

## Reflections on a Life in Adventure

### Graeme Addison

May your trails be crooked, winding and dangerous, leading to the most amazing view.

- *Edward Abbey*

Nobody ever asked me what I've learnt from a life in adventure, but I'm going to answer the question anyway.

It is said that the Bourbon royal family – several of whom lost their heads to the guillotine during the French Revolution – learnt nothing, but they forgot nothing. I would say that in my life of adventure, mainly as a riverman, I have learnt a lot and I have forgotten nothing, but as for understanding what it has all been about, I have to wonder.

This is the critical problem with adventure, learning and life skills. We don't really know what it is all about. It is, as Simon Priest so elegantly explained, a black box.

This presentation falls into four parts. I have been a Riverman, journalist, academic and trainer/assessor of adventure tour guides. I'll deal, very subjectively, with each, and try to draw out some lessons that help to explain what it is that is in the black box.

#### RIVERMAN

One day last season, rowing my raft Big Bertha on a high Vaal River, I fell off and had a very bracing experience fighting the flow. This was in a rapid called Theatre - where there's always lots of drama - just above another notorious washing-machine aptly named Gatsien (See-Your-Arse). The names we river

runners give to rapids are always dramatic and usually reflect the embarrassment of someone who did see their rear end.

If you fall off a cliff, nobody laughs. But if you come short in a rapid, it's funny - at least for others - although you don't think so at the time. I wonder about the lesson in that? Rivers tend to be quite forgiving, not like rocks at the bottom of a cliff<sup>i</sup>, but there's always a chance of injury or drowning.

This time, above Gatsien, I was alone because I'd gone ahead to take photos of the group – hoping especially for those funny pictures of rafts capsizing and everyone being hurled into the maelstrom. Everyone wants those pix to show to Granny. My other function was to act as a rescue craft for drowned rats.

Well, it turned out I'd have to rescue myself. I was offline and hit a big pile of turbulence called The Thing – which you know to avoid – and instead of cruising past it as I'd done dozens of times before, my raft got sucked back. It teetered atop the wall of whitewater then slid sideways and started bucking like a crazy horse. I was thrown off.

I knew all about so-called holes in the river. The Americans call them hydraulics, meaning the water churns back on itself and won't let you go.

Big Bertha is a Zambezi style oared inflatable that only requires one person to row it, though it can carry up to six passengers. Now, with me in the water, Bertha was a ghost ship with no-one aboard. For a moment I imagined the rest of the rafting party finding it abandoned with no crew - a kind of Marie Celeste adrift in the roaring rapids. There'd be stories about the mystery of the Lost Skipper. But I didn't have time to think the story through. Situation critical!

Firstly, in a hole, you are flung about like a waterlogged rag doll, down into the foam, up, round and round, down under water, with arms and legs flailing, gasping for air and generally feeling rather unwell. You could drown, and people do. Secondly the boat itself is doing the same thing, and as it's much bigger than you are, and not to be reasoned with, you had better try to keep out of its way. Which is easier said than done in a tumble drier.

To make matters worse, our oarboats are designed not to lose their oars in a capsize so the oars were thrashing about like the arms of some frenzied river monster trying to beat me to a pulp.

I once read a manual on self-rescue in a river that advised "When in a hole, compose yourself". Hmmm, OK. No need to panic. I composed myself as well as a rag doll could. In this calm state of mind I realised I could grab one of the oars the next time it came whapping around in my direction. So I did, and hung on for dear life. Both of us were now whirling round and round in the hole together. This was fun. Not.

Suddenly my feet touched a rock under water, forming part of the ledge the current flowed over to cause the hole. Here was my big chance. I waited till the boat spun round once more then kicked hard off the ledge and in the same moment hauled myself up the oar and back into the well of the boat. Whew! I was back in the game. I grabbed both oars and with one mighty heave, pulled out of a corner into open water.

I'd survived to row another day. Don't ever think a septuagenarian is a spent force, too weak and panicky to get out of trouble. The old are seasoned and wise!

Now for the lesson of this adventure.

**If you find yourself in a hole with nobody to save you, hope  
like hell there's a rock to kick off.**

Yup. That's it. I'm not sure how that generalises to a life hack. If I were going bankrupt I wouldn't know what it means to find a friendly rock to kick off. Adventure teaches nothing - but then again, it's everything, self-reliance above all.

In the end we DO learn from adventure, but how we learn and what we learn are open to question.

## JOURNALIST

Here's another example, drawn from a field closely related to adventure: journalism. Both are steps into the unknown, risky and exciting. It's no accident that many journalists have entered adventure careers. It so happened that I was the environmental reporter for The Star and on 16 June 1976 I went to Soweto early in the morning to find out why rubbish was accumulating in the streets. Little did we know that a revolt was brewing, and that rubbish trucks – as symbols of authority – were being attacked. So I walked into a totally unexpected situation as an estimated 10,000 schoolkids were marching against Afrikaans and for their freedom.

The police rioted and started shooting. Youngsters fell dead. It was shocking, and for me a life-changing moment as I finally realised what kind of country we were living in. The mood of the students turned from cheerfully defiant to downright enraged, and chaos broke loose. I tracked down the top cop on the scene, who turned out to be none other than Rooi Rus Swanepoel – later to be tagged by the United Nations as a wanted human rights criminal. He would become notorious for torturing and murdering detainees. To put it politely, at this early stage he was still working on his CV.

As I went up to him he looked angry, confused, and not keen to answer questions from a journo. One of the principles of adventure is that you do a quick risk assessment before you tackle something. I was a young journalist then, and neglected this elementary step. "Why are you shooting people?" I demanded. He looked at me with a face reddened by fury and eyes that burned like hot coals.

The question was so direct, all he could do was splutter. That's the thing about audacity, especially when you're young – you can get away with it. Finally he muttered something about crowd control and waved me off.

**The lesson here was simple: Just Do It.**

A few days later I jumped into the boot of a car while the photographer I was with – who was black and could pass muster as a resident of Tembisa township – drove us through the opposing lines of police and students. I could hear, but not see the mayhem and smell the smoke of teargas and burning official buildings. I tried scribbling notes by the dim red brake light next to my nose. My companion meantime thought better of driving any further. Youths were banging on his window and screaming they would overturn and set fire to the car. The press not welcome as we were seen as *impimpis* – informers for the state. We turned tail, and after crossing police lines my colleague freed me from what could have become my coffin.

**Another simple lesson: Don't do it.**

I saw death as a journalist and I've seen it on the river. Nothing instils caution more than a brush with eternity, especially when you have a body that was alive only minutes before, all efforts of CPR notwithstanding.

**ACADEMIC**

They call me the River Professor. I genuinely rose up through academic ranks; my field was communication. Research, writing, lecturing and river-running all formed part of the mix. At Rhodes University in the 1970s I launched the Kayak Club and took full advantage of the fact that the university supplied a Land Rover and other resources for properly registered clubs.

Along with stray students who couldn't find a place in rugby, football or ping-pong, as well as some staff members who thought maybe African exploration could be fun, we set about pioneering river routes on the Great Fish River (Eastern Cape), Senqunyane or Little Orange (Lesotho) and Orange River Gorge (Northern Cape). These were adventures in the true sense. We knew nothing about what we were getting into, the equipment was primitive, our skills rudimentary and the attitude was entirely relaxed. Anything could happen, and it did.

In Lesotho I was left, finally with only one other paddler, a fellow staff member, and we completed our first descent of the river in fine form. Meanwhile those who had walked out, dragging their fully loaded kayaks up and over the Maluti Mountains, emerged more dead than alive. In the course of their harrowing travels, they were observed by one tribesman man-hauling their kayaks over the stony paths. He was used to seeing Basotho ponies dragging crude sleds the same way. With an eye for innovation he asked where he could get a suitcase like theirs.

**Lesson: Things aren't what you think. Somebody else has a better idea.**

## **TRAINER & ASSESSOR**

Which brings me to adventure tour guiding. I've trained several generations of paddlers, and more recently got into assessing rafters, hikers and mountain bikers for their legal tickets to guide. I have tried to educate them in the perils of the life they were choosing. This wasn't to put them off but to encourage them. Strange to say, risk is attractive, addictive and very satisfying if you get it right.

The big difference between Adventure Based Learning (ABL) and adventure tourism is that tourism is a leisure activity not usually dedicated to education. The "experience economy" seeks to enrich tourist activities by offering activities that go above and beyond merely having fun. Skills may be learnt; cultural, historical and scientific information provided; and the tourist becomes a true participant, especially in the adventure sector where risk has its own rewards. To that extent, adventure tourism contains some educational elements. This is certainly what we aim for in our hiking, rafting, canoeing and mountain biking where we are in the Vredefort Dome just south of Johannesburg. This mountainous wilderness area, which is a UNESCO World Heritage Site, lies at the centre of the biggest and best preserved asteroid impact crater that can be seen on Earth. We introduce all our tour groups to the astronomy, geology, gold mining history and battlefields of the area. We also coach willing participants in outdoor safety and basic skills and equipment.

So education does have a place in adventure tourism but I venture to say it is not a leading place. Tourism is still leisurely, no matter how fascinating and exciting the experience may be. But where education and skills development do have pride of place is in the training of adventure tour guides. For the past 30 years I've been actively involved in guide training, starting with river rafting and branching out into cycling and hiking. During the past decade I've been an Assessor for the official, legal Generic Adventure Site Guide (GASG) skills programme. This has required curriculum development, field programmes, the coaching of candidates in communication, leadership, planning, Level 3 Wilderness First Aid, and a considerable commitment to computer skills in order to produce the bulk of documentation needed for assessment.

The personal qualities needed by adventure tour guides include physical fitness, curiosity, courage, an open ended attitude to lifelong learning, problem solving, budgeting, nature awareness, nutrition and catering skills, and attention to detail. The candidate needs to be - or become - an all rounder. As he or she is often thrown together with a group of strangers in the outdoors for several days and nights in sometimes stressful situations, the guide needs interpersonal and group management abilities. This is a tall order.

If you get it wrong as an adventure guide you are placing yourself and others in harm's way. There's plenty of that in the world of guiding. In South Africa today the authorities are failing to police the system to check on qualified guides. Still, it's not the qualifications so much as the professionalism of guides that counts most. We have an elite corps of truly professional guides and large body of lower level, untrained and uneducated, poor ambassadors for adventure.

There will be mistakes and surprises. I had a real shock when a youngster from a poor family suddenly collapsed at the campsite one morning, groaning and almost comatose. The day before had been truly hectic and exhausting. We were hours from any road and would have had to evacuate him downriver to the nearest bridge. I'd promised his mother that we'd look after him and give

him a great time. Now this: A burst appendix? Diabetes? Heart attack? Brain tumour?

The odd thing was his vital signs were fairly normal. This was more worrying than anything. Finally one of the other kids took me aside and said the boy had drunk an entire tin of condensed milk before breakfast. That's what can happen: adventure is all too new, too much, and the victim goes haywire.

**Lesson: Don't leave cans of condensed milk unguarded.**

## **SOCIETY AND CULTURE**

South Africans are lucky to live in one of the most fascinating regions on earth. The story of our planet's birth is told in the rocks that surround us. Also, the story of life's evolution can be traced in fossils and human remains.

This region has contained:

- the earliest human creatures
- most famous game reserves
- the oldest continent
- the richest deposits of gold
- the largest deposits of platinum
- the biggest meteorite crater

The Vredefort Crater is on a par with Kilimanjaro, the Victoria Falls, or the Grand Canyon. It's right here in the heart of South Africa, stretching from Johannesburg to Welkom, and it tells us a lot about how the landscape of the Highveld and central interior has been formed over billions of years.

We talk about the glories of the outdoors but are often insensitive to what the terrain symbolises. It's not just "scenery". It is the identity of people embodied in spirit of place. South Africa's land symbolises whole worldviews and value systems that diverge from each other: the European view of land as an



economic asset in a competitive productive system and the African as a communal possession that expresses their identity. Adventure takes place in this contested environment.

This happens against the background of our massive unemployment problem in South Africa as well as low appreciation for leadership, communication, competence, mastery of skills and simple diplomacy. The bulk of our outdoor guides have too little exposure to mentors with all these qualities. Personally I was most influenced by the top American guides I met and I worked with, rafting in the States. They were experts on the water, great story tellers, knowledgeable about history, geology and the environment, tireless in serving their clients, and great cooks! We do have guides like this, we need many more.

**Lesson: We can't rely on the tourism authorities to ensure it.**

**The industry is responsible for professional standards.**

I'm so grateful to have had the opportunity to guide many others on foot, by river, on bikes and in 4x4, here, there and everywhere over decades of discovery. It is an understatement to say a career like this has been one of self-discovery. It's been an epic of highs and lows, exhilaration and terror, mild treks and fatal misadventures. Nothing I ever did as a journalist covering South Africa's agonising escape from apartheid comes close to the raw personal emotions I have experienced in adventure. A journalist observes and empathise with the victims of violence. An adventure guide takes responsibility for others as they tackle thrilling hazards.

On the more extreme expeditions , adventure clients voluntarily put themselves in harm's way... And like the guides who conduct climbers up Everest, at risk to life and limb in a heartless wilderness of ice and wind, the buck stops with the professional leader.

**Lesson: One must learn to be safety conscious at all times.**

## **CAREER PATHS**

In South Africa, to be frank, young matriculants or university graduates entering careers don't generally see adventure tourism as an option. It is, at best, a rite of passage, a sort of extended gap year while you make up your mind what to do with your life. An entirely different cohort of trainee guides comes from townships where unemployment threatens one's very survival. No job, no money, no prospects of long term growth, promotion and position. These young adults simply need work, any work, so the notion that adventure adds to quality of life is fairly irrelevant to the survival motive. There is a third kind of candidate, in my experience, is the older adult who is looking for a career change and decides to try adventure. Sometimes these candidates succeed very well because they have experience and people skills that ensure they can handle groups in challenging situations. They may be slow to learn skills but they can be an asset in the business of recreation..

What I'm saying is that career paths in adventure are obscure to those who wish for a rewarding way of living. The problems in a semi-developed country like ours can be summed up as lack of understanding of what adventure tourism requires from the individual, from the operator, from the education system, and from the tourists themselves. Adventure is for kicks; it's a money-making racket; it only requires monkeys to swing from tree to tree.

In reality, what the truly committed, seasoned, adventure guide offers to participants is insight into the nature of the world and the nature of themselves. The guide is a facilitator in all situations, encouraging, setting boundaries, demonstrating mastery and telling stories while trying to draw stories out of the others.

## **THE QUESTION**

So, to answer the question about how adventure changes us. Scholarly literature acknowledges that *something* happens but opinions are divided about exactly what and how, and the empirical evidence is inconclusive<sup>ii</sup>. I've

spent my life in adventure and certainly know it transforms people. But why and how? The mechanisms remain very hard to pin down because the questions are very complex. Is it the leader or facilitator that makes the experience transformative? Or sharing with others? Or is it our evolutionary nature that harkens back to millennia of living with nature? Is it the adrenaline challenge that awakens us, or the problems we must solve in adventure situations? There are lots of theories but no Theory of Everything.

All the examples I've used were in unstructured situations. There was no deliberate plan to teach or learn anything. Adventure based education (ABL) has definite goals and applies methodologies designed to challenge participants and make them reflect on their experiences<sup>iii</sup>. Examples of ABL include camping, canoe trips, wall-climbing, initiative and teamwork tasks, low ropes challenge courses, trust activities, swimming and preparing meals.

The transformative theory of adventure<sup>iv</sup> holds that it's not the specific activity but the social, environmental, cognitive and emotional elements of any challenging activity that shape its outcomes. You can have a kind of adventure being an entrepreneur, or innovating a new technology. But the distinctive thing about our types of adventure is that it takes place in nature (an evolutionary setting) and we take money to offer dangerous experiences at the client's own personal risk. Duty of Care should be uppermost in our minds. If the client then tackles problem solving, along with skills development, that's all to the good, making the adventure meaningful and more than just an adrenaline rush.

It is false, of course, to claim – as the operators of the experimental submersible, Titan, did on their disastrous deep sea dive – that clients are somehow “mission specialists” or have the techniques or judgement to make risky decisions. That's our job. One of the key lessons I've learnt the hard way when leading, is to watch carefully what you and other guides demonstrate with you behaviour. Unconscious incompetence<sup>v</sup>, ego-tripping and being too casual are all accidents waiting to happen.

Clients who don't listen can't be blamed. I had a very recent case of someone who nearly paddled over a deadly weir in spite of having been told to follow the group to a safe landing on the riverbank. Frantically, I waved and shouted for him to turn back – he did eventually, close to the brink of certain death – and afterwards I lost my cool with him. He replied that I should have required everyone to repeat my instructions, that being the only way to ensure they understood. Well, maybe.

**The real lesson: Make sure you keep a beady eye on everyone  
– they do crazy things.**

In unstructured adventure, learning can be random. I can't exactly put my finger on what I've learnt in adventure, but I am certainly a different person because of it.. I won't forget my joyride in Theatre but as for what I learnt... Who knows? Adventure is integrative. To put a spin on it, it's an existential moment of self-fulfillment. Or to quote Voltaire, It concentrates the mind wonderfully: he was reflecting on the death sentence. Yet how many times have we heard people say about their adventure: I thought I was going to die!

**Most of all, what adventure does for you – if it doesn't kill you  
– is make you bomb proof. Resilience is everything.**

Thank you.

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[i https://paddlingmag.com/stories/kayaking-vs-climbing-extreme-sport/](https://paddlingmag.com/stories/kayaking-vs-climbing-extreme-sport/)

[ii https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Marcia-Mckenzie/publication/252227632\\_How\\_are\\_Adventure\\_Education\\_Program\\_Outcomes\\_Achieved\\_A\\_Review\\_of\\_the\\_Literature/links/55fa1bc708aeafc8ac312146/How-are-Adventure-Education-Program-Outcomes-Achieved-A-Review-of-the-Literature.pdf](https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Marcia-Mckenzie/publication/252227632_How_are_Adventure_Education_Program_Outcomes_Achieved_A_Review_of_the_Literature/links/55fa1bc708aeafc8ac312146/How-are-Adventure-Education-Program-Outcomes-Achieved-A-Review-of-the-Literature.pdf)

[iii https://sites.google.com/site/authenticstudentengagement/adventure-based-learning](https://sites.google.com/site/authenticstudentengagement/adventure-based-learning)

[iv https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/14729679.2019.1686040](https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/14729679.2019.1686040)

[v https://www.mentaltoughness.partners/stages-of-competence/](https://www.mentaltoughness.partners/stages-of-competence/)