to girls. With four or five of them in the cab, the first thing which you smelled was paraffin. Primus stoves and paraffin lamps were still the preferred sources of heat and light. Basotho boys were far less fond of soap and water than the girls. Trust me, on an empty stomach, that distinction matters.

A few kilometres further, one of them would signal to me to pull over, her school was nearby. Over time, my regular passengers and I got to know one another and they became my first-hand source of insight into the lives, struggles and joys of the Basotho in that area.

Machabeng, our permanent camp on the far side of the Mafika Pass along the Malibamatso River, was taking shape rapidly and I often stopped there on my way to work. Among ourselves, we argued endlessly about which house would have the best position. Everyone already had their eye on a favourite.

In Ha Lejone, I regularly stopped at what could generously be described as a shop-café. One of my colleagues had shown me the place, swearing that it was the best place for Maghoenjas in the region. Maghoenjas, pronounced as in golf, are Lesotho's version of vetkoek, only smaller, rounder, and slightly sweet. About the size of a golf ball, they are deep-fried and sold six at a time in a brown paper bag for a rand or two. If the oil is old, there is a distinct hint of paraffin. Still, they go down beautifully with

a cup of coffee at work. It was the first of many culinary discoveries awaiting us in other countries.

There is so much one could write about our six years in Lesotho that it could easily fill an entire book on its own. But this story is about our experiences across the many countries where we had lived and worked over a period of twenty-five years but here is only space for a few select episodes from the 'Kingdom in the Sky', as Lesotho is also known.

Where the Lammergeyer circles

During the construction of the main route to the Katse Dam, there were numerous accidents on the Mafika Pass, most of them fatal. Nearly all were caused by brake failure. You quickly learn that driving on the brakes simply does not work. Speed must be controlled with the gearbox. Only now and then you could pump the brakes lightly when the vehicle started to run away and the engine sounded as if it wanted to leap out from under the bonnet.

One day, on my way down to the lowlands after work, I came across one of our Polish inspectors, Bogdan, stranded at the top of the pass. His bakkie had run out of fuel. Would I please tow him to the nearest pumps? That meant all the way to Leribe.

You do not leave a colleague stranded on a mountain, so we improvised a long towrope by tying our ropes together. I carefully explained that he would need to help to brake on the descent to keep the rope taut. Easier said than done.

Barely a hundred metres in, his bakkie was practically kissing my tailgate. I gave more gas to tighten the rope. No luck. The more I accelerated, the faster Bogdan came at me. I added even more throttle. Soon I had exhausted every swear word I knew and even invented a few new ones.

Never before had I driven down that pass so fast. And certainly, never with another vehicle so alarmingly close behind me.

When we finally pulled off at the bottom, Bogdan climbed out with eyes like saucers, his face chalk-white. That was when we realised the brakes were assisted by the engine, but only if the engine were running. Without it, there was almost no braking power at all and barely a handbrake to speak of. In time, I forgave Bogdan for the scare.

We were a forced-together patchwork of nationalities, all learning, sometimes reluctantly, to live alongside one another and respect, or at least tolerate, one another's customs.

My contribution to camp life was a small newsletter where people could communicate. Initially, it was meant to announce social events and share bits of news in the absence of television. Remember, this was when the internet was still in nappies and we had only just been weaned off telex machines.

I called the newsletter Molomo, which means mouth in Sotho. From school days, I had always preferred poking people's ribs rather than tickling them. The hope was to demonstrate the fun of healthy confrontation. Perhaps I had always wanted to write. Writers, after all, have a licence to gossip. And what is more enjoyable than being the first to tell a juicy story?

You soon learn who the natural carriers of stories are. To protect identities, I started writing a kind of soap opera in which the characters were fictional, but not entirely. It nearly led to a divorce or two.

One can imagine the potential for drama in a remote place like Machabeng, where a group of single people lived among married couples. An indignant woman or two occasionally showed up at my door, demanding that I confess that her husband was one of my characters.

Once, I came so close to the truth that a woman known as 'Legs Eleven' thanks to her exceptionally long legs, confronted her husband, caught him red-handed while he was, quite literally, trying to pinch the cat in the dark and gave him such a thorough dressing-down that he ended up on sick leave for a week.

