

No mean feat: 130km Birthday Adventure Walk

The Idea

I'm travelling with my more than best friend in the world and intrepid adventure partner, Bev, who thought of this challenge just 6 weeks earlier.

At the time, I thought she was joking.

We run and walk together a lot, and she had a long-standing dream of walking from Harare to Juliasdale, in Zimbabwe's eastern highlands. But the main road we would take is heavily trafficked, and wouldn't make for restful walking. So she was thrilled when she thought of a new plan. She initially broached the idea to me via SMS, in an exchange that went something like this:

Bev: Instead of Harare Juliasdale, we should walk from Vumba to Juliasdale.

Amanda: Um. Okay. That makes sense. It will be prettier and quieter. But how far is it?

Bev: It's intrepid. And exotic.

Amanda: The route is going to be quite isolated. Won't we have to carry a lot of water?

Bev: We'll be traversing our country at such a different pace.

Amanda: We'd also be quite vulnerable. Do you think it's safe?

Bev: We'll do it for your birthday.

Amanda: It's really hot in October. Shouldn't we do it sooner? Like closer to your birthday?

Bev: Imagine everything we'll see.

Amanda: Um. You're not answering any of my questions.

Bev: Right. That's settled then. I am so excited!



Walking behind Bev's love button keeps me moving forward

Saturday 15 October

Step 1: The Vumba Mountain Run – a half marathon (21.1ks)

We fell asleep to the rain on Friday night and woke up to the cold, low mist Vumba is named for.

The race started half an hour late, but was brightened by the arrival of the Mutare Save the Rhino team: Three women and one man, each in a bright pink tutu and the words Save the Rhinos painted on their arms. Their back up driver had a wooden rhino taped to the bonnet of their car, and drove with them much of the way, plying her teammates with fruit and sweets as she drove by, filming everything.

The group had heard about the run just three weeks ago, and raised \$1,000 to support WEPU anti-poaching efforts. They had barely trained and aren't normally runners. But their energy was beautiful to watch and their enthusiasm infectious. They brought home that saying about distance running – when you're $\frac{3}{4}$ of the way into a distance race, it's not your legs carrying you; it's your head. For them it was definitely head, and heart. They



Sunset from The Castle, Vumba

had these enormous smiles, whether they were staggering up the hills or flying down them. I spotted one of them the evening after the race – completely drunk, both with beer and the sheer pride, delight and excitement of their accomplishment.

At the finish, a number of runners told Bev she'd had the best smile of the race, and two complete strangers asked for a photograph with her. "Me?" she asked, as in, why me? But yes, they insisted, they wanted the photo with her.

Sunday 16 October

Step 2: Leopard Rock to Inn on the Vumba – 25ks



On Sunday morning, we eat our breakfast, pack our bags and get ready to set off. In addition to the three or four plasters Bev already puts on each foot to prevent blisters, she's putting another one onto the heel of her left foot, where a blister developed during the run.

"Oh my God!" our hotel owner exclaimed when we told him what we were doing, with a mixture of admiration and concern.

Walking down the road away from our hotel, Bev comments on how odd it feels to be walking away from her car – for the next week. We start off slowly. The morning has none of the misty coolness that Saturday started with, and we labour up and down the same hills we ran down and up the day before.

I'm relieved when we make it to our first landmark – the iconic Tony's Coffee Shop, famous for the best cake in Zimbabwe. We sit in the cool thatch, refill our water bottles, and share a slice of white chocolate cheesecake and coffee with cream, despite warnings from Bev's homoeopathist that doing **this** kind of exercise on **that** kind of cream and sugar intake was surely a bad idea.

As we leave Tony's a woman slows to offer us a lift. Not to worry, we say, we're walking, and we wave her off. In places, the forest creates a cool, moist shade. But as we climb out of the forest, the trees thin and the predominant experience is one of trudging up steep hills in hot sun. Around lunchtime, we hear a sudden clap of thunder behind us, and turn to see angry grey storm clouds amassing over the mountain. We look at each other and pick up the pace – but with another 5ks to our destination, there's no way we'll outrun it. After half an hour, we feel the first drops of rain on our arms. We quickly shove our things into drier pouches and wave down a bakkie that lets us climb in the back. The other passengers open the top of the canopy, but don't bring the tailgate down, and they have to haul Bev up and over it to fall into the back. The other passengers welcome us – a woman dozing on a cushion with her head on the wheel well, and her legs wrapped around a man who offers us a beer. Two other men perch on spare tyres. The final 3ks of the day feel like a blur compared to our walking pace as the bakkie whips around the mountain curves.



