



WILD WATERS RUN DEEP

In part three of his year-long series on South Africa's national parks and reserves, **Scott Ramsay** travels to a place of great noise, Augrabies Falls.

Long before we saw the waterfall, we smelt it. The scent of water flowing over hot desert rock lured us closer; the same smell that comes with the first thunderstorms after a long highveld winter. But strangely, there was no rain; just more sunshine, more rock and more heat.

'Come on!' my friend Gareth John shouted. 'I need to see water again!' We'd been travelling for several weeks through the Kalahari Desert as part of my Year in the Wild journey. We were dry, dusty and *dors*. We were longing for water.

But how could there be a river here? And how could there be a huge waterfall in this flat, hot, rocky land on the edge of the Kalahari?

Geological tricks

The Orange River runs like a vein of life through South Africa. By some wonderful trick of the geological gods, the country's longest waterway flows through the driest and hottest parts of the country. Instead of flowing east from its source in the Drakensberg on a shorter journey to the subtropics of the Indian Ocean, the river flows in a westerly direction.

Also called the Gariiep River, it takes the distinctly long way across the subcontinent, making its way slowly to the Atlantic Ocean, meandering some 2 200 kilometres through an increasingly arid landscape. At its mouth in the southern Namib Desert, barely 40 millimetres of rain speckles the dry earth every year.

On its journey, the river sustains entire towns and cities, farms, livestock, crops and wild animals. Without its fresh water, South Africa would be a completely different country. But the Orange River waits for nearly 1 500 kilometres before it shows off its natural splendour. At Augrabies, almost the entire river pours over a 90-metre high granite cliff, crashing into a narrow gorge less than 100 metres wide.

We parked our Ford Everest and rushed down the boardwalk that leads to the main viewing deck. First we saw the spray of water; a rainbow formed in the late afternoon light. The shudder of pounding water sent vibrations through the rock and into our bones. Then we saw it: two tonnes of water hurtling down every second, smashing into the gorge below. For 600 million years, the river has cut its way through this weak point in the granite rock.

We stood dumbstruck, hypnotised by the spectacle. It was hard to believe the river is but a trickle compared to the floods of the rainy seasons. During particularly wet summers, when the Drakensberg experiences higher-than-usual rainfall, the falls transform into a snorting monster.

'The power is scary,' park manager Steven Smith told me. 'It's almost unbelievable. The viewing deck closest to the falls

OPPOSITE: The main falls at Augrabies in dry season. During floods, the falls widen over several hundred metres. ABOVE LEFT: The Dassie Nature Trail crosses several braided streams of the Orange River. ABOVE RIGHT: Lookout decks offer spectacular views of the river carving its way through the arid land.

is [often] smashed to smithereens. We still haven't had a chance to repair it from the the most recent floods.'

Recent floods brought five tonnes of water flowing over the falls every second and, in 1988, it reached eight tonnes of water a second. 'Some geohydrologists have worked out that the maximum amount of water we could expect in a flood is close to 29 tonnes of water a second,' Steven explained. 'I wouldn't want to be around for that.'

The scary monster

Indeed, the local Nama people prefer to keep away from the falls. They have lived in the region for centuries, joining the Bushmen who once hunted and gathered here for 100 000 years. Just like modern tourists, the Nama would have been drawn to the water to quench their thirst and let their livestock drink, but they avoided the falls completely. According to folklore, a monster snake lives in the plunge pool, luring people and animals into the depths with its shiny scales, devouring them with glee.

Their beliefs aren't that far off and are supported by some convincing statistics. Of the 22 people who have fallen into the gorge since the park was proclaimed in 1966, only two have survived – a Scandinavian tourist in 1979 and an army serviceman a few years later. Like moths to a flame, more than 70 000 tourists visit the falls every year – sometimes as many as 90 000 during flood years. No wonder the boardwalks now all have solid, high fences.

We stayed for sunset, watching the changing light and gazing down into the canyon. We could hardly hear each other speak above the roar of the cascading water. The name Augrabies means 'place of great noise' and comes from the





LEFT: Twin Falls is a photogenic example of the river's erosion of the granite bedrock.

Nama word '*!oukurubes*'. In 1778, Scandinavian explorer Hendrik Jacob Wikar became the first white man to record the falls and called them Aukoerebis.

Some spray settled on our hot bodies. After the brackish water of the Kalahari, it was the first pure, fresh water we'd seen for several weeks. Refreshed, we headed back to make a braai at our chalet a few hundred metres away, the sound of the falls in the distance.

More than the falls

But the 55 383-hectare park isn't just about the falls. There's an array of wildlife, including the endangered Hartmann's mountain zebra, gemsbok, springbok, eland, kudu, steenbok, klipspringer and giraffe (which are lighter in colour than their lowveld counterparts, an adaption to the intense heat).

The largest predator is the secretive leopard, but it's rarely seen; this means visitors are welcome to leave their cars and explore on foot – something that isn't possible in Kruger, Addo or other parks which have dangerous large animals such as lion, elephant or buffalo.

So, early the next morning, we set off on the Dassie Nature Trail, a three-hour hike that skirts the edge of the canyon. It soon became obvious that the main falls are only one of several astounding viewpoints. The 20-kilometre gorge below is as spectacular: narrow, precipitous and deep. Below, the water churns its way over countless huge rapids, washing around massive boulders the size of houses, carried down by prehistoric floods of gargantuan proportions.

First we came across Twin Falls. It's that part of the braided river above the gorge which flows slightly south-west, missing the main falls to crash over two successive cliffs. It then joins up with the main river and its gorge. Arrow Point is where the two gorges meet.

We soon realised why Arrow Point isn't part of the trail. It's just too high, too narrow ... and it's not fenced. Gareth and I decided to go anyway. We climbed over boulders, making our way to the edge. We moved slowly, taking our time. 'This is the most incredible view!' Gareth screamed. 'Wooowwwweeee!'

We stood on the narrow rocky peninsula, just a few metres wide. On either side and in front of us, cliffs fell more than 200 metres down, where the two main waterways meet and continue flowing as one river through the epic gorge.

A black eagle soared above us, peregrine falcons streaked below in the gorge and black swifts darted back and forth. Dassies scuttled along the rocks, sure-footed, with their babies close behind. Purple-headed flat lizards trotted perpendicularly down the cliff face, decidedly not scared of heights – unlike us.

Baboons barked behind us, warning us of their presence, or perhaps reminding us that they've seen other humans fall down the cliffs; 'Watch out,' they seemed to tell us. We headed back to the trail, our hearts and heads dizzy from the vertigo.

The trail took us away from the river and up and over Moon Rock, a huge granite dome with panoramic views. Around us the so-called Orange River Broken Veld extended in all directions. It's a dry place in winter, with low shrubs that aren't easy on the eye.

The horizon is broken by few trees, including the quiver tree, that iconic silhouette of the desert. A recent cultural research study discovered a quiver tree with an inscription that hinted

at the end of one of the worst droughts in history. '*Die weer is Mooi 11 Des 1933. Daar is hoop,*' reads the inscription ('The weather is beautiful 11 Dec 1933. There is hope').

In the afternoon, we made our way by car several kilometres down river, stopping at the viewpoints of Ararat and Oranjekom, both of which have expansive viewing decks out over the canyon. The further we drove away from the falls, the fewer tourists there were.

At Echo Corner, the viewing point furthest from main falls, we cracked cold beers from the Everest's fridge, and watched the sun go down on the river. We were the only people there.

Baboon calls echoed off the cliffs. We shouted out at the tops of our voices: an unintelligible, wild, barbaric yawp, a call that can be made only by two men who want to be boys again. Echoes rang out around us. After weeks of travelling in relentless heat, the wild waters of Augrabies had restored us. ■



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Scott Ramsay is spending a year travelling to 31 of South Africa's most special nature reserves, including all the national parks.

Follow his journey at www.yearinthewild.com or www.facebook.com/YearInTheWild. His sponsors include Ford, Total, EvoSat, Frontrunner 4x4 Technology, K-Way, Cape Union Mart, Vodacom and Conqueror Trailers.



A chalet at Augrabies.

TOP THINGS TO DO AT AUGRABIES FALLS NATIONAL PARK

- 1 Visit the various viewpoints of the falls and the gorge, including Main Falls, Arrow Point, Ararat and Oranjekom. gives visitors an excellent overview of the park.
- 2 In the middle of the night, preferably during full moon, stand near the falls and listen to the crashing water.
- 3 The Dassie Nature Trail, a three-hour walking trail, gives visitors an excellent overview of the park.
- 4 View Twin Falls, an underrated attraction that tends to be overshadowed by the main Augrabies Falls. They flow mostly when water levels are above average.
- 5 Do the Klipspringer Hiking Trail, a three-day, two-night self-guided trail, which is open during the winter months between April and September.
- 6 Look out for fascinating little creatures such as the colourful Broadley's flat lizard, which runs up and down the high granite cliffs and jumps acrobatically to catch flying insects.
- 7 Spot the endangered Hartmann's mountain zebra. Augrabies is one of the few places in Africa where it's found in its natural environment.
- 8 Take a photo of the iconic quiver tree, a huge succulent that is one of the few trees which can survive away from the river and live for several hundred years.

TRAVEL PLANNER

Getting there

The quickest way to get to Augrabies Falls National Park is to take the N14 national road between Springbok and Upington. Look out for the R359 turn-off to the park, about 10km west of Kakamas. Drive north for about 39km and look for the signs to the park on your right. From there, it's a short drive to the park entrance.

Gates and operating hours

The entrance is open daily from 07h00 to 18h30. When the river is in flood, more tourists visit the falls, so the gates may open earlier to reduce

traffic. The gates are manned 24 hours a day, but if you want to arrive outside of official opening hours, you'll need to call ahead.

Where to stay

There is only one rest camp at Augrabies; it's unfenced (because there are no dangerous animals in the park). There are 50 campsites (40 with power, 10 without) on grass, and trees offer good shade. There's a communal cooking area with two-plated stoves and washing-up facilities as well as ablutions with toilets and hot showers. For two people it's R165 a campsite a night (R58 an extra adult

and R29 a child, max six).

There are also 59 self-catering, fully equipped chalets, each with kitchenette, lounge and dining area. Most units sleep two and there are family cottages, which have two bedrooms that sleep four. All chalets are air conditioned and have outside braai areas and sleeper couches, suitable for kids

only. From R700 to R1 690 a chalet a night.

All chalets and campsites are within walking distance of the falls and the canyon. There are three swimming pools in which to cool off.

Who to contact

SanParks, tel 054-452-9200, email augrabiesres@sanparks.org, www.sanparks.org ■

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