



**TOP LEFT:** The coastal section of Namaqua National Park requires a 4x4 to drive the soft sandy tracks. **TOP RIGHT:** The nutrient-rich ocean adjacent to the park is being considered for a marine protected area. **ABOVE:** The Cape fur seal colony is one of the few in the country which lie within a protected area. **RIGHT:** The park now includes several former farms and their dilapidated homesteads.

# NAMAQUALAND'S SHINING JEWELS

This West Coast gem may be known for its flowers, but there's much more to it. By Scott Ramsay.

The westerly wind was strengthening and dark clouds hovered low. Night was looming and raindrops pounded the roof of my Ford 4x4. Yet I was lost – and alone. I was searching for my campsite, but my GPS batteries were flat and the jeep tracks in the thick sand seemed to lead nowhere.

On the Namaqualand coast there's no place to hide. Here the sky and sea

rule. There are no landmarks to identify your position – no mountains or hills, no cliffs or kloofs.

Rocky beaches run for hundreds of kilometres from south to north. To the east, tiny succulent plants hug the low-lying strandveld. To the west lie thousands of kilometres of Atlantic Ocean. Dark and icy, the rich Benguela Current surges from Antarctica up the coast of Africa.





The road from Skilpad to Soebatsfontein.

## TOP THINGS TO DO

**1** Do the Caracal Eco-Route, a 4x4 trail through the park. Although it's supposed to be a one-day trail covering 156 kilometres, it's best done over two days, which means overnighing at one of the campsites on the coast or Luiperdskloof Cottage.

**2** Visit the Anatolian sheep dog project. Tel 027-672-1948, email [elanza.vanlente@sanparks.org](mailto:elanza.vanlente@sanparks.org).

**3** Drive the five-kilometre Skilpad circle, which starts at the main reception area and winds through undulating fields of daisies.

**4** Spend a few nights at one of the campsites in the new coastal section of the park.

**5** Drive the Wildeperdehoek Pass, a spectacular road leading down the escarpment from Springbok to Koingnaas.

There is little sign of human habitation. Once famous for diamonds, the Namaqua coastline has given up its mineral wealth. The mines are abandoned and, without anything else to live off, the remaining people are leaving.

The emptiness was tangible and unnerving; I was travelling alone through one of the most sparsely populated areas in South Africa – a new section of the Namaqua National Park lying adjacent to the coast, which was given to conservation authorities by De Beers Consolidated Mines.

The flowers are just the beginning

When I'd arrived earlier in the week at the park's head office in the hills of the Kamiesberg, the sky and the earth were on fire with luminous orange. The sun shone warmly and flowers were blooming.

Proclaimed in 2001, Namaqua National park conserves a sizeable portion of the succulent Karoo. This arid biome stretches from the Little Karoo to the Richtersveld, and hosts the greatest diversity of desert-adapted plant species in the world.

The succulent Karoo is an international biodiversity hotspot, described as those areas which are endowed with particular biological richness, yet are also threatened by climate change and man's overbearing footprint. And it's one of only two hotspots in the world which are entirely arid (the other being the Horn of Africa).

Lying within the succulent Karoo, Namaqualand is the most important part of this biome, containing 75 per cent

of the plant species in just 25 per cent of the total area. There are more than 3000 species of plants, mostly bulbs and succulents, half of which are found nowhere else on Earth.

Uncomfortably hot, dry and drab for most of the year, the veld transforms itself when spring comes. Literally millions of flowers emerge, thanks to the reliable (albeit low) rainfall every August and September. 'It's what makes Namaqualand unique,' park manager Bernard van Lente explained. 'It's one of only a few arid regions which receive reliable, predictable amounts of rainfall. The plants can rely on the rain, even if it isn't very much.'

Each spring morning at about 10h00, when the temperatures climb to about 20° C, every flower opens its petals to attract a range of pollinators. Each afternoon at about 16h00, as the temperatures fall again, the petals close.

'The flowers open according to temperature, not sunlight,' Bernard elaborated. 'That's why when there's warm, cloudy weather, the flowers still open, but stay closed when a cold wind blows on a sunny day.'

Namaqua's other jewels But the famous flower displays near the entrance to the park aren't entirely natural and owe their presence to many years of overgrazing by livestock.

'These concentrations of flowers are actually an indicator of damaged veld,' Bernard explained. 'It looks pretty, but it's not ecologically diverse. If you want to see Namaqualand in its natural state, you

need to go here.' Bernard pointed to a map on his office wall, to an isolated spot about 100 kilometres southwest on the coast, a lonely place called Boulder Bay.

The 60000-hectare section lying adjacent to the coast was donated by De Beers four years ago on a 99-year lease, and it includes some of the country's most unspoilt beaches, coves and estuaries.

'De Beers never mined this land,' Bernard explained. 'So it's in an excellent state and contains some fascinating ecosystems.'

Bernard – a former marine biologist – is excited as the new land includes three waterways: the Spoeg, Bitter and Groen rivers. 'The Spoeg was ranked as one of the most pristine estuaries in the country,' Bernard enthused.

Along the coast are some of South Africa's last untouched moving dune systems, with uniquely adapted fynbos.

'There's some seriously deep sand there,' Bernard warned me before I headed out. 'I hope you know how to drive that 4x4 of yours – you're going to need it.'

In the middle of nowhere Bernard was right. The roads aren't good. Bad gravel turns into deep, thick sand. I kept the Ford's revs high, hoping the momentum would get me through the quagmire. As the sky darkened and the wind whipped the sea, I wondered whether I should have stayed at one of the comfortable chalets near the offices.

My eyes scanned through the drenched windscreen as the wiper blades smacked back and forth. There it was! I saw the stone cairn indicating



ABOVE LEFT: Gemsbok are one of several antelope species in the park. ABOVE RIGHT: The park's dense concentrations of colour are a sign of overgrazed veld.



Boulder Bay. I veered off the main jeep track and headed closer to the coastline.

A few low lapas provide a pittance of protection from the elements. In the howling wind I set up the rooftop tent, hoping the canvas wouldn't tear. I made a fire and climbed into my sleeping bag, falling asleep to the pounding wind and crashing waves.

Conserving the Namaqua ocean

A loud noise woke me in the morning. I wasn't alone. A seal was lingering on the pebble beach. It barked at me, then plopped back into the ocean. I followed its path through the water and watched it clamber onto some rocks. There it joined about 400 other seals, all basking in the morning light.

'It's one of only two shore-based breeding colonies in South Africa which fall within a protected area,' I was told later by Peter Chadwick, the World Wildlife Fund's marine parks programme manager. 'There are larger breeding colonies on the coast, but none are currently protected.'

Now the shore is part of the national park – and the seals'

protection is ensured – but the open ocean is unprotected and can still be fished, something the environmental ministry and conservation authorities would like to change. A proposed marine protected area would run the length of the 45-kilometre coastal section of the current park and extend three to five nautical miles offshore.

Peter explained this is desperately needed. 'The closest marine protected area is more than 400 kilometres away, near Langebaan. There is no other stretch of ocean along South Africa's west coast which is conserved.'

Namaqua's oceans are ecologically special, underpinned by a strong upwelling of the Benguela Current, bringing vast amounts of nutrition to the surface and forming huge kelp beds.

'It's a unique habitat,' Peter explained. 'This area hosts the highest density of limpets in the world.' Species such as *Patella argenvillei* and *Patella granatina* thrive, using their sandpappy tongues to graze on algae. There are also sizeable numbers of crayfish, galjoen and Hottentot fish.

Larger creatures such as Heaviside's dolphins cruise the coast. 'These dolphins are found only along the southwest coast of Africa,' Peter emphasised. Then there's the small stuff: invertebrates such as the giant isopod *Tylos granulatus*, a sand louse which is an important recycling agent in the ecosystem.

More wild wonders

It's not just the sealife that makes Namaqua National Park a wildlife destination. There are the flowers, of course, but there are also intriguing animals, including three endemic to the region: namely De Winton's golden mole, Van Zyl's golden mole and the Namaqua dune mole. There's also the world's smallest tortoise, the Namaqua speckled padloper.

There was plenty wildlife before colonial hunters moved in. Elephants, black rhino, lion, cheetah and wild dog once roamed here. Today visitors can expect to see springbok, red hartebees, gemsbok and a few grey rhebok. Then there are the predators, which are rarely seen, but include caracal, black-backed jackal, small-spotted genet, bat-eared foxes – and leopards.

Driving back from the coast

to Kamieskroon, I met up with Chavoux Luyt, a researcher with the Cape Leopard Trust who is working to educate the local community about the crucial role predators play in Namaqualand's ecosystem. Some local livestock farmers still believe that by setting traps and killing predators, they're eradicating the problem. 'The problem is these traps are indiscriminate,' Chavoux said. 'Most of the time, these traps end up killing so-called non-target species such as aardwolf, dassie and porcupine.'

The park now has a breeding programme of Anatolian sheep dogs, which it supplies to farmers. These dogs – originally from Turkey – have proven to be proficient guards of livestock and farmers are benefiting already. Less livestock is being taken by predators and fewer traps are being set. 'So the leopards are better off too,' Chavoux smiled.

As with the rest of the wildlife and sealife of the Namaqua National Park, the leopards are reclaiming their rightful place in this seemingly empty corner of South Africa.

Travel Planner overleaf



Annelise le Roux

## FLOWERS OUT OF SEASON

The Namaqualand veld may seem barren and brown during summer, but botanist Annelise le Roux, author of *The Wild Flower Guide to Namaqualand*, says there are spectacular plants to look for during the hottest months.

The Amaryllis family of plants don't mind the heat at all – notable species include *Haemanthus pubescens* (with an unmistakable crimson flower) and *Haemanthus graniticus*, which has conspicuous pink,

fleshy fruit. 'When the fruit drops onto the ground, the seed has enough moisture to help it germinate during the hot months,' Annelise explained. 'So it has an advantage over the other plants which start growing only with the onset of rains.'

Also look out for the brilliant white flowers of *Gethyllis linearis* – locally known as Koekoemakranka – the fruit of which is used by locals as medicine for upset stomachs.

If you're near the coast, you should come across *Sarcocornia littorea*, a hardy plant which grows at the high-tide mark. 'It's one of the toughest plants,' Annelise said. 'It grows in very salty conditions, and is sometimes covered by the high waters, yet it's always green and lush.' Also found near the coast are large bushes of *Drosanthemum luederitzii*, a type of vygie with spectacular pink and white flowers.

## TRAVEL PLANNER

### Getting there

Namaqua National Park's main offices and reception lie 21 km west of Kamieskroon. If you're driving from the south along the N7, turn right to Kamieskroon; if you're driving from the north, turn left.

Then at the T-junction turn left and follow the road to the park's reception and administrative offices at the Skilpad section of the park.

If you're accessing the coastal section, turn left into Garies (about 50 km before Kamieskroon) and follow the signs to the Groen River Gate, about 73 km from Garies along a gravel road.

The roads in the northern part of the park are mostly gravel, while in the coastal section long stretches of sandy jeep tracks are encountered. A 4x4 is an absolute necessity for the coastal section.

### Gates and entry times

There's no gate to the main reception area at Skilpad. Office hours are 08h00 to 18h00 every day. Groen River Gate is open between 08h00 and 17h00. A daily conservation fee of R22 an adult and R11 a child applies. This fee is waived for Wild Card holders. [www.sanparks.org/wild\\_card](http://www.sanparks.org/wild_card).

### Where to stay

There are no campsites within the Skilpad section, but there's an unofficial campsite at Kookfontein on the Caracal Eco-Route, about an hour's drive northwest of Skilpad. In the coastal section there are nine campsites, all signposted off the main coastal jeep track from Groen River Gate. From north to south along the coast they are: Boulder Bay, Skuinsbaai Noord, Koringkorrel Bay, Skuinsklip, Bamboeskamp, Mosselbank (for hikers only), Varswater, Kwass se Baai



Photojournalist Scott Ramsay is travelling for a year to 31 of South Africa's most special nature reserves, including all the national parks. Sponsors include Ford, Total, Evosat, Frontrunner, National Luna, Vodacom, Goodyear, Lacie and Escape Seat Covers. For updates and photos, go to [www.yearinthewild.com](http://www.yearinthewild.com) and [www.facebook.com/yearinthewild](http://www.facebook.com/yearinthewild).

and finally Delwerskamp. Each campsite has a braai area with protective walling from the prevailing southeasterly wind. There's no fresh water and toilets are enviroloos. Camping from R100 a night a site, for up to six people (additional adults and children pay R20 each).

**Skilpad Rest Camp** has four fully equipped self-catering chalets, a 10-minute drive west from the main reception area. They all look out over the descending escarpment towards the far-off coastline of the Atlantic Ocean. Each has 240-volt electricity, a bedroom, lounge, open-plan kitchen, enclosed veranda with dining area, and an indoor and outdoor braai. One of the units is wheelchair-friendly. From R455

for two people (additional adults are R172 each and children are R86).

**Luiperdskloof Cottage** is remotely situated on the Caracal Eco-Route, in a valley surrounded by koppies in the north of the park. The beautiful stone cottage can be reached by 4x4 only and can accommodate up to six people in two bedrooms. There's gas heating and a stove and paraffin lighting. R1 100 a night for the cottage.

### Who to contact

SanParks Central Reservations, tel 012-428-9111, email [reservations@sanparks.org](mailto:reservations@sanparks.org), [www.sanparks.org](http://www.sanparks.org). Park reception, tel 027-672-1948, email [elanza.vanlente@sanparks.org](mailto:elanza.vanlente@sanparks.org).

Accommodation price ratings: a person a night, usually B&B, sometimes full board under R250 R251 – R499 R500 – R750 R751 – R999 R1000+