The driver stops to let us out, and refuses any payment. We clamber out the bakkie and dash up the driveway to Inn on the Vumba. A tall thin man with an air of John Cleese about him smiles and welcomes us, and we settle in for a beer in the Vumba View Lounge just as the rain begins to pound.

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We head back to our rooms for a small sleep, and later Bev suggests we go back to the lounge for tea and snacks. I pick up our flask, untouched for the day, and bring it with us. We sit down and Bev looks around for a waiter, then back at the table where I've prominently placed the flask.

"What are you doing?" she looks at me shocked.

"You said we were having tea," I tell her proudly.

"What are you thinking? It's not BYO Tea!" she says with astonishment.

"Oh." I reach out and move the flask to the floor beside my chair.

We order fresh, hot tea and toasted cheese sandwiches.

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Bev is a demanding conversationalist, and one of my greatest concerns before we left was that I would run out of things with which to entertain her. Long, hot days of walking make my brain switch off and focus on what's outside of me – I don't find they typically prompt inspired debates or scintillating repartee.

But knowing we have just one another for entertainment for the next week, without the benefit of news headlines, magazines, books or other stimulation, puts pressure on both of us. On our packing list we each had "intellectual entertainment."

So over dinner, I take out one of two slips of paper on which I've written my topics for discussion, and select a few. They're mainly snippets of news I've heard on the radio or read in the papers – the Man Booker Prize, a new documentary about Joyce Carol Vincent, a proposal in the UK to pay funeral costs for organ donors, and so forth. I'm shy about them, and grateful when newshound Bev doesn't already know what I'm telling her.

In typical creative fashion, she's brought a stack of tiny printouts – inspirational quotations and graphics to reflect on. The absence of any other entertainment makes the offerings we share with one another all the more precious. So when Bev reads this quotation, it particularly resonates:

But a sentence, a solid sentence, restores the earth beneath my feet.
~ *Julia Hartwig*

* * *

We've walked the whole day and we're not even in Mutare. The Inn on the Vumba hasn't had power since 6am. I feel a bit like we're doing a black out to black out national tour.

By 9pm Bev is lights out. Not that I can blame her. These days are long and hot and tiring.

This journey is hugely challenging. Taxing on the mind as well as the body. You have to think about something other than what you're doing as you go. If you actually felt what your body was really

feeling? You'd just stop dead. But at the same time, I'm loving it. I find myself saying "I couldn't be happier," several times a day. And each time, I mean it.

Monday 17 October

Step 3: Inn on the Vumba to La Rochelle – 22ks

We're on the outskirts of the Mutare industrial area, and we hear them before we see them; a group of runners singing as they come up the road towards us. At first we think they're police recruits – but no one is in uniform. The leaders wear black berets with silver emblems and yellow reflective vests. They carry black canes with carved silver tops. Before we get to them, the group stops outside a factory gate and begins to run in place, in formation, four abreast taking up a full lane. They chant to the beat of the instructors and latecomers straggle up from the back and take their places. Periodically, one or two leave the formation to dance and *toyi toyi* at the edges of the group.

As we draw closer, we can see the group includes men and women, all with shaved heads. They're in a motley variety of clothes, some more ragged than others, but uniformly dirty, as if they've all crawled through the same dusty field. A lucky few wear Bata takkies, but the rest are in slops, lace up church shoes, stokies, even a pair of socks.

When we walk past, a few smile and wave. The leaders greet us and invite us to join them. A few in front lead a high-kneed *toyi toyi* in place for what must feel like an age as they wait for the last of their company. A heavy set woman, head bald, her red top covered in dirt and drenched with sweat, staggers up the road, her braless breasts bouncing uncomfortably. Legs akimbo in her black and white slops, shuffling feet pointed outwards, she heaves for breath as she tries to catch up.

We empathised with her as we tried to work out who this group could be. They didn't appear threatening, and the guards at the factory they faced didn't seem fazed by their presence. Were they security company recruits?