The contractor's bar in the lower part of the village, was mostly frequented by single men and their girlfriends and reliably provided good entertainment. As a countermeasure, and to keep husbands in line, some of the more prudent residents began using the clubhouse near the tennis and squash courts as an informal restaurant, hosting regular dinners and themed dance evenings.

Annabelle and I also decided to keep a few chickens of our own for fresh eggs and perhaps occasionally a plump chicken for the pot. Our first mistake was giving each chook a name. Now who can bring themselves to eat a chicken that has a name? Hendrik Bosman, the surveyor, sweetened the deal by bringing me a big rooster so we could grow the flock as well. This gentleman soon developed the habit of leaping onto the corner post of the yard long before sunrise and proceed to awaken the whole world with his crowing.

Behind us lived a young French geologist. Very early one morning, no doubt after enjoying herself a bit too much the night before, I heard her in the dark shouting my name in her language at the top of her voice, loud enough for half of the camp to hear, "Henri, Henri, your cock is disturbing me!" I was teased about that for weeks.

One of my more pleasant duties was hosting visitors to the project and taking them into the tunnels. One day, my boss stormed into my office in a foul mood and informed me that the new group of visitors was actually our opposition for the next project phase. I was instructed not to be too friendly or reveal too much about how we did things. As if anyone could reasonably expect that.

To make matters worse, they were flown in by military helicopter. As fate would have it, I knew most of the pilots. They had all trained in Russia, something that did not necessarily inspire confidence in their flying skills. Still, it was always a privilege to fly with the Lesotho Defence Force helicopters to the highest peaks, where our radio transmitters were kept inside modified shipping containers. No matter how remote the location, herdsmen always managed to find and attempt to plunder them.

While sitting with Lucky one day, some distance from his Bell helicopter, watching a lammergeyer soaring high above us, he explained how he got his nickname.

You know it's commonly known that a helicopter pilot only has one accident, if he has one at all, he said casually. Then, rubbing the left side of his flight suit, he added, "See? I have no left bum." He let that hang in the air for effect. "And that happened during my second accident!"

He grinned. "That's why my fellow pilots call me Lucky."

The opposition visitors eventually arrived around ten in the morning after several weather-related delays from Maseru. I did not need to be unfriendly; their pale faces suggested a rough flight. After the tunnel visit, I joined the bus to see them off at the helipad. Along the way, I shared Lucky's story about surviving two helicopter crashes. When we arrived, I walked straight up to the helicopter and greeted Lucky loudly and enthusiastically.

It was not pleasant to watch grown men freeze in naked terror. We nearly had to drag one visitor off the bus, never mind getting him to climb into the helicopter.

Incidentally, I later learned that Lucky did not survive his third accident. He drowned when a Lesotho Air Force helicopter crashed into the Katse Dam.

Dagga grows like Weeds

To add another layer of intrigue to camp life, dagga grew wild in our gardens. It popped up like khaki weed and everyone pretended not to know what a dagga plant supposedly looked like. Behind our offices, one or two carefully tended bushes flourished. The foremen of the tunnel-boring machine admitted outright that their workers did not function quite as well without the occasional puff on that little comfort herb.

Annabelle and one of our neighbours, Elsje, conspired to organise a birthday party for me, one with a difference. They had noticed that certain invited guests never really caught the party spirit and always left early. The two then quietly harvested the weed in question and on the evening of the party, two traps were set. If the quiet ones refused to eat the special green-tinted cookies, they could at least sample the fresh garden salad.

Needless to say, sunrise merely meant that everyone could see better who they had been dancing with all night. Former prudes and previous sourpusses underwent such convincing transformations that it became difficult to distinguish them from the usual rascals and jokers filling our living room.

The only real problem was getting the die-hards to leave. One tends to forget how much punch a little cannabis leaf can deliver to certain people. By lunchtime, the '*doef-doef*' sound of my high-fidelity system finally fell silent. Only the little man with the hammer inside my head refused to put down his tools. Respite only came at bedtime when he finally packed up his kit and left.

Birds galore in Lesotho

It was during this time that our interest in birdwatching took flight. The birdlife was rich and abundant. Apart from the LBJs, Little Brown Jobs, we were able to add many new names to our list. The Roberts and Sasol guides were consulted with enthusiasm as we tried to identify the Drakensberg Siskins that had made our gardens their own. One even nested right at the mouth of one of our tunnels.

When we spotted the stately lammergeyer high in the mountains, we devoured every fact we could find about it. Some birds I simply named myself like the suicide bird, a type of brown thrush that would suddenly dart across the tarred road on the Mafika Pass just ahead of your car, narrowly avoiding being flattened. Or the Kamikaze crows, gliding effortlessly alongside a vehicle as you descended the pass, wings motionless, as if daring you to race them.

At times, it was difficult to keep your attention on the curves of the steep mountain road. The wealth of birdlife even inspired my first and only piece of rock art. South

Africa was in the turbulent transition phase of the nineties, emotions running high as politics seesawed wildly. The possible release of Nelson Mandela dominated conversations. High up in the pass, I spray-painted *Nelson ain't no seagull* in white paint against the black basalt cliffs. Further down, just before the last bend towards the plains, I completed the slogan: *He is a jailbird.*

Then Professor Ordino Kok from the Department of Ornithology at the University of the Free State came to visit. Officially, he was researching the endangered bald ibis. Have you ever heard of it? That heron-like, rather extremely ugly looking species must surely be destined for extinction. If you ask me, they are forced to nest high up in freezing, snow-covered mountains, incredibly fussy about where it feeds and what it eats when it descends to the Free State maize lands.

The professor rekindled my dormant birdwatching habits. Once again, the Roberts guide lay permanently within reach as I read up on Lesotho's avian residents.

Nonnie

We had now moved our offices to the Pelaneng Tunnel, tucked into a pristine, untouched gorge. The Pelaneng River teemed with rainbow trout and where there are fish, there are birds. My new commute followed the Malibamatso upstream, right along the valley floor, close to the river.

One morning, I thought I saw a slight movement across the river, against a sheer black-and-grey rock face where the stream had carved an elbow bend over centuries. It looked like the perfect nesting site for a raptor. I slowed down, scanning for the telltale white streaks of droppings that sometimes betray a nest. Nothing. Convinced there had to be something there, I decided to stop after work.

Late that afternoon, I pulled over where I had spotted the movement. I sat staring at the speckled rock face across the water. Still nothing. As I leaned forward to turn the key, there she was.

Nearly half a metre tall, upright and regal. She stared straight back at me. That was the beginning of a long and intimate relationship. Nonnie, as I named her, was a Cape eagle-owl (Bubo capensis) nesting along my route to work beside the Malibamatso River.

Although her species sits on the lowest rung of the conservation concern ladder, I admired her and her nest as if they were the last surviving pair of the Strigidae family. Our meetings were conducted under strict secrecy.

I began rising earlier, waiting at the roadside for sunrise so that we could study each other. At first, I hoped to catch her returning from her nocturnal hunts, but I was always too late. Foolish, really. She had never left.

Later, I learned, and eventually saw for myself, that her mate delivered food to her constantly while she sat on the eggs for four or five weeks. Despite knowing exactly where she was, Nonnie was so perfectly camouflaged that her speckled plumage matched the rock behind her precisely. Every time, I had to stare long and intensely before she gave herself away with those magnificent, round yellow eyes.

The day the first owlet hatched, I happened to be there. It must have occurred during the night, because when I stopped, the mother was already feeding her new chicks. Only then did I realize the father had been nearby all along, likely watching me like a hawk from another lookout while I ogled his wife.

Slightly smaller than Nonnie and very much the dutiful provider, he hunted in broad daylight, especially early mornings and late afternoons, returning with generous offerings of mice, lizards, and even other birds for the ravenous twins.

I visited the family whenever I could until the young owls were able to fly on their own. Shortly thereafter, the entire family moved on to new hunting grounds.

On Foot again

It was during those years, before Lesotho and while Kamermaatjie and I could still walk long distances with enthusiasm, that we belonged to an informal hiking group of ten or twelve regulars. They made sure we crisscrossed the country with courage and sore feet. Well-known routes like the Blyde River Canyon and even the Otter Trail were proudly ticked off our list. Lesser-known routes such as Suikerbosrand were tackled too, along with completely new ones we mapped out ourselves.

One such route near Rustenburg we named Funa Manzi, Fanagalo for searching for water. On that occasion, we were badly lost and ran so low on water that we were close to dying of thirst. It was so hot that we nearly became food for the same white-backed vultures that we had set out to find.

