



» YEAR IN THE WILD
 Roughing it in the
Richtersveld

With Scott Ramsay

In the fourth article in a series on his Year in the Wild expedition, taking in 31 South African nature reserves, Scott Ramsay writes about one of the country's most spectacular wild places – the desert mountains of the Richtersveld National Park



Below: The Richtersveld is a dry and desolate place, but it holds its own haunting beauty. Above: The area might not look as if it can sustain much life, but it is filled with interesting insects, animals and plants. Scorpions are a common sight.



The mountainous desert region of the Richtersveld is a staggering sight, and one that inspires awe and respect. Between the mountains are vast sandy plains which turn into velvety grasslands during the sparse winter rains. And through it all, the Orange (Gariep) River carves out an impressive path to the Atlantic Ocean.

Named after missionary Dr E Richter, who visited the area in 1830, the Richtersveld may be SA's most remote and inaccessible wilderness area. It's a magnet for seasoned 4x4 adventurers and self-sufficient nature lovers who enjoy stark yet stunning landscapes.

The Richtersveld National Park encompasses the most spectacular part of the region. It lies in the far north-western corner of SA, on the border of Namibia, alongside the curve of the

river, which turns north for about 100km before going west and south again to the Atlantic. It is a special place – ecologically and culturally – with some of the most diverse desert flora in the world, adapted to deal with the searing summer temperatures, rocky mountainsides, minimal rainfall and cold winter nights. Look out for the stark silhouette of the Kokerboom tree, or the bizarre-looking Halfmens.

It is also the country's first national park to be owned by the local community, from which South African National Parks (SANparks) rents the land. Visitors are often surprised to see Nama shepherds and their livestock moving past the campsites. About 6600 small livestock units are allowed within the park – 4700 permanently and 1900 seasonally. Apart from being superb survivalists, these Nama

shepherds are probably the last truly nomadic people in SA.

The park is part of the greater Ai-Ais/Richtersveld Transfrontier Park, which covers more than 6000 square kilometres of conserved land on both sides of the SA/Namibian border. About 27% of this area – or 1600 square kilometres – is in SA.

Lying adjacent to the southern boundary of the park, the Richtersveld Community Conservancy comprises another 160 000ha. Much of this land, which includes the Nama villages of Lekkersing and Eksteenfontein, is devoted to a less formal type of conservation. Together with the national park, the area was proclaimed a World Heritage Site in 2007 (the eighth in SA), and is known as the Richtersveld Cultural and Botanical Landscape.

WHERE TO STAY

Sendelingsdrif Rest Camp

There are ten fully-equipped, self-catering and electrified chalets (some sleeping two people, others accommodating four) on the banks of the Orange River at the entrance to the park at Sendelingsdrif. There is a communal pool. However, beautiful as the area is, visitors are warned that the adjacent mining village can be noisy and distracting.

Visitors should stay at Sendelingsdrif for only one or two nights, as a stop-over to the park itself.

Tatasberg Wilderness Camp

The camp is situated on a ridge in the north-eastern section of the park, about a 100m from the river. There are five two-bed, self-catering, fully-equipped wooden chalets with stunning views of the river and mountains.

Only four chalets are rented out, as the fifth is for the SANParks caretaker. Solar panels and a small wind turbine provide battery power for fridges and electronic gadgets.

Ganakouriep Wilderness Camp

Built in a similar style to the chalets at Tatasberg, Gannakouriep is situated within a rocky valley in the south-west of the park.

There is no fresh water, so guests must bring their own drinking and cooking water.

There are five fully-equipped, self-catering chalets. These are wheel-chair friendly, unlike the chalets at Tatasberg.

Hakkiesdoring Trail Camp

Situated in the south-west of the park, deep in the mountains, Hakkiesdoring is near Gannakouriep Wilderness Camp, and can sleep eight people in simple yet stylish self-catering accommodation. It was originally built as a base camp for hikers, but can be booked by non-hikers.

Pootjiespram camp site

There are 18 camp sites on the Orange River at Pootjiespram, which is the nearest campsite to Sendelingsdrif, about 9km north-east of the park entrance. It's a good place to spend your first night in the park, especially if you don't want to stay in the chalets at Sendelingsdrif.

De Hoop camp site

About 38km east of Sendelingsdrif, De Hoop has 12 basic camp sites on the river, with communal ablutions and showers. It has one of the best views in the park, with steep mountains on either side of the river, and thick green riverine habitat on the Namibian side. The South African side is relatively sparse of trees and shade, so remember to take an awning, or make sure you camp near one of the few camelthorn trees.



Richtersberg camp site

About 10km farther on from De Hoop, Richtersberg also offers 12 beautifully-situated camp sites on the river, but there are no ablution facilities or showers.

Kokerboomkloof camp site

Deep in the south-eastern mountains, Kokerboomkloof is one of the most beautiful and unusual areas in the Richtersveld park. There are eight camp sites, with ablutions which don't always work, so check out the situation before you go. In any case, the camp has no water, so visitors must take enough for drinking, cooking and washing.



Top: The pont from Namibia to South Africa across the Orange River. Centre: For 4x4 enthusiasts, the Richtersveld is a wonderful destination. Above: Joseph Obies, a shepherd in the Richtersveld. The Richtersveld is a community-owned reserve.



Left: The Richtersveld is incredibly dry, but it manages to sustain a surprising amount of plants. Above: The beautiful Kokerboomkloof camp site. Below: The Tatasberg Wilderness Camp. Bottom, left: Oom Willie at Tatasberg with a yellow fish from the Orange River. Bottom, right: The area's mountains offer stunning vistas.



Year in the Wild – Supported by Total and Ford

Year in the Wild is a journey to 31 nature reserves in SA, including all the national parks. I am travelling for a year to photograph and document our country's last remaining wild places, raising awareness for their continued protection. For blogs, photos and updates which are uploaded via Evosat, go to www.yearinthewild.com and www.facebook.com/yearinthewild. The venture is sponsored by Total, Ford, Evosat, Frontrunner, EeziAwn, Goodyear, National Luna, Global Fleet Sales, Garmin, Escape Gear, Safari Centre Cape Town, Vodacom, Conqueror Trailers, Digicape, Lacie and Clearstream Consulting. I have been to the Richtersveld before, but I have not previously towed a trailer through this very rocky region. I've been a fan of Conqueror trailers since I first used one to explore the Zambezi escarpment a few years ago. Richtersveld park manager Nick de Goede chuckled when I told him I was taking a trailer into the mountains. He has spent many an afternoon fixing broken axles on visitors' trailers. However, he did say that he had never had to fix a Conqueror. Well, true to Nick's word, I had almost no problems with the Conqueror. It's a tough unit, that's for sure, underpinned by a solid 2,5 ton axle and heavy duty shock absorbers.

The trailer is well designed, and has almost everything you could need for a camping trip into a remote region: water tanks, jerry cans, storage boxes, tent, dual battery system, fridge and water pump. But one thing I did notice after two weeks was that the trailer doors did not fit too snugly into their frames, probably because of all the twisting the chassis was subjected to on the rocky tracks. Also, if you're going to take a fridge, I suggest you ask Conqueror to fit a National Luna. These robust portable fridges are manufactured locally, and if something goes wrong, it's easy to get it serviced. The Everest vehicle was a major surprise. I was sceptical about its ability not only to handle the Richtersveld terrain but to do so while towing a trailer weighing almost a ton. Well, it handled everything extremely well. I have new respect for the Everest, and for the Goodyear Wrangler tyres. I deflated these to about 2-bar, and had only one puncture. My main concern was the Everest's towing height. The towbar sits low down on the rear of the vehicle, and I had to be extra careful that the trailer didn't jack-knife into the rocks while going through steep dongas. But as always, I went really slowly, engaged low-range all the way, and chose the easiest line through the obstacles. It all turned out just fine. The interior of the Everest is extremely comfortable, but you'll definitely want to fit seat covers, as the pale khaki leather will suffer in the harsh conditions of the Richtersveld. I have fitted Escape seat covers to the Everest. They are custom made to fit the seats exactly, and the canvas is not only very comfortable (and cooler than leather), but hard wearing. 🌞



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