As we get a bit closer into town we both need the toilet – but Where? We're in the heart of the industrial sites now, and both sides of the road are filled with pedestrians going in and out of town. After a few false starts – no not that tree, someone's coming. No not that side road, someone's coming! – we find a security-guard and gate-free reception and wander in. We explain to the orderly that we've walked in from Vumba, and please may we use their toilet. "Of Course!" his face lights up, and he starts to look for toilet roll for us. Not to worry, we tell him; we have some of our own. As we leave, we thank him and say goodbye. "More time," he waves us off with a smile. "More time."

You know you make a sight when you're walking through Mutare and the usual hey baby, or hello sister, is replaced with "Helloooooo? People!"

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When we drove through Mutare on Friday, Bev pointed out Christmas Pass, the steep mountain crawl we'd have to climb back up on Monday. I watched the switchbacks flick by in the car with dread, imagining the journey in reverse.

The whole of Monday is focussed on making it up Christmas Pass – our tea and breakfast stops, our water and snack preparations, all are aimed at what feels like my greatest nemesis of the journey: Christmas Pass.

But like so much in life, after all the hype, we walk steadily up the road, finding enough space to not get run over by haulage trucks. We stop on occasion to take in lengthening views, and after an hour

we've seen the worst of it. Elated at our accomplishment, I look behind us and exclaim at how far we've come. Mutare is a village in miniature below us. And beyond it, across the valley, is the distant Vumba Road we started on in the morning.

"Look at this!" I call to Bev, who walks on ahead of me. "Can you believe it? We made it up Christmas Pass!"

"You're excited," she says with minimal emotion, and continues to walk.

"Of course I'm excited! How could I not be excited? What I don't get is why you're **not** excited," I tell her. I'm an eager puppy next to her steady gait, and I'm in awe of the day so far.

"I'm excited," Bev says, still with no backward glance.

"You don't look excited," I tell her. "You look like you do this every Monday."

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As we walk down the tail of Christmas Pass, straining backwards to counter the downward pull of road, Bev suggests we stop for lunch and a swim at the Christmas Pass Hotel. At first I laugh. Does it even exist? But she promises it does – or it used to. And within minutes I'm longing for a swim I didn't even know I'd have – and know I'll be heartbroken if it turns out closed.

But yes, the hotel is still open. The pool is full of water (!) and covered in leaves but looks clean enough. We're told it's \$2 each to swim, and we're happy to pay. We settle in for lunch – more toasted cheese sandwiches – whilst the waitresses size us up with a mixture of amusement and suspicion.

On my way to the changing room, one stops me.

"You are going to swim," she says.

"Yes," I reply.

"The pool is not clean," she warns me.

"I can see that."

"There are a lot of leaves in it," she warns.

"I've noticed," I smile.

"You've noticed."

"I've noticed."

"You're going to swim?"

"I'm going to swim."

Tuesday 18 October
Step 4: Rest day at La Rochelle

It's hard to put your finger on it, what exactly makes this place so odd, because it's the composite, really. It **is** odd. So it's not just one thing. Maybe a few details help – the garden gnome nestled against the trunk of the tea rose climbing the airbricks enclosing the veranda. The Shona sculptures in the disused braai area: a rhino on its side, mother with child on her back. On the veranda of our cottage, the lawn chairs have been chained together and padlocked. There's a pool table in a room leading to what would be the entrance to the lodge's tower room and 360 views, but that is also padlocked. They don't sell snacks like peanuts, crisps or biltong. But at the reception there is a trophy case, where mouse pads and cat food are for sale.

In the cottage there's a small refrigerator that throbs like a jumbo jet.

It's 10:53 in the morning when I get the following text from Bev, who is in bed:

Words to describe our adventure so far: Altering. Challenging. Fun. Tiring. So new. 'Is it too early for a beer?'

Of course it's not. She joins me on the veranda where I've put myself, my legs too restless to sit still, and shares some of the solidarity SMS she's had from others:

- It's never too early for a beer! And if you keep your eyes and ears busier than your feet, you will succeed.
- AWESOME!!! No ways. It's 5pm somewhere. Take care
- Wow. Sounds truly mind blowing. 2011 is the year to alter our mind frames to catch the changing tides, so you are in the right space. As Bruce Chatwin once said: If you walk hard enough, you probably won't need any other God.



As we sit on the veranda reading the Newsweek magazines we found at reception, 30 primary school children suddenly invade the tranquillity. They're in the pale blue uniforms of Correspondence School La Rochelle, and they've come to rehearse their musical: Roald Dahl's *Cinderella*. It's a dark, quirky version of the fairy tale, where the prince kills off the ugly stepsisters, and Cinderella goes for the jam man instead. The children bring it to life with song and dance.

"Say your words out loud, in front of a mirror," the director instructs the children with speaking parts. "You won't have such stage fright if you get used to looking at someone when you say your lines."

The finale, a techno number with catchy rhyming lyrics, stayed in my head and kept me walking strong for the next three days.

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Planning ahead, we decide to get some sandwiches at La Rochelle to take away for breakfast and lunch the next day. So around 4pm, I go to the kitchen and ask for two-toasted cheese and two toasted egg sandwiches. The waiter brings them to our cottage, and sets the tray on our table.

"Will you be joining us for dinner?" he asks.

“Oh yes,” we tell him with a smile.

His eyes widen and he walks away.

We wait for the sandwiches to cool and pack them into our plastic bags.

Wednesday 19 October (The Birthday!)

Step 5: Watsomba to Mutarazi Falls – 29ks

Are you sure you're going to make it to where you're going? The woman calls to us in Shona. She's selling apples on the side of the road and waves to us with a huge smile. She might well ask. It's 8:30am and we're a good 50ks from pretty much anywhere. It's a Wednesday morning, we're half way through an adventure we thought we'd only dream about, and we're hoping our legs, and our spirits, don't fail us.

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Hours later, we're deep into the Pungwe Scenic Road, a remote dirt road that will lead us to the night's accommodation. It is scenic – but it's also beginning to feel interminable. We've been fortunate to find a place to fill up our water bottles at a settlement. But the day has been hot and long, and Bev's heat rash, which started to develop on our Harare training walks, is worse than I've ever seen it. Her legs are covered in enormous, swollen red welts and it's making her skin feel tight and uncomfortable. We're tired. It's nearing 3pm, we left La Rochelle at 6:30 in the morning, and we're both beginning to wish we'd just get to where we're going.



We come on to a wide stream at a picturesque curve in the road, and Bev asks me how far we've come. Unthinking, I look at my watch and tell her 22ks. “Oh good,” she brightens. I realise the implication: Oh good. We're walking 25ks today, so if we're at 22, there are only three to go. Again, without really thinking, I say “It's 3 more ks to the turn off. Then it's another 4 or 5 after that.”



Her mood blackens. “But today is 25,” she says. “I know,” I tell her, “but it's more than that. I must have miscounted.”

“That's no good,” she tells me.

We get to the stream and she walks up to it, takes her shorts off and gets in to cool her legs in the water.

“I'm sorry I got the mileage so wrong and that we still have such a ways to go,” I tell her when she comes back to the road.

She looks through me and sets off up the trail, and I fall in behind her. We walk the next hour in silence.

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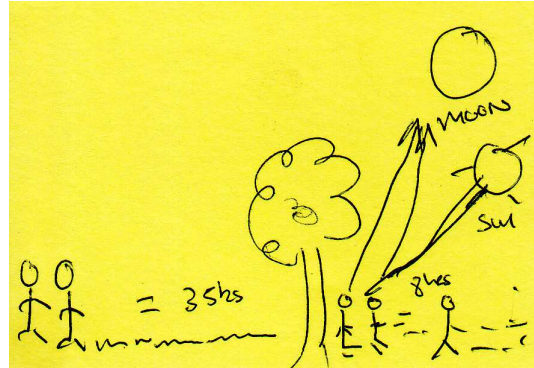
The turnoff to Mutarazi takes us a good 4ks down a steep, potholed, rocky dirt road, which must feel nearly impassable when it rains. For better or worse, it's not raining now, and this last stretch drags

on through the heat. After the palaver of earlier in the afternoon, I find myself holding my breath a few times, wondering if we've missed our cottage.

At last, the screams of children give it away. Our cottage is on the same property as a school adventure / team building camp, and from high in the trees school children are egging one another on through the challenge course.

Our cottage is beautiful. Pine walls and floors with a high roof, comfortable beds, spacious bath, and a balcony that opens up onto the valley forest before us. There is no power, again, but it is a far sight better than what Bev had originally planned for the night.