Still keen on walking trails, Annabelle and I decided one weekend to hike along the Malibamatso River from Ha Lejone to the site offices. Fifteen kilometres as the crow flies, but much farther with all the climbing and descending.

We were seasoned hikers by then and properly equipped: backpacks, hiking boots, water bottles, sleeping bags, gas stoves and even the most essential little bottle of snakebite serum. Not that it actually protects you from snakes. Our version consisted

of equal parts whisky and Drambuie or Glayva, mixed and carried in a hip flask. It warmed the gills and guaranteed deep sleep.

At the time, we had two dogs: Sheba, a Dobermann lady and Province, our brave little Maltese poodle, who faithfully wore her blue-and-white striped jersey in winter. How wonderful it always was to call loudly in the evenings! *Proh-vince*! I may just as well have been standing at Newlands rugby stadium. That very same Province would go crazy if we dared to step out the garden gate without her.

There was this particularly massive rock, serving as centrepiece of our garden. The contractor delivered it with a front-end loader. He explained that mine was to be the biggest of the village as I was, after all, the project's rock doctor. Province would regularly climb onto this rock and take up position. The moment Annabelle disappeared from sight; she would sit there and howl her own tragic rendition of an aria from La Traviata. A mournful, continuous lament. To avoid complaints about animal cruelty, we decided that she had to tag along.

At first, she trotted happily with us, sniffing, snorting and leaving calling cards everywhere, as befitted a lady of her standing. Gradually, however, the climbing became steeper. Eventually we had to carry her up the slopes. Her legs were simply too short.

We then came across a herd of cattle. It was the first time in her life that Province had been so close to such large animals. Bravely, she charged at them. To her surprise, they did not scatter as expected. Instead, they stepped closer, clearly never having encountered such a noisy, ridiculous little creature before.

At the first deep *moooo* from the nearest cow, Province froze and looked back at us: What do I do now? With no better option, the brave dog resorted to feminine resistance and barked furiously. The cattle responded by closing the ranks even more. When one cow stomped its hoof, Province let out a terrified yelp and retreated to safety behind my legs. The cattle soon lost interest and we moved on.

They were ordinary cattle, the kind you find anywhere on even ground. Not the special left- or right-turning variety unique to Lesotho.

Let me explain: Cattle do not enjoy grazing up and down steep slopes; they prefer moving sideways. Basotho cattle are adapted to the steep Maluti slopes, call it evolution if you like. Some have slightly shorter right legs than left, the so-called right-turners. Others are left-turners, with shorter left legs. Both types walk perfectly upright as long as they graze in the correct direction. Should a left-turner attempt to turn right, it will topple over. Do you not believe me? Go and see for yourself.

By late afternoon, we still had to descend before pitching our tent as high as possible. As remote as Lesotho may seem, you can kick a herd boy out from behind nearly every bush. To be relatively alone, you need to gain height and camp far from the nearest mud huts, otherwise a steady stream of little outstretched hands appears, begging for bon-bons. Apparently French missionaries once roamed these parts and till this day children still use the word for sweets.

Province lagged further and further behind. When Kamermaatjie picked her up, we saw her paws were raw and bleeding. The only solution was to make space for her in a backpack. From her little tower, Madam surveyed the world with satisfaction as we hauled ourselves higher.

It was already dark at the time the three of us pitched our two-man tent and put the gas stove under the kettle.

I do not know how many of you have camped that high under the stars. Only a Kalahari night is more beautiful. You feel closer to heaven. Each star fights for its own place in the black satin of the sky. We searched for the Magellanic clouds. One sees them more clearly when you look past them towards Andromeda. Incredible to think it is an entire galaxy on its own. In our imagination, we traced the Oort cloud where meteorites begin their journey; the pitch-black depths of Deep Sky, an endless darkness with no known edge.

In the Kalahari, you would hear jackals calling. Up there in Lesotho, you hear only the wind roaring and now and then the yelping bark of a mongrel at a distant homestead far below.

Across the Senqu

When we returned home, Alain Truyts was waiting for us. He, his wife Esther, a friend and another young civil engineer from Cape Town were planning a hike from Lesotho across the mountains into Natal, as like the Voortrekkers of old, only on a shorter and far steeper route. Would we join them?

We were immediately eager. Planning began at once. Michael Fatla, the company driver, and his mate would drop us in two double-cab Hilux 4x4s at the Senqu River, the source of the Orange River.

