

# The spell of the desert

What is it about deserts that grip the imagination more than other wilderness areas? On the surface, these arid spaces are the most intimidating. Yet the drier the air, the hotter the temperatures, the more desiccated the earth, the more we are inclined to fall in love with them. Part of a transfrontier conservation area, Ai-Ais National Park in southern Namibia may be one of the most alluring of them all

Text and photography: Scott Ramsay

The immense Fish River Canyon, one of Earth's most impressive natural features. This viewpoint is located on the gravel track to the south of the main viewpoint.

*"No man can live this life and emerge unchanged. He will carry, however faint, the imprint of the desert, the brand which marks the nomad; and he will have within him the yearning to return, weak or insistent according to his nature. For this cruel land can cast a spell which no temperate climate can match."*

So wrote the British adventurer Wilfred Thesiger of his travels in the early 1940s through the so-called empty quarter of Arabia.

Standing alone on the edge of a cliff above the Fish River Canyon, I could understand Thesiger's sentiments. What is it about deserts that grips the imagination?

My mind tried to process the immense

scene around me. The statistics don't lie: this is one of the largest canyons in the world after the Grand Canyon in the US. (The Blue Nile Gorge in Ethiopia is considered equally big).

The Fish River Canyon was formed more than 300 million years ago, when Africa, South America and Australia were still joined as one continent. About 160km long, 27km wide at its broadest point and up to 550m deep, it is one of Earth's most impressive natural features. The rocks themselves date back 1,5 billion years – one-third of the age of Earth. In our short human lives of three score years and ten, these large numbers seem incomprehensible.

Consider, too, the intense desert

conditions that prevail in southern Namibia. Receiving less than 50mm of rainfall a year, with evaporation of more than 5000mm, Ai-Ais National Park is a true desert.

(Desert conditions are said to occur when evaporation exceeds rainfall by three times. In southern Namibia, the factor is ten times).

Daytime temperatures can reach 65°C at the bottom of the canyon during summer, and on cold winter nights they can fall to ten degrees below freezing.

These figures are impressive, perhaps unrivalled by any desert elsewhere, including Thesiger's Arabia, yet their true, practical meaning is lost. Intellectually, it's possible to understand what such a place is like, but unless

### Travelling between Ai-Ais and Richtersveld

The concept of a transfrontier park makes sense. Ecologically, these two arid parks are almost identical, with similar species of plants and animals, and similar climates. From a conservation point of view, managing the area holistically will contribute to its preservation in the long term.

Visitors benefit because they can easily explore both the Namibian and South African sides. The pont at Sendelingsdrif makes travel between the two parks – and countries – very easy. Before the pont service, visitors had to drive 500km to cross at the main border post at Noordoewer.

Today, if you're driving from Port Nolloth in SA, you can spend time in the Richtersveld park and then drive your car onto the pont at Sendelingsdrif. Within minutes you are in Namibia's Ai-Ais National Park.

If you're coming from Namibia, you can enter the park either through the town of Rosh Pinah in the west or from Noordoewer border post in the east, and then use the pont to cross into SA.

Just remember your passport, because it must be stamped at immigration on either side of the Orange River when you use the pont to cross.

You don't need a 4x4 to travel in Ai-Ais National Park. The gravel roads are in good condition, but of course your journey will always be more comfortable – and safer – in a 4x4. If you're going to drive into the Richtersveld National Park, you must have a fully-equipped 4x4.

you immerse yourself in this beautifully hostile terrain, you'll never know the essence of it.

As I stood on the edge of the canyon under a burnt sky, the afternoon sun scalded the earth, and a hot easterly wind evaporated any sweat from my body. I had already consumed ten litres of water that day. Just by breathing, just by existing in this desert – even without exerting oneself – a human body dehydrates remarkably quickly. My eyes were scratchy from the wind, and even with my sunglasses I squinted to limit the bright light. Perhaps I was slightly delirious from the heat but nevertheless, I was transfixed.

From the viewpoint above, the canyon meanders from the northern to southern horizon, a fearsome assemblage of rocky cliffs, ridges and plummeting depths. The aura of the landscape held me enthralled.

