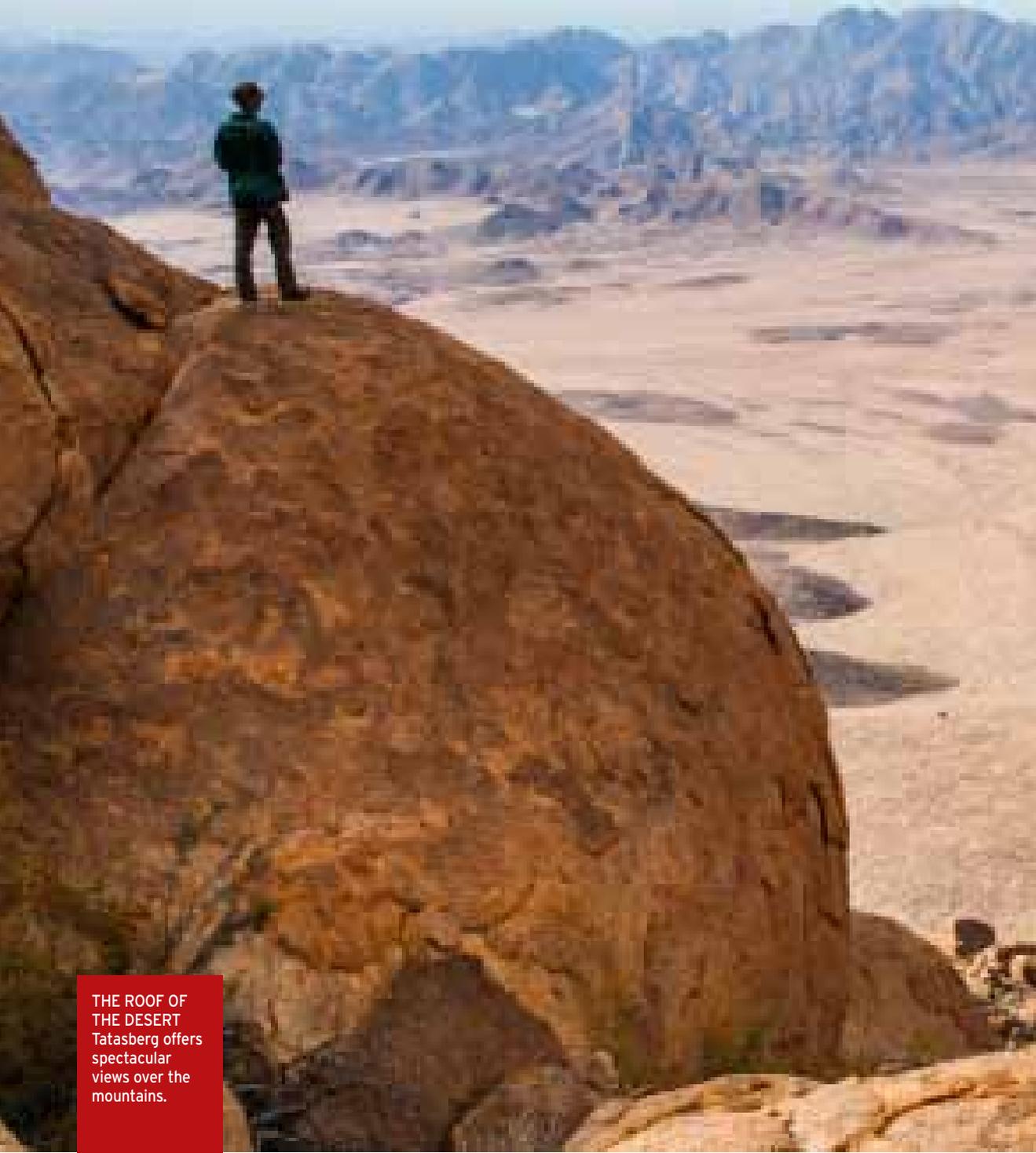


Beyond the rugged and remote campsites and chalets, a jaw-dropping world awaits in the Richtersveld. Make the most of this fine wilderness destination by venturing where few go. **By Scott Ramsay**

Desert DISCOVERIES



“Always and everywhere I have seen men attach themselves more stubbornly to barren lands than to any other... we too have loved the desert to the point of feeling it was there we had lived the best years of our lives.” -Antoine de Saint-Exupery, French pilot and author



THE ROOF OF THE DESERT
Tatasberg offers spectacular views over the mountains.



From left to right: Ranger Seth Domrogh; park manager Nick de Goede; a lonely trail into the park.

The Richtersveld is the most extreme place in South Africa. In summer, it is usually one of the hottest spots on Earth, but I was shivering. An icy westerly wind from the Atlantic Ocean was howling, bringing with it thick misty cloud that shrouded everything.

It didn't stop park ranger Seth Domrogh from chuckling. "This weather is unbelievable," he smiled, "but it's lekker!"

Seth was born in the nearby town of Kuboes and has lived his whole life in this arid, sweltering wilderness. For him, like his Nama ancestors, the cold weather was a blessing.

We were walking up the iconic mountain of Tatasberg, a 1000-metre high granite pluton, a conglomeration of thousands of massive boulders piled on top of each other. Forced into the crust of the Earth by a magma intrusion half a billion years ago, this distinctive mountain in the east of the Richtersveld Transfrontier Park can be seen from kilometres away. Walking slowly to the top takes about three hours and offers some of the best views of the park.

TO THE SUMMIT: TATASBERG

Based at the nearby Tatasberg Wilderness Camp on the Orange River, Seth had never summited the mountain. As a self-taught botanist with unbridled enthusiasm for the Richtersveld's famed flora, he was keen to check out some of the plants on the way up and see for himself the legendary views.

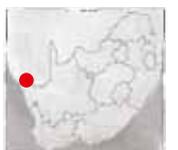
The week before temperatures had soared into the high 40s and that morning seemed like any other. Clear skies, no wind and full of the portent of yet another hot day. Seth and I left Tatasberg Wilderness Camp at first light to get to the top of the mountain before the sun climbed too high.

Within minutes of the sun being up, cold air rushed in from

the coast, about 100 kilometres away, where the Benguela Current bathes the shore in icy water. The wind threatened to blow us over and thick cloud blocked our views, so we hid behind a clump of granite boulders. Shivering, I never thought I'd long for the heat of the Richtersveld.

Seth told me how park manager Nick de Goede had once recorded 62°C outside the offices at Sendelingsdrif. In such conