

Breede River

Source-to-sea without support.

8 – 17th May, 2011

Tues 3rd May

Last minute decision to cancel leisurely 4 day trip down an Orange River in flood. That thing is pumping and been advised it would be foolish to run a new section blind in those conditions. Besides, we'd only be paddling an hour a day or we'd finish the trip on the 2nd day. We have three days to conjure up a new adventure. Maps, beer, and a week off work equals a dangerous combination to start planning. Discover that we've both had dreams of doing the full length of the Breede so its decided. Source-to-Sea.

The rest of the week we use wisely to find a boat (essential), ration down our luxury stashes purchased for the Orange, invest in duct-tape, and we're set. Our only way of measuring progress is four A4 laminated 1:250000 maps from the mapping dept.

Sunday 8th, day 1:

Where to put-in? Popular opinion has it the Breede starts at the bottom of Michells pass before Ceres. But we study maps and more maps and eventually decide (foolishly) on starting higher upstream behind the Ceres golf course, close to the confluence of the Modder & Titus rivers.

We have no support crew and have to take everything with us in the boat, 1 drybag each for personal use including sleeping bag and clothes for night-times. 1 drybag for food and 1 small bag for snacks. And 1 drybag for hardware including gas stove, repair kit, medical kit, and toilet paper. All stashed behind the seats and up front behind the pedals. The weight of the boat is insane but we bravely wave goodbye to our faithful driver, Leigh, who has come to see us off.

Happily discover the boat floats and paddle confidently out of sight around the first corner, into a thicket of bushes. Out of boat for first portage, sliding and dragging through the bushes to get back to the water. We joke about having to portage over the golf course and paddling over the waterways. An hour later and the joke is on us as we portage the outskirts of the course to find the railway line to get down the gorge. Headlamps on as we carry the beast through the train tunnel hoping the tracks are out of use, and eventually we're at the Tolhuis enjoying a quick cup of coffee for our efforts. Desperate for water so we take a straight line down from the road through the bushes to the river. Rocks and more rocks with a trickle of water gurgling in-between. Not quite what we came for but we know it will get better. 6hrs later and its not better. Still dragging the boat over rocks and through trees and thick bush looking for the 'wide river'. Wet rocks underfoot and every footstep is slip-slide ankle-smashing torture. The long grind continues into late afternoon, the desperation to paddle and in we're in even if its only 100m. A pedal pops the rivets on the hinge and we have no steering. Back out the boat and dragging and we eventually call it a night under the trees on the bank. We are barely past the point of where the Witels comes in, and way before the bridge that we hoped to be past by midday. Cold night under the stars but spirits still good and convinced we'll be paddling

tomorrow. Repairs to the pedals to grind out the rivets with a knife. Thankful I remembered to pack some bolts into the hardware kit. We estimate today at 9kms. 306 to go. Thrilled.

Day 2: More hauling

An early start after an uncomfortable night, brew some coffee, pack the boat and back on the river. The slip-slide ankle smashing continues painfully where we left off yesterday. We drag on and on, eventually coming to the White bridge marking the bottom of Michells pass. Insane. Day 2 and we're already a day behind? In a desperate attempt to revive sense of humour we decide to name the boat. Wessel. We drag Wessel on and on, over endless fields of boulders, thirsting for intermittent patches of water that we can sit and rest our weary legs and actually paddle. We cross under the bridge to Wolsely and Tulbagh, another small mental victory, undone by another boulder field and more trudging and dragging. Hear our first fish eagle and we decide to stop and celebrate with coffee. In honour of Trev's & Uge's trip and their faithful support-crew Pete who made them coffee, we name our gas cooker Pete. And Pete made us coffee. Finding it helpful to name our gear considering we spend more and more time talking to them. Drag on for another few hours and finally come to stop, somewhere, not sure where, but we stop where there is water so we can start tomorrow on a good note. More repairs to Wessel who has developed a split personality and starting to show signs of cracking. Small crack and not too much concern but we glue it up anyway. Lush grass bank to spend another freezing night under the stars. Starting to realise my sleeping bag is about as effective as a thin cotton sheet and suitable only for camping on a balmy summers night on a Durban beach. Our knees are trashed, back's throb, and ankles bruised and swollen. 12kms today and taking the positives that it was more than yesterday. Eyeing Worcester on the map but it seems very far away, our big goal is at least within 20kms of Swellendam by Friday night. Fall asleep trying not to think about the unfairness of effort vs. reward here.

Day 3: Clawing back

Everything wet after the night dew. Fire up the coffee, breakfast, pack boats and start the day with a 100m paddle then more dragging. After 2 days of portaging that's considered a good start. Beginning to wonder about this and if 3 days research was enough. My lifelong fear of weirs comes to an end on this trip as we now officially love them as they are usually preceded by water that we can paddle on. We eventually pass under the Bainskloof bridge, a major moment. 20 minutes by car from here to where we started. Insane. Today we paddle more, with occasional stops to drag over low-level bridges and weirs, through bushes, and eventually paddling downstream at what we thought was fantastic progress only to get entangled in a barbed wire fence courtesy of some caring farmer who thoughtfully strung the thing right across the river. Only notice after the nose of the boat has swept under it. I shove the paddle upright in front of my face and half a second later ram into the fence. Swearing and cursing but we wangle under, trying not to get entangled in the sharp ends. Back on the river, in and out of Wessel, paddling and dragging. The routine continues. Through ridiculously overgrown bogs and marshlands, trying to guide a fully laden 5m long boat that was clearly designed for being aimed straight downstream like a missile and not foraging through the jungle. Nightfall approaching and we find a sand bank on a bend in the river near the N1 to make camp.

Spectacular evening skies make it a memorable one and we soon forget the pain of 3 days of hard hard work to get here. The sky glows more intense as the sun sinks lower and lights up the underbelly of the dark clouds. Truly spectacular and our spirits soar. Supper of spaghetti and soya mince washed down with a carefully rationed piece of Top Deck. All good intentions fail shortly thereafter and we scoff the rest of the slab, guilt free. We avoid the temptation of a huge bonfire to not draw any unnecessary attention, so another freezing night on wet sand in my cotton-sheet sleeping-bag. 25kms in the bag today and we rest happier, despite still being on map 1 of 4. Frightening thought.

Day 4: Fighting back

Memorable moment passing under the N1 and we pause for a photo shoot and slaps on the back and handshakes at a job well done so far. We know others would be writing us off right now for the slow progress but the milestone makes us more positive and determined and motivated. More boglands and marsh near Worcester, too thick to paddle so we swim and wade through the murky water alongside Wessel, stumbling over roots and branches and disappearing into deep water trying to maneuver the missile through impenetrable Palmiet reed bushes and over and through trees. Discovering ways to get into a canoe that I never thought possible. Find a sandbank before Worcester to rest and Pete makes us coffee. Back on the river refreshed, shoot the weir at Nekkies and officially declare that those 5 seconds must be the fastest we've traveled in 4 days. Back to the grind and get caught in a horrid tree block near Alfies low level bridge. I'm under and pop up somewhere in the chaos of trunks and branches and sticks. Boat filled with rushing water and threatening to rip away and disappear but we managed to get it back up. My paddle disappears through the branches and I fear the worst. It washes through but thankfully gets caught on rocks further downstream. On with the paddle and the haul and the dragging and bushwhacking. Past the occasional decaying ruins of dwellings and caravans and keeping an ear out for banjo's. Daylight eventually disappearing on us fast and we paddle with uncertainty past a near perfect campsite – should we shouldn't we? Too late, and we paddle on into the dusk, eventually finding a grubby spot to take out and make camp. We cant be fussy and settle down here for the night. Evening conversations of pizza and hamburger while we cook our tuna-rice-chicken-cup-a-soup combination. A bitterly cold night out under the stars on the fringes of the klein Karoo and swearing at my foolishness for not packing a better sleeping bag.

Day 5: Bitter sweet

Very little sleep, and desperately waiting for the horizon to grow light so I know morning has arrived. Eventually it does, cold mist hovering over the water and everything is wet again. And everything aches, knees, hands, back, shoulders, hands, but we're confident we'll finish on day 8 and I'm sure the body can hang in there. Pete makes us coffee, pack the boat and we're off. The sun gradually warming us, weirs and low-level bridges go by. The river widens and we drift past a lazy campsite, asking the campers where we are. They hear we're going to Witsand and utter the exact same comment as the guy in Ceres that saw us putting in. "F*k dis ver". Nice paddling and we arrive at a scenic weir nestled in the back of a winefarm. Pete makes us coffee. Off again and within minutes the river has disappeared completely on us and we're left wondering why this is called the wide river when there is no damn water at all. Not a drop. We push and drag Wessel

through insanely thick bush but eventually realize our efforts are futile. Waste precious time to scramble through the jungle to find a channel through this madness and we eventually retreat and agree to go back upstream and portage until we find the river. Boat back on the shoulders and we make slow grinding progress down the back of the vineyards cursing the farmer for interrupting the river. An eternity later and we find water, only to have it disappear on us again. Sense of humour officially wearing thin. We bash over rocks and stumble and smash our ankles again dragging Wessel to try find water. Beginning to wonder about our decision having given up drifting down a river in flood for the exact opposite. A horseshoe bend in the river and we're faced with the temptation of a 2km portage straight across to beat the 5km curve in the river, but in the nature of trying to do this thing by means as pure as possible we agree to stick to the riverbed. Our efforts seemed unjustly defeated for another few painstaking hours, then the river that had disappeared on us magically reappears and we can paddle beautiful flat water. We pass an official campsite and after some exploring downstream decide to paddle back up and take out. Interesting looks on the owners face when they ask about transport. Yes – a canoe is transport. We're 2 and a half kms short of Robertson but decide to leave the boat there overnight and walk into town. Our food is running out so this is an ideal time to restock. Hoping tomorrow will be better, fueled by double burgers thanks to Robertson's Spur and a good night's sleep in the relative luxury of a prehistoric defunct SAR carriage doubling up as Robertson's dodgiest B&B, though considering our condition I would say it's the mattresses that should be worried. Trucks roaring down the Route62 outside and I'm starting to miss the campfire and starlit sky. Not missing my cotton sheet.

Day 6: We bailed... and bailed and bailed

A brisk morning walk back to the boat, repack with our fresh supplies and we're off paddling again. Flat water and shouting 'this is what we came for'. Short lived by more rocks and portages over weirs but it flattens out into beautiful flat paddling and scenic countryside. More fish eagles overhead. Knee aches giving way to shoulder pain and blistered hands. Ankles still throbbing at every slip and slide. Have to stop more frequently to bail water out of Wessel who is leaking worse with each passing day. Late afternoon and we're looking for Otters Bend guesthouse that we have no clue when to take out other than it's a few kms past Bonnievale. Take out on one bend to scout the landscape of farmhouses dotted far and wide, then another, then realize the sun has set and we'd better get off and make camp. Manage to make contact with the owners and after a brisk walk in the dark through strange vineyards we are on the main road to meet John the owner. Recovery night under the warmth of a hot shower and bed and I drift off into a coma like sleep happy to have clocked over 50kms today but knowing this short-lived luxury is just playing with our minds. Worried about Wessel and fear we may be paddling in to Witsand like two periscopes on a submarine.

Day 7: Up the creek

An early start and we paddle on into the dawn chill. No sun to warm us, and get thrown out early in a small rapid, Wessel lodged firmly sideways in the river between two rocks. Waiting to hear that splintering sound but he holds out and we're thankful he doesn't wrap. Pete makes us coffee to try recover and regain sense of humour. Warming up

slowly, we pass another campsite and stop to bail water and tactfully ask the campers where we are while standing shivering over their nice fire. Further downstream another farmer reacts with the identical 'f*k dis ver' piece of advice. Thought we had made progress (?) though judging by his further advice that 'just a few kms down we must carry the boat over the Swellendam weir and then go to Malgas' we realized his sense of distance and time has been severely distorted. Perhaps too much time spent alone in banjo-country. 5 hours later we are lodged up against the weir (still two days short of Malgas I might add), some tactful maneuvering to hoist Wessel over and we are within sight of the N2 bridge. A massive milestone, we film the happy occasion, only to get lodged on rocks beneath the bridge and in fitting with the expedition have to get out and drag Wessel downstream. Again. Dusk beginning to creep in and we are forced to seek camp opposite the Bontebok Park. 100kms to go and its unanimously decided that we celebrate with our long-awaited freeze-dried lamb fettucine that was saved for a landmark big-haul day. Repairs to try dry out the boat and re-glue the ever-growing crack. Having serious issues keeping stuff dry, everything now wet from dry bags that have spent the better part of the day under water inside Wessel's leaking hull. We're desperately hoping for a 70km day tomorrow to reach Malgas, or its soggy 2 minute noodles reboiled in cow-dung infested water for supper. Either Jenny Morris or Bear Grylls would be proud of us. Most likely the latter. Flattened the remaining half slab of chocolate in another moment of weakness. Into wet night time clothes and wet sleeping bags, we call it a night under a cloudy sky. Praying the clouds stick around to keep some warmth in but fall asleep as close to the fire as possible without the cotton sheet going up in flames with me wrapped inside. Freezing night and every waking moment is spent dragging more wood onto the fire to keep warm. Finally drift off dreaming of hamburgers and the missile flying through the rapids that await tomorrow.

Day 8: off the radar

Awake to find we're in thick mist. Note to self: next time pray the clouds stick around but preferably up in the sky. Everything soaked. Coffee, pack boat, onto water - the familiar routine ingrained continues. 100m downstream and we're shivering in chest deep water to haul Wessel over our first weir for the day. Then rain, then rapids and knife-edge rocks emerging from the river threatening to slice Wessel down the spine at every turn. We brave a few where the water is deep enough and get out and drag over big drops into pools below. Slipping and sliding on the angled, mossy rocks. Gradually making our way downstream but painstakingly slow and the thought of today's massive 70km haul in a half-submerged boat is fading fast. All we are focused on is getting Wessel through the notorious rapids in one piece, but even this seems a dying hope as he fills with water faster than we can bail. Tight turns through rocks and we're out and swimming and Wessel again lodged sideways waiting to wrap. Snap the steel rudder cable and another hour wasted on repairs and puncturing a hole in the side of a leaking boat to run the new cable seemed to defy logic. Andre's paddle washes downstream but we recover it and on with the grind, spend most of the day sitting in water and trying not to think of the extra kg's of dead weight we're hauling. Growing quietly desperate watching Wessel's nose constantly dipping under the surface, neither of us wanting to admit the situation growing more serious. Early afternoon stop on the sprawling lawns of the Felix camp, Pete makes us coffee, and we set off with no clue as to what's about to go down. (read: the boat). Its

like slow motion - round the corner, decide to risk a run and we drop vertical into a pool. We disappear under, completely submerged, lock stock and two smoking barrels of 8 days of hard physical grinding effort gradually rising to the surface in a defeated sodden state. Things looking increasingly depressing as we have snapped the new rudder cable but we bail and bail and do a quick repair to the cable and try to get things back on track. Until the next rapid, the final straw to seal our fate. I feel the rock hit the boat at my feet and feel it sliding closer until it is under me and coming right through the boat under my seat. It pushes my seat completely up off the bracket and its officially game over as Wessel sinks lower with only the rims of the cockpits above the water. Andre points out how the Breede is flowing through our boat. Seems we have become part of the river. We wade downstream until we find a campsite, ironically the best so far on the trip, where we take out. It seems criminal ending the day mid-afternoon with hours of sunlight left, still so far short of our target, but we have no option. Paddling is no longer an option. Pete makes us coffee to restore some humour in amongst this lunacy. We are officially stranded, like survivors from a shipwreck, on a beach in the middle of nowhere. We have no cellphone contact to even get a message out that we're okay and know our families and friends will be worried as we disappear off the radar without warning. But that's adventure, and now it was time for a plan to get us out of here. The thought of ending the trip with 70kms to go is heart-breaking. We had gone through so much to get here and it just didn't seem fair. We are in the dreaded rapids section and know if we can just get Wessel through another 15kms of spine-jarring jagged-tooth rocks we can save this trip and make it through the remaining flat water to the mouth. We make a fire and shift the boat over the coals to dry out the inside and outside. The afternoon sun is a major boost to lift our spirits and try dry out clothes and sleeping bags, and the boat. By early evening Wessel is dry and ready for repairs. Like a scene out of Alive, the story of the airplane crash in the Andes where those that made it eat their friends to survive, we nominate our most leaking drybag to take one for the team, and start slicing it up to patch the cracks and holes. We feel strangely encouraged by the way it looks after the final layer of duct-tape and celebrate over our last meal of soya and soggy spaghetti that has spent the day floating inside a water-logged drybag. A few pokes with a fork and the strands eventually separate into vaguely edible lumps. We are now out of food. I drift off to sleep in my dry cotton sheet, staring through the flames of the fire at the boat that is held together with a drybag, a tube of contact glue, and a roll of duct-tape and know that our entire trip lies in what will happen when we slide Wessel into the water tomorrow morning.

Day 9: Raising the Wessel

Today is go big or go home. I prod and poke and Wessel flexes and bends on the join but it is looking encouragingly secure. We slide him off into the water and hold our breath. For an agonising moment we watch in silence, but our fears lay rested as Wessel stays afloat. We gingerly get in and start paddling, every action is done in slow-motion and with extra care today to not disturb the repairs. After so many days of sitting in water it feels strange to be dry. We make a firm agreement to only paddle through rapids that we know are deep enough to avoid scraping the repairs on rocks, so for over 5 hours we nurse Wessel over the knife-edge rocks. We shoot occasional sections which are fun and return some sense of normality to this trip, and eventually by early afternoon we round a corner and are greeted with a long stretch of flat water. We are convinced this is it, we are

through the rapids, and with less water in the boat than on any other day in the trip. Pete makes us coffee to celebrate. Its 3:30pm and we finally arrive at Malgas, exhausted after the efforts to get here but thrilled that our repairs have been so successful. A few frantic phonecalls to find out that Leigh is optimistically sitting at Witsand with the champagne and marching band in preparation of celebrating our arrival. We consider pushing on into a moonlit night sky and finishing under headlamps but we are tired and hungry after a day of not eating and opt to finish tomorrow. Leigh races back to beat the pont before sunset and we settle down at the hotel for one last night on the river. Personal blister count on my hands so far: 14. 8 on my right, 6 on the left. Some have already popped twice. Our feet and backs are aching.

Day 10: Done and dusted!

Wonderful not to have spent last night under the wet cotton sheet again. We debate going light for the last stretch but in the nature of the trip we decide we must carry it all to the finish and pack all our goods back in the boat -. A later than usual start at 9am but we're in good spirits and Wessel is doing well. Paddling with the tide and making great progress down the long flat stretches, aided by an unusual tail-wind. The inevitable turn in the tides came with about 20kms to go and the battle resumed to keep going forward. Full-moon last night reminded me these are spring-tides and the water flow against us seemed stronger than ever. Cant even sit still to stretch or catch a breather without losing precious ground. Find a muddy bank to rest and Pete makes us coffee and we tuck into our last half packet of soggy winegums found in the bottom of the drybag. Back to the slog, we stop only for photographs and the occasional joke to break the monotony. Houses in the distance take an eternity to reach and pass. A seagull flies past and I smile big as I stare at it flying next to us for a while as if to escort us in and knowing without doubt that we've got this now, this incredible journey is almost done and we round the final corner into the long home straight and see Witsand and the sea and waves breaking up ahead. But in true keeping with the spirit of what has been, Wessel throws us one last curve ball as we are riding the swells in the estuary and the foot pedals sheer off the mounting bracket. Struggling to steer we zig-zag across the bay in huge over-compensated turning circles, if anyone had witnessed the spectacle they'd have been forgiven for thinking we'd already been at the champagne. Finally we navigate a straight line into the safety of the harbour and we take out and shake hands on a job well done. 315kms later, 10 days, and 5kgs lighter. Greeted by Leigh who has been fantastic in hanging around for an extra day. Grimacing to pop the champagne cork on blistered weathered hands but it tastes ever so sweet and we savour the moment and the memories with big smiles. Unpack Wessel for one last time, pose for photos and we hit the road home. Past Swellendam, back over the Breede and looking down on the river beneath and remembering the many moments. Dreaming of burgers, double burgers.

Eric Tollner & Andre van der Spuy