A few years ago I had walked the canyon's famous five-day hiking trail during winter, but this past year the trail has been closed because the river was bone dry after a recent drought. (See box.)

During summer, the trail is always closed. Park ranger Wayne Handley had told me how – despite plenty of warning – foolish visitors sometimes tried to walk down into the canyon during the summer months, only

to die from dehydration and sun exposure. Appropriately, Ai-Ais means "burning water" in the local Nama language.

"We once had to helicopter a dead Frenchman out of the canyon. After two days his body had turned pitch black from the sunburn, as if he'd been roasted on a braai. Very little can survive down there."

With its source in the Naukluft Mountains, the Fish River flows sporadically for 650km to its confluence with the Orange River in the south. Geologically, the canyon was formed when tectonic plate movements cracked the earth about 600 million years ago. Then, about 50 million years ago, the Fish River started flowing, scouring out the rock.

The folklore of its creation is more poetic. A long time ago a giant snake preyed on the livestock of ancient Nama herders. Eventually, wounded by the arrows of the tribe's warriors, the monstrous serpent's death throes tore giant gorges into the earth.

Despite its ferocious environment, Ai-Ais National Park is one of the world's most diverse arid areas. The eastern part falls under the Nama Karoo biome while the western region falls within the Succulent Karoo biome. It is an international hotspot of biodiversity and one of only two arid regions



Above, left to right: The region may be arid and hot, but there's a surprising amount of plant and animal life, including this southern masked weaver, swallow-tailed bee-eater, Namaqua sandgrouse, and these juvenile yellow fish in the Orange River.

in the world to fit this bill, the other being the Horn of Africa.

The park is home to more than 1600 species of plants, including roughly 100 that are found nowhere else. Among them are three types of quiver tree, standing several metres tall in the rocky earth, like gods lordling over their desert domain.

Gemsbok, springbok, kudu and steenbok are seen regularly during wetter periods, while the Hartmann's mountain zebra are one of the last resident indigenous groups of this species in Namibia. And there are predators, including brown hyena, black-backed jackal and bat-eared fox, as well as leopards.

As part of the Ai-Ais/Richtersveld Transfrontier Park, the Namibian section

### Hiking the Fish River Canyon

This is one of Africa's premier hiking trails with spectacular, unique scenery, and an authentic sense of adventure. Best done over five days, it is a self-guided, self-supported hike on which you must carry all your own gear, food and water (remember to take water purification tablets so you can drink from the river).

Starting at the main viewpoint, the trail descends into the canyon. Once you are down, the hike is mostly level as the route meanders alongside the river, which will flow steadily if you have timed your trip correctly. The trail is open between May and September, but it can be closed by the Ministry of Environment and Tourism if there is no water in the river.

The silence and scale of scenery make this trail unforgettable. Hikers sleep on the ground wherever they like. The stars are among the brightest I have seen, and the sense of wilderness is profound. Once you're down at

the bottom of the canyon there are only a few exit points, and these are not easy to scale. On my hike, we encountered a lady who had sprained a wrist on the first day, and she was unable to walk back out of the canyon, so her husband had to climb out to summon a rescue helicopter.

Don't forget the following: two hats (one spare, in case you lose the first one), sun cream, sunglasses, a medical kit, rehydrate, biodegradable soap, water purification tablets, Game powder and plenty of high-calorie, salty food such as salami and canned tuna.

Remember to burn your toilet paper and bury your faeces well away from the river. Remove all trash, and use as little driftwood as possible for fires (gas cookers are recommended).

To book the trail, contact Namibia Wildlife Resorts. Contact [www.nwr.com.na](http://www.nwr.com.na), e-mail [mronje@nwr.com.na](mailto:mronje@nwr.com.na), or tel +27 (0)21-422-3761.



#### Best viewpoints

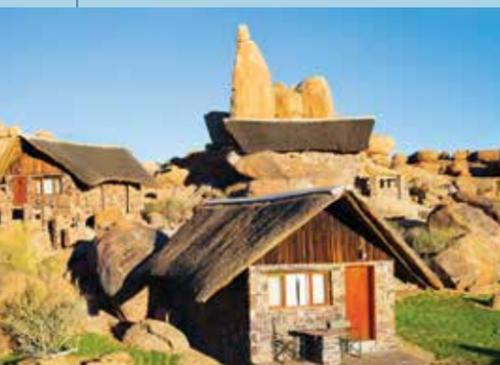
From the camp at Hobas, it's about 10km to the main viewpoints into the canyon, where there is also an excellent interpretive centre. The best times of day to view the canyon are early morning or late afternoon.

Although the main viewpoints are spectacular, drive along the ancillary gravel road to the south, along the edge of the canyon, where there are more interesting, less regularly photographed views.



Left and above: The Fish River Canyon hiking trail is one of the classic hikes in Southern Africa, but despite the hostile environment, it is in fact a relatively easy hike if you're prepared. The terrain is relatively flat at the bottom of the canyon, and if you do it over five days, it's a very pleasant walk. Just remember to take plenty of rehydrate!

**Namibia Wildlife Resorts accommodation and campsites**



From left to right: The chalets at Gondwana Canyon Lodge. The Ai-Ais rest camp. The campsite at Hobas.

• **Hobas**

If you want to see the canyon, you should stay at Hobas Camp, which is about 10km from the main viewpoints. This is a rustic camp of 15 sites, with basic facilities (electrical powerpoints and cold water taps), but superbly clean ablutions, plenty of shade from ebony and camelthorn trees, and very friendly staff (chat to manager Eric Gubula, who has worked here for many years and knows the area well).

There is also a pool! After a long day in the desert, it may be the best thing you'll see, with the possible exception of a cold Tafel Lager.

The best campsites are 1, 6, 8 and 9.

Electricity is supplied by a generator in the mornings and evenings.

• **Ai-Ais**

Ai-Ais resort is at the southern end, where the canyon widens and is less imposing. This is the end of the hiking trail, where hot springs bubble out from the earth. In winter, when it can get cold at night, visitors come to enjoy the warm water in the public pools inside the chalet complex.

There are fully equipped chalets and a good restaurant and bar, but I preferred

to camp under a huge camelthorn tree. My EeziAwn rooftop tent and Bat awning provided additional shade.

There's a really nice feel to the campsite, if it's not too busy. It's popular with self-drive 4x4ers and travellers from all over the world. You're quite likely to be camping between a German family and a Spanish couple. The campsites with the best shade are 33, 35 and 42. Other sites have limited shade, if any, so be warned.

Contact [www.nwr.com.na](http://www.nwr.com.na), e-mail [mcronje@nwr.com.na](mailto:mcronje@nwr.com.na), or tel +27 (0)21-422-3761.

This is one of the classic views in the transfrontier park, seen from the top of a small mountain next to De Hoop campsite on the South African side of the Orange River.

**Apollo 11 Cave**

One of the more famous archaeological sites in Africa can be found in Ai-Ais National Park at Apollo 11 cave in the north-west Huns Mountains. German archaeologist Wolfgang Wendt was studying the 27 000-year-old paintings during the time of the Apollo 11 spacecraft mission in 1969, and so gave the same name to the cave. The site is currently off limits to the public, but authorities are considering opening it to the visitors on guided tours.

**Gondwana Canyon Park**

Just to the east of Ai-Ais National Park is the huge private Gondwana Canyon Park, a conservation area of 1200 square kilometres. Comprising mostly vast desert plains, dotted here and there with granite outcrops, this makes an excellent stop-over point for visitors to the Fish River Canyon, which is about 25km away.

There are no fences between the national and private parks, so there's really no distinction between them. It's the accommodation that sets Gondwana apart. There are several options, but the best is Gondwana Lodge (from R895 per person), where several semi-luxury stone and thatch chalets are nestled among massive granite boulders. It's a superb setting, and along with the excellent service and food, is probably the best place in the region for non-campers to stay.

Other options include the Village (from R685 per person), the Mountain Camp (from R310 per person), the Roadhouse (from R685 per person) and a campsite (from R150 per person). The Roadhouse – just off the C37 – is a popular lunch or refreshment stop for travellers on their way to the canyon.

Contact [www.gondwana-collection.com](http://www.gondwana-collection.com), e-mail [info@gondwana-collection.com](mailto:info@gondwana-collection.com) or call +264-(0)61-230-066.

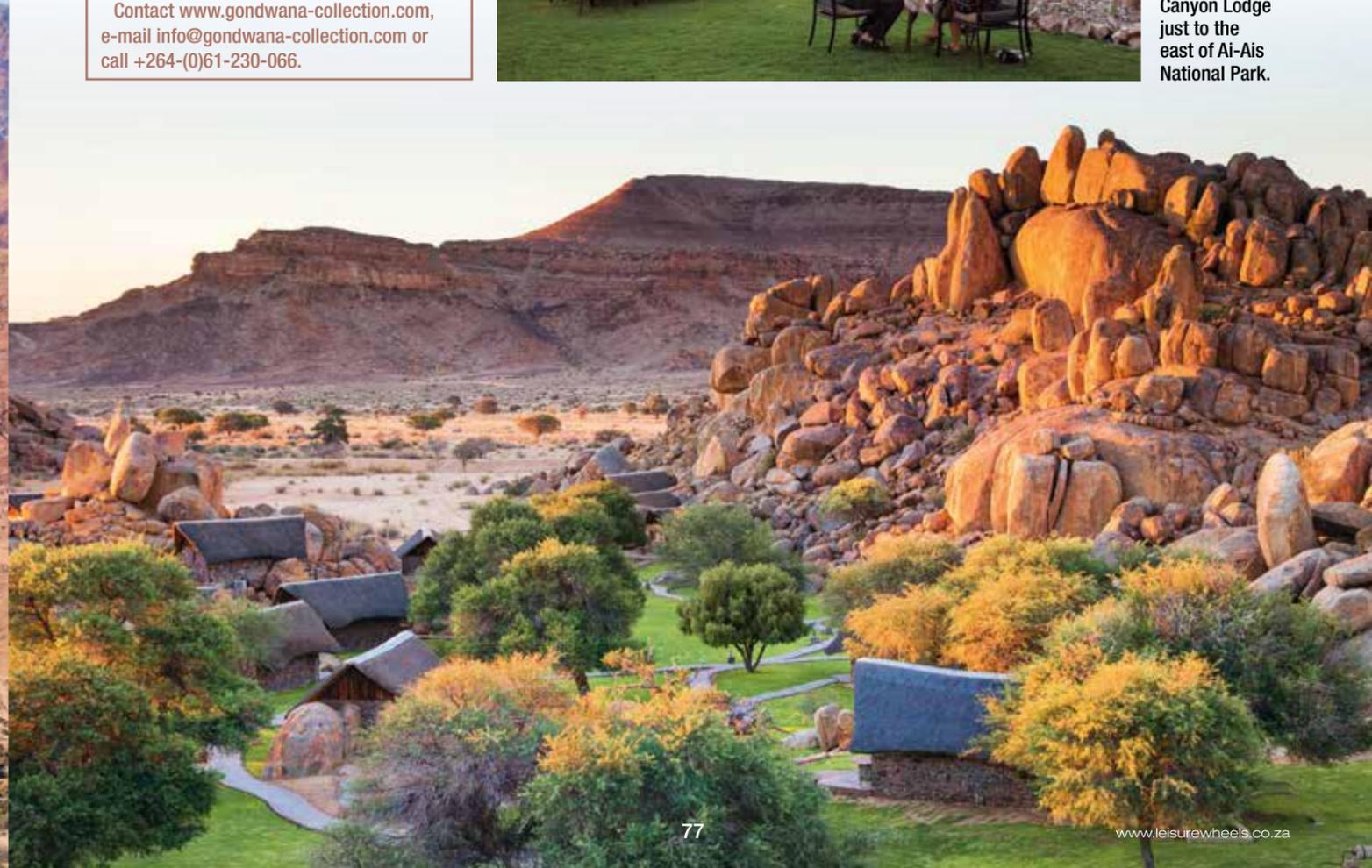


Above: A full moon rising over the desert mountains.



Left: Dining outside under a desert sky at Gondwana Canyon Lodge

Below: The spectacular setting of Gondwana Canyon Lodge just to the east of Ai-Ais National Park.



