

Thirst for **WILDERNESS**

Remote and relentless, Richtersveld National Park is not for the faint-hearted or ill-prepared. But the rewards for the adventurer are unrivalled. By **Scott Ramsay**.

RICHTERSVELD NATIONAL PARK



BELOW: A fully sufficient 4x4 is mandatory for navigating the jeep tracks. Many are narrow so take a small trailer if you need to carry supplies for a longer stay. **BELOW RIGHT:** The scenery near Kokerboomkloof is some of the park's best.

Our thirst raged as we hiked up Tatasberg. An agglomeration of granite boulders piled on top of one other, this iconic peak looks like the fortress of a monster banished to the desert. My friend Gareth and I soon realised we didn't have enough water. A human can require several litres every hour, especially when hiking in hot, dry conditions – and if there are two overriding characteristics of the Richtersveld, it's heat and drought.

At the southern end of the Namib, it's the only true desert region in South Africa. Temperatures during summer often hit 50 degrees Celsius and ultraviolet radiation is higher than most places on Earth. Rainfall can be as low as 40 millimetres a year, while evaporation reaches 3000 millimetres annually. We were there in winter, but even so there are only two kinds of daytime

temperature: hot and very hot.

As I reached the top of the narrow peak, my thirst disappeared momentarily, forced out of my mind by the views. Around us in all directions stretched range upon range of mountains, sharp teeth silhouetted against a metallic sky. Some of these foreboding massifs are two billion years old, half the age of Earth. Interspersed between them are sand valleys several kilometres wide, a barren canvas on which nothing moves except the slow creeping of the mountain's shadows.

To the north of the river was !Ai-!Ais National Park of Namibia, now part of the cross-border conservation area that includes the Fish River Canyon, one of the largest on Earth. To the south lay Richtersveld National Park and the Richtersveld Community Conservancy, the core of South Africa's eighth World

Heritage Site, declared for its unique cultural and botanical assets.

Far below, the Orange River ran like a cool vein through the gorges on its way to the Atlantic Ocean. In the Richtersveld, it sustains a narrow line of green acacia trees on its banks, the only bright colour in the hegemony of beige and black geology.

FEW PEOPLE

Unsurprisingly there were no signs of people, but I knew there were a few campsites along the river where 4x4ers were setting up. No doubt the adventurous visitors were cooling off in the water.

We had stayed at several of the sites: De Hoop, Richtersberg, Potjiespram and Tatasberg wilderness camps. Further into the mountains was Kokerboomkloof, a campsite surrounded by granite boulders and a colony of quiver trees.

I also knew there would be a few Nama shepherds, the last nomadic people in the country. On our way into the park, we had met Joseph Obies sitting in the shade of a scraggly shepherd's tree, his dorper goats grazing nearby.

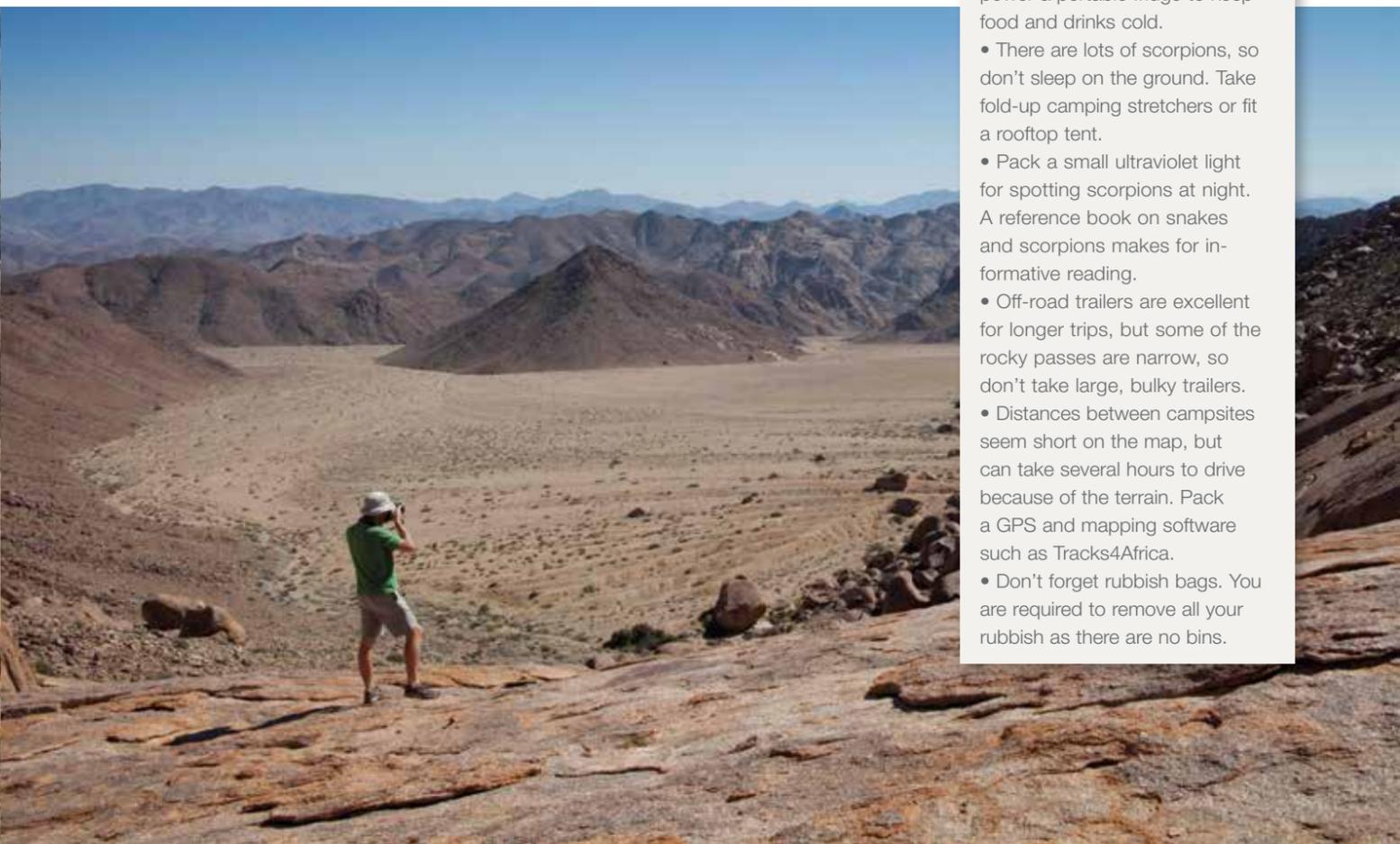
He looked at us through the smoke of his cigarette, then glanced at our 4x4, trailer and all our gear. Archaeological remains show that Joseph's ancestors have lived here for at least four thousand years, continuously moving their livestock and living in portable reed huts. They own the land, but lease it to SanParks for conservation purposes. Visitors are often surprised to see goats grazing inside the park, not realising the Nama shepherds are entitled to do so.

But even the desert-adapted Nama are few and far between. The Richtersveld is effectively devoid of people, with no

➔ continued on page 56

TOP TIPS FOR RICHTERSVELD

- The 220-odd kilometres of tracks are either rock or sand and only fully self-sufficient, high-clearance 4x4s are allowed into the park. Take at least two spare tyres, a tyre repair kit, a high-lift jack, tow-rope and spare fuel.
- Take enough water, food and medical supplies for the whole trip. You can drink from the Orange River, but take purification tablets just in case.
- There's no cellphone reception; consider hiring a satellite phone.
- It's illegal to collect the little firewood there is in the park. Take gas to cook on, or stock up on wood at Port Nolloth or Springbok beforehand.
- Fit a dual-battery system to power a portable fridge to keep food and drinks cold.
- There are lots of scorpions, so don't sleep on the ground. Take fold-up camping stretchers or fit a rooftop tent.
- Pack a small ultraviolet light for spotting scorpions at night. A reference book on snakes and scorpions makes for informative reading.
- Off-road trailers are excellent for longer trips, but some of the rocky passes are narrow, so don't take large, bulky trailers.
- Distances between campsites seem short on the map, but can take several hours to drive because of the terrain. Pack a GPS and mapping software such as Tracks4Africa.
- Don't forget rubbish bags. You are required to remove all your rubbish as there are no bins.



The Orange River flows through the desert gorge, a lifeline for animals, Nama shepherds and visitors. After searing daytime temperatures, the cool night brings relief and nothing beats a sunset skinny dip to wash off all the desert dust.

RICHTERSVELD NATIONAL PARK

more than a hundred-odd people in 6000 square kilometres of largely impenetrable territory.

Standing on top of Tatasberg, a hallucinogenic heat shimmered in the air and the silence hummed in my ears. Wilderness in South Africa can take on many forms but, for me, the Richtersveld defines it better than any other. Although it's intimidating, it's also humbling and awe-inspiring. The region has affected many other people similarly, including Dr Graham Williamson, who probably knows it better than anyone else.

'It's almost impossible to convey in words the profound experience of the overwhelming presence of wilderness which suffuses and saturates the senses,' he wrote in his book, *Richtersveld – The Enchanted Wilderness*. 'The

impression is of a harsh, cruel, arid lunar-landscape but it emanates a beauty of unusual intensity.'

Now based in Cape Town, Graham and his wife Francoise lived at the coastal town of Oranjemund for more than 20 years. During the week he worked as a dentist for local diamond mines; on weekends, he morphed into a pioneering naturalist and botanical expert. The indefatigable couple explored the mountains and valleys on foot, and their love and respect for the area grew.

REMARKABLE ANIMALS AND PLANTS

As Graham explained to me after my hike at Tatasberg, an array of plants and animals survive and even thrive here despite the desert conditions.

Snakes, beetles and geckos endure by burrowing deep into the sand or hiding in rock cracks, often emerging only at night to feed.

Some chameleons have a nasal gland which rids the body of excess salt, and frogs and toads, such as the mysterious Namaqua caco froglet (*Cacosternum namaquense*), hibernate in cracks or soft clay during times of drought. When rare rain arrives, the amphibians emerge with an urge to make up for lost time by copulating all night.

'A deafening cacophony attracts females,' Graham said. 'On one such night in June 1986, after the best rains in living memory, Francoise and I experienced a frog symphony so loud that it prevented sleep.'

He's seen black-backed jackal drink-

ing sea water to quench their thirst, with no negative effects, but large mammals are uncommon because of the climate, and even the hardy gemsbok is limited in number. Klipspringer, springbok and Hartmann's mountain zebra can be seen. The largest predators are leopard and caracal, which survive on small rodents and the odd bird.

Scorpions are common, including the venomous *Parabuthus granulatus*, while one of the world's most poisonous spiders – *Sicarius testaceus* – and snakes such as the dangerous Cape cobra (*Naja nivea*) occur. (Keep your shoes on at night, and don't sleep on the ground). But it's the plants which make the Richtersveld famous, and which intrigue Graham most of all.

As part of the succulent Karoo, a

BELOW: Kokerboomkloof campsite is one of several spectacular options for visitors. Set in the mountains and surrounded by quiver trees, it's best visited during winter when temperatures are cooler, while campsites like De Hoop, Potjiespram and Richtersberg near the river are better for summer. **BELOW RIGHT:** Descending Helskloof Pass in the early morning under a full moon is something to savour. No rush-hour traffic here, just space, silence and solitude.



RICHTERSVELD NATIONAL PARK

biome with 5000 plant species of which more than half are found nowhere else, the area is a global botanical hotspot and one of only two worldwide that is entirely arid (the other is the Horn of Africa).

'Some plants can lower their leaf temperatures below normal metabolic rate and encourage condensation on the outer surface. Others have spoon-shaped leaves which capture condensation and fog. Some have hairs on the leaves which serve as water traps, while others develop large amounts of reddish, orange and even black pigment to protect against excessive solar radiation.'

Graham and Françoise discovered several new species of plants and were instrumental in the rediscovery of the

spectacular *Amaryllis paradisicola*, a species found only in Paradyskloof in the west of the park.

Most obvious among the plants which grow in this region are the unmistakable quiver trees, standing like guards over the landscape and named because the Bushmen once used the branches for hunting arrows.

The three species of quiver trees – or kokerboom – grow just a centimetre or two every year, yet can live for more than 200 years. Their pale bark is cool to touch, reflecting the sun, while the hard, succulent leaves and stem can store several litres of water. Porcupines and other rodents gnaw on the trunks for moisture, yellow flowers provide nectar for

sunbirds, and the branches are perches for raptors in a landscape otherwise devoid of trees.