Some weeks before we left, we were still stuck on where to overnight on this leg. She drew me a picture – the two of us sleeping under a tree. Doable, but looking around our cottage I know we've lucked out – and I feel a bit of the sins of my miscounting absolved.



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Having walked down the Mutarazi Road, we're not that excited to walk back up it again to start the next day, so we decide to ask Bernie, the manger, for a lift. I find his house closely guarded by a sharp-eared boarder collie. When I find other staff, they tell me he's gone for a run.

I decide to leave him a note, well several notes, because his house had several doors and I wanted to Make Sure he saw one.

Back from his run, Bernie comes to see us. "I found all your notes," he starts off, leaving me shy. He agrees to the lift but is strangely aloof, despite shared friends and common interests.

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We sit on our balcony watching the sky until the evening cold catches up with us. I go downstairs to warm up and shower off the worst of the day's grime. When I come out of the shower, Bev has decked out the dining room table for my birthday. Knowing she'd had to carry all of my gifts with her for the past 80ks, she's been discerning – but none the less thoughtful and personalised.

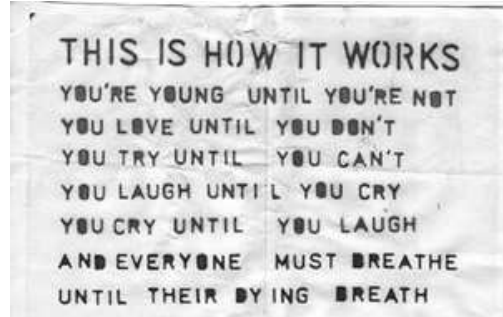


She's put a birthday candle on the table, and two balloons in a serving bowl. Snug against them are two bottles of Amarula (my favourite), one of which has been decanted down the kitchen sink and replaced with foam bath. To one side is the dog pill container into which Bev put a Jameson (her favourite) to have with me. It's a wonder that she's managed to keep it upright for the past six days, and not a drop has spilt.

She's also brought incense, a special coffee, and cards. I feel spoilt, and I tell Bev: "I think it would be physically impossible to be any happier than I am right now." She makes the pasta I've been carrying for days –

complete with a jar of special sauce for the occasion. It's made all the more delicious by the knowledge that it's one more thing I don't have to carry away from here tomorrow.

The only thing our cottage lacks is an ice cube tray. So I put a shallow bit of water in a few plates and stick them in the freezer. Even without any power, it's cold enough to freeze. So we light the fire and sip our drinks over makeshift ice. Bev shares her birthday readings and I share my cards with her. Later, she draws me a bath and I slip in, feeling like a movie star. The tub is an enormous, free standing, claw footed porcelain bowl. The foam bath is perfect – masses of white fluff that envelope me completely. When I eventually drag myself out of the tub, suds cling to my back and shoulders, spongy and scented.



Thursday 20 October

Step 6: Mutarazi Falls to Juliasdale – 33km

The Pungwe Scenic dirt Road is empty as we set out at 7am. In the first four hours of our walk, we see one car, one person walking, one bushbuck and three sheep, coats ragged with burs, which look like they've lost their way. It's peaceful walking the wide empty dirt road, and meditative. But as the sun climbs in the sky the heat rises, and the road is a steady grind upwards.

They're about my least favourite food, but by 9am, I find myself looking forward to our boiled egg breakfast.

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The day wears on, steep switchbacks up winding mountain roads that make Christmas Pass feel like a walk in the (flat, gentle) park. The word getting louder and louder in my head is unrelenting. The heat is unrelenting. The climb is unrelenting. The endless, endless dirt road is unrelenting. The place feels battered, abandoned. Signs are worn and faded, trails overgrown.

"What are you on?" A worker at Mutarazi asked Bev as we were leaving. When she told me that, I smiled. But now I'm beginning to wonder.

We break the monotony where we can. A few sips of water here, another stop for tea and chocolate there. My mind feels like it's in an altered state – a suspended reality where normal worries and considerations feel foreign. I don't know what I'm thinking, but I'm not bored. I watch the landscape around us and marvel at how, even at this slow pace, it changes over time. I religiously crosscheck the satellite map and the tourist map against our progress. I take deep breaths and turn my attention away from my stiff back and aching shoulders. I listen to the birds, the breeze, the leaves. On the road, there is no shade to speak of. But on either side of us the landscape is thick with trees. Much of the forest we walk through is fire damaged, and I battle off a slump of depression in the face of so much devastation. We see signs of lizards, ants, mice, and other creatures everywhere.