The six of us gathered at Alain’s place. He went through the list of absolutely essential gear for our epic trek to the Cathedral Peak Hotel on the Natal side of the Drakensberg. Milla McLachlan and Michael Chemaly, the two single people in the group, confirmed they had everything, and more, especially the more.

We eyed Michael's enormous backpack with suspicion. It looked brutally heavy. He was young and fit, so we said nothing.

The weather was discussed. It did not look promising. Ha Lejone lay under a cloud, but it was impossible to know what conditions would be like in the Senqu Valley. There was talk of the weather clearing later in the weekend. We agreed to make the final call at the drop-off point.

At four o clock on Friday morning, we set off. The weather was gloomy and misty, the ride rough and increasingly uncomfortable as the road narrowed and deteriorated.

Then suddenly the Senqu was in front of us, bank to bank with recent rain. Turn back or go on?

We asked our driver, Michael Fatla, if he thought he could get us across. He said he would put the Hilux into extra-low gear. And off we went. Michael was no coward.

Annabelle, Milla and I were in the first vehicle. The river was deeper than expected. Water sprayed through the rubber casing around the gear lever. The bakkie vaulted and bounced over the stones like a washing machine about to shake itself apart. Its rear end began to slide sideways as the current pushed forward. Michael's eyes widened into circles as he glanced at me. Just when we thought we were about to be swept away and drown, the ever-willing Hilux lifted its steaming nose out of the churning water and hauled us up the far bank. I let out an audible sigh of relief and could physically feel my bum relax.

Then it was the second vehicle's turn. It looked like a bucking bronco, jumping and jerking first this way and then that way. The engine roared as the four-wheel drive fought for a grip. Inside, the passengers bounced like rag dolls, clinging desperately to anything they could grab.

This time, the bakkie gave a sideways lurch as the current caught it and began moving like a crab. At the last possible moment, the front wheels found the river bank and stormed past us in search of distance from the water. And they still had to cross back again. With a mixture of unease and exhilaration, we watched as the Hilux bounced over the rocks back to solid ground. Thank goodness. We waved goodbye. Maybe they could still see us in their rearview mirrors.

Six abandoned Souls

Now it was too late to turn back. It was only us and nature: the massive Malutis ahead and the roaring Senqu behind.

At first, things went reasonably well and we stayed together. It was misty. The mountain peaks were hidden, perhaps a blessing. When the sun finally broke through around eleven and we looked down, we realised we were barely halfway up the first slope. Our backsides were already magnetically attracted to every flat rock.

Alain knew how many vertical metres still lay ahead and drove us mercilessly onward, determined that we reach altitude before nightfall.

Michael Chemaly began to fall behind and turned visibly pale. Concerned for his wellbeing, Alain and Esther took turns carrying his backpack.

The first day was almost entirely uphill. About ten kilometres in the direction of the Mweni Cutback area on the escarpment side, widely regarded as one of the wildest and most untouched regions in Lesotho. Under normal circumstances, ten kilometres are not far for hikers, but here the air is thin and the slopes relentless.

By early afternoon, we left the Maluti Mountains and the ground levelled slightly to the Drakensberg side. Our pace picked up. Our target was Ledgers Cave.

Alain frequently studied his aerial photograph of the area, scratching his crown beneath his floppy hat. Each time he did, he subtly altered our direction. With no real footpaths, you have to wrestle your own way through long mountain grass. There are a few places left on earth where humans have not left footprints. This is one of them.

Above us, a lonely lammergeyer circled. Was it hoping that one of us would collapse? Whose sun-bleached bones would remain behind?

Eventually, after several fruitless detours, Alain announced that we might be ‘slightly’ lost. Somewhere between nowhere and nothing, on top of the Drakensberg. To this day, I still wonder how many unnecessary kilometres we walked that day.

“Wait here. I’ll scout ahead,” Alain said, dropping his backpack. Everyone welcomed the break as the expedition leader headed towards the eastern horizon. Esther watched him go with concern. If he was to get lost, we would all be vulture food. We stayed calm and made tea. Perhaps we would have to sleep right there. The sun began to set and an icy wind picked up. Esther was the first to spot the waving figure appearing on the escarpment edge in the fast-fading light. Alain had found Ledgers Cave! He waited for us on the brink of the abyss. We were not in the clouds, but above them.

Below us, packed like giant cotton balls as far as the eye could see, stretched a thick white blanket of clouds. Alain pointed out Ledgers, a gaping hole in an almost vertical cliff, some twenty metres below us. From up there, the ledge leading to the cave looked terrifyingly narrow. I scraped my courage together. Thankfully, I had spent

many school days hiking up Table Mountain. I helped Kamermaatjie with her backpack, and we began the descent. Behind me, I heard Alain and Esther arguing. “This is not the time to tell me you’re afraid of heights!” “I am too!” Mike added helplessly. Without looking back, the three of us continued down to the ledge. The cave had clearly served many predecessors as a safe haven. We even found some dry wood and soon a cosy fire crackled at the mouth of the cave. Then the silence of the cliffs was broken, “Oh no, for heaven’s sake!” There was anger and frustration in Alain’s voice

It had been so long since we had last crossed the Drakensberg on foot that, while writing this, I felt the need to check a few details with Alain to stay as close to the truth as possible and to get his perspective on that epic hike. He reminded me that when we had reached the cave, Mike and later Esther refused to descend the steep cliff into Ledgers Cave. That left him stuck camping on the edge with two people suffering from severe vertigo, while the rest of us lay snug and warm inside the cave below. That alone would have been manageable.

What finally pushed him over the edge was when Mike produced an enormous rubber mallet from his backpack to hammer in tent pegs. An absurd amount of extra weight, weight Alain himself had helped carry, only to drive in pegs! That on a mountain overflowing with rocks. Was this the young man’s idea of engineering logic? To this day, Alain maintains that the hammer came perilously close to being hurled into the abyss. If it ever happens again, he swears, it would not survive.

From Ledgers Cave to the top of the Mlabonje Pass it was a glorious day. We pitched camp near the river by early afternoon and lounged together in one tent, chatting. Mike shared cheese and a hefty slab of salami. We washed it down with snakebite serum. Despite the sunshine, it was bitterly cold.

From time to time, mist bubbled up over the escarpment from the South African side. Alain still had to locate the path downwards from the top of the Mlabonje Pass. Thankfully, despite the fog, he nailed it. As the sun set, the mist closed in thick and dark around us.

At first light, Mike woke us. In each hand, he held a steaming mug of strong coffee with condensed milk. Alongside it were long, stark-white aniseed rusks which Esther s mother had baked especially for the expedition. Revived, we struck camp in a record time. The descent took almost the entire day. By late afternoon, we spotted smoke curling from the fireplaces of the Cathedral Peak Hotel rooms. That evening, we soaked blissfully in hot baths with foam, with a beer in our hands. Well earned.

Later, we secured a table large enough for all of us in the restaurant and celebrated our successful crossing of the Drakensberg.

Highly accurate Gatkruiping

At this stage the transfer tunnel on which I had been working was nearly completed. Two enormous tunnel-boring machines, each roughly 150 metres long, had been drilling towards each other from opposite sides of the mountain.

One machine started from Muela in the lowlands, where a hydro-electric power station had been constructed deep inside the mountain. The other began from the intake tower on our side of the range.

When completed, this tunnel, 45 kilometers long and 5 metres in diameter, would carry roughly the equivalent of thirty swimming pools of water every second from Katse Dam to South Africa.

As the two machines crept closer to each other, the tension among the surveyors responsible for the alignment steadily increased. At that time GPS was still in its infancy. Their measurements had to be taken from survey beacons outside the tunnel and transferred underground to the machines over distances of more than 20 kilometres from each side. And on top of all that, they had to allow for the curvature of the earth.

Hendrik Bosman, our surveyor, went on leave two weeks before the planned breakthrough. The strain had simply become too much for him.

I was fortunate enough to be in the tunnel shortly after midnight when the historic moment finally arrived. Breakthroughs of this kind are always celebrated on the spot, right there in the tunnel itself. The men from the two TBM crews had made sure that enough French champagne appeared, somewhat unofficially of course.

When the final measurements were taken, the result brought a collective sigh of relief. The vertical and horizontal difference between the two tunnel drives were less than two inches. For a tunnel nearly fifty kilometres long, that was nothing short of extraordinary accuracy.

A few weeks later, an email arrived from Hong Kong. Would I be interested in working on a project in the Far East?