BEAUTIFUL BUT DANGEROUS

As wondrous as the Richtersveld is, there's a hard, sharp edge which the unprepared will encounter. On the hike up Tatasberg, Gareth and I had stopped to admire a quiver tree to honour the stately plant that grows happily where logic says it shouldn't, but we wasted no time on the way back down. We'd drunk every last drop of our water, and while the plants and animals of the Richtersveld have adapted to desert conditions, we were far from our natural biome.

Out here, with no cellphone communication and at least a four-hour drive over rocky mountains to the park's office at Sendelingsdrif, the possibility of death was all too clear.

By the time we had reached my Ford Everest, our eyes had started to dry out, and it seemed as if someone had poured sawdust down our throats. But we had made it. We downed a bottle of cold Coke from the vehicle's fridge, and soon felt better.

That night the air temperature dropped to the mid-twenties, and we celebrated our day's adventure with a braai and a beer under cosmic light. A chorus of cicadas played out their nocturnal symphony against a backdrop of rushing river water.

As we admired the ancient mountains shining in the moonlight, we became aware that we wouldn't be on Earth much longer than a geological blink of an eye. So we cracked another cold beer, sat back and stared at the stars without a worry in the world. Our thirst for wilderness had been quenched in the Richtersveld. ■



PLAN YOUR TRIP

GETTING THERE

Richtersveld National Park, part of |Ai-|Ais/Richtersveld Transfrontier Park, lies in the far northwestern corner of South Africa on the Namibian border. The entrance is at Sendelingsdrif (open daily from 06h00 to 20h00). The quickest route is to drive from Steinkopf on the N7, 100 kilometres along the R382 to Port Nolloth. Then drive north to Alexander Bay. The road to this point is tarred, but it's gravel from here to Sendelingsdrif.

An alternative route is to turn right off the R382 after about 50 kilometres to Eksteenfontein or Lekkersing, then on to Sendelingsdrif. These are bad gravel roads and the journey will take longer.

Visitors can also enter the park from Namibia, by using the pont (it can carry two fully loaded 4x4s on each crossing). It's open daily from 08h00 to 16h00, but closes when water levels are high.

STAY HERE

SELF-CATERING CHALETs. Sendelingsdrif Rest Camp has 10 fully equipped units with electricity (from R665 a night for two people) on the banks of the Orange River with a communal pool, but the

adjacent mining village can be noisy. Tatasberg (near the river), Gannakouriep and Hakkiesdoring camps (both inland) have simple tented chalets, each with a basic kitchen, shower and toilet (from R660 a night for two people).

CAMPING. There are no demarcated sites at Potjiespram, De Hoop, Richtersberg and Kokerboomkloof, so you find your own spot to pitch camp. During summer, it's best to camp at the three on the river, while Kokerboomkloof inland is better during the cooler winter months (there's no water at Kokerboomkloof, so visitors must bring enough to drink and cook). Costs from R180 a site a night for two people (additional adults pay R62, maximum six people).

For accommodation outside of the park, see the Northern Cape section of the Getaway Guide on page 117 or go to accommodation.getaway.co.za.

CONTACT

Tel 012-428-9111 (central reservations) or 027-831-1506 (park office), email reservations@sanparks.org, www.sanparks.org. ■

BELOW: The view from Tatasberg Wilderness Camp is one of the best in the park. Basic but clean chalets with bedroom, toilet, shower, kitchenette and braai area make things a bit more comfortable, so spend your last few nights here if you have been camping for a week. **OPPOSITE:** Fun in the night: a long exposure and well-aimed torch light illuminates the wildest place in South Africa.



Photojournalist Scott Ramsay has just embarked on his 2013/14 Year in the Wild journey to more of South Africa's reserves and national parks, including the transfrontier parks on the country's borders. Year in the Wild is sponsored by Ford, Goodyear, Cape Union Mart, K-Way, Fronrunner, Globecomm, Vodacom, National Luna, EeziAwn and Outdoor Photo. Follow the new adventures at www.yearinthewild.com, www.facebook.com/yearinthewild, and blog.getaway.co.za.