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A good four hours into our day, we hit the Juliasdale Nyanga road. I'm thrilled to have taken us safely out of the forest, and relieved that we've reached this landmark on the journey. But the tar feels unfamiliar under my feet and I shudder at the return of cars whizzing past us. We can see a storm building around us, and quicken our pace. At the first drops of rain Bev repacks her bag in parts, to protect her phone - and the taser we haven't yet needed. We're 500 metres from Montclair Casino when the rain is joined by hail – tiny balls of ice bounce off my cap, on the grass in front of us. I feel a small sting as one lands on my neck. Laughing, we hobble more than run up to the car park and into shelter.



At the hotel, we find a conference lunch in progress. Diners stare at us in silence as we wander through, dishevelled and smelling of sweat. We eat lunch and wait out the rain, which disappears as quickly as it came. It's hard not to feel celebratory – but we still have a good hour and a half left to walk.

* * *

It's hard going this last leg – we're chased by a sense of so near yet so far, and the terrain doesn't help. A white CRV slows beside us and asks where we're going. Tempting as it is to get a lift this small last stretch, we turn him down. We look for landmarks where we can find them: Mutare Road turn off, Chamakowa Road. Finally, we see the sign for our turn off, and I start to relax.



We take the dirt road to Pine Tree Inn, and as we walk in, Bev sees a white CRV – possibly the same one who offered us a lift. In the garden, we see our John Cleese from Inn on the Vumba, chatting with a man who is indeed the driver of the CRV. John Cleese gives us a big smile. "You've walked all the way here?" We last saw him on Monday morning, and it's now Thursday afternoon. He is suitably impressed. "I know these ladies," he tells his companion. "As soon as they arrive, they want beer."

And sure enough, that's exactly why we're here. It's not quite the end of the road for us, but it's the best place to have a cold one and celebrate the journey. We try and relax, but the rain starts to gather again, and we're still another kilometre or so from our final destination. So a few sips later we pull our rain covers back on and walk up the last bit of rocky dirt road. We arrive and make tea and take off our shoes. By this point, our two-tone tans have firmly settled in. So when we peel off our socks the line between brown ankles and white feet is strong and straight.

Feet up, we sit and take in the view at our destination, and play back our long journey in our minds.

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Get there: Correspondence School La Rochelle performs Roald Dahl's Cinderella: 30 November at the Dutch Reformed Church, Mutare. To find out more, contact: Simon on larochellezim@gmail.com

The Skinny

Route

Day 1 – Vumba Half Marathon (21ks), finish at Leopard Rock

Day 2 – Leopard Rock to Inn at the Vumba (25ks)

Day 3 – Inn at the Vumba to La Rochelle (25ks)

Day 4 – Get a lift to 13ks past Watsomba. Walk to Mutarazi Falls Far and Wide Cottages (29ks)

Day 5 – Get a lift back to the corner of Mutarazi Falls turnoff and Pungwe Scenic Road. Walk to Susurumba past Pine Tree Inn (33ks)

Food & Drinks

Bev tried to allay my concerns about the journey with promises of taverns with nuts, kiosks selling fruit, and streams throbbing with cold, potable water. Lucky for both of us I didn't believe her about any of it. We carried our own water – 5 litres at a time – and filled up as and when we could. We brought a flask of tea each day. We carried dinner for Wednesday night (Mutarazi), and breakfast for Thursday morning, as well as power bars, nuts and dried fruit for snacks. Our favourite? Haribo gummy bears and Lindt Passion orange dark chocolate. Who says an adventure can't have its bits of luxury?

Transport

We organised in advance to leave Bev's truck at The Castle in the Vumba, and had some friends from Chimanmani drive it up to Juliasdale for us the day after we finished. A huge thank you to Dee & Jane who made the end to this adventure possible!

From La Rochelle, the distance to the next place to stop was too great to walk in one day. So the options were to either carry camping gear for one night, or get a lift to a place from which we could walk. A huge thank you to Della from La Rochelle for enabling us to opt for the latter.

Accommodation

Best food: Greg, Leopard Rock Hotel chef

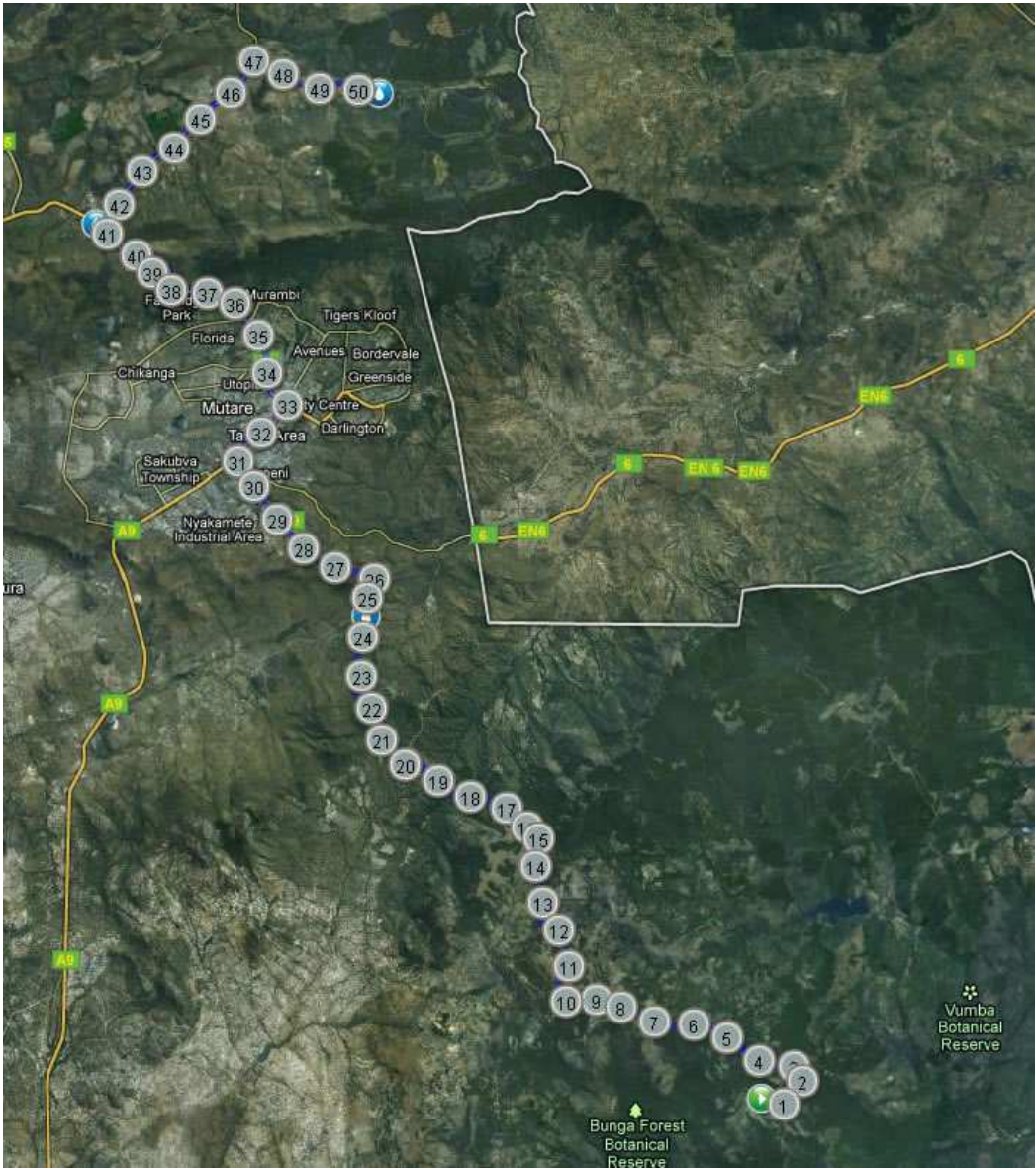
Friendliest staff: The Castle, Vumba

Worst power: Inn on the Vumba (24+ hours without)

Coldest beer: La Rochelle

Best accommodation: Mutarazi Cottages

Map: Days 2 & 3



Map: Days 5 & 6