# YEAR IN THE WILD

## AI-AIS NATIONAL PARK



Far left: The friendly staff at Ai-Ais rest camp. Left: The Namibian border post near Sendelingsdrif, possibly the easiest border post in Africa to pass through! Below left: The pont at Sendelingsdrif which makes travel between Richtersveld National Park and Ai-Ais National Park really easy.



their way.

On my last night, after photographing the canyon all day, I camped at Hobas, about 10km from the canyon, braaing lamb chops and drinking a cold Tafel Lager. I was alone, except for an African wild cat that came to investigate the smell of sizzling fat emanating from my braai.

covers about 4500 square kilometres of this arid wonderland, or about 75% of the park. The other 1600 square kilometres makes up the South African portion, which is known as the Richtersveld National Park.

While the South African section comprises mostly desert mountains and valleys, the Namibian section is more diverse, with equally impressive mountains, enormous gravel plains dotted with granite outcrops, and the canyon.

There are only a few access roads, making it difficult to explore thoroughly. Perhaps this is just as well, because the extreme conditions could become deadly if visitors lost

The nights in the southern Namibian desert are always cool, providing relief from the intense daytime heat. It's a time of reflection and gratitude – a time to give thanks for the simple rewards which are lost and forgotten in city living.

In the desert, life is good when you have a cold drink of water (or beer), a tasty piece of meat, a cool breeze and a good night's rest under the stars.

Wilfred Thesiger wrote: "In the desert I found a freedom unattainable in civilisation." The grizzled adventurer would no doubt have doffed his hat to Ai-Ais National Park. **LW**



### K-Way gear review

There is one item of gear I won't do without when exploring southern Namibia: my K-Way Talus Floppy Hat. You don't want to be stuck out there without proper protection for your head. This wide brimmed hat has a towelling sweat band and an adjustable chin strap. It's made from quick-dry, wickable nylon. It keeps the sun off your head and face, with complete UV protection. R199 at [www.capeunionmart.co.za](http://www.capeunionmart.co.za).

### Year in the Wild, 2013-14

Following on from his first Year in the Wild, photojournalist Scott Ramsay is travelling from July 2013 to October 2014 to some of the same parks (but in different seasons) as well as to many new parks and nature reserves in SA and the transfrontier parks in southern Namibia, Botswana, Zimbabwe and Mozambique. Again, his goal is to create awareness about protected areas and inspire others to travel to these natural wonderlands.

Ramsay's partners include Cape Union Mart, Ford Everest, Goodyear and K-Way, with support from WildCard, EeziAwn, Frontrunner, Globecomm, National Luna, Outdoor Photo, Safari Centre Cape Town, Tracks 4 Africa, and Vodacom.

For more information, go to [www.yearinthewild.com](http://www.yearinthewild.com).



Go Further



### Klein-Aus Vista

Near the little town of Aus to the north of the national park is the family-run Klein-Aus Vista lodge and chalets, located within the private Gondwana Park.

The Swiegers family have turned their old farm into a legendary overnight stop, situated just off the B4 road between Keetmanshoop and Lüderitz, and near the junction of the C13 going south to Rosh Pinah. For travellers on their way south or north, the accommodation and restaurant are highly recommended.

There is a range of activities, including guided tours to see the famed wild desert horses.

Costs: from R655 per person for chalets, and R100 per person for campsites. [www.klein-aus-vista.com](http://www.klein-aus-vista.com).

### Important GPS Points

- Pont at Sendelingsdrif (Namibian side of Orange River)  
S28 07.363 E16 53.344
- Immigration border post on Namibian side of Transfrontier Park  
S28 06.678 E16 52.928
- Ai-Ais Resort and campsite  
S27 55.236 E17 29.329
- Hobas campsite and entrance gate to canyon  
S27 37.135 E17 42.918
- Main canyon viewpoint  
S27 35.376 E17 36.881
- Gondwana Canyon Lodge  
S27 39.801 E17 46.852
- Gondwana Road Lodge and Restaurant  
S27 31.538 E17 48.972
- Klein-Aus Vista Lodge  
S26 38.883 E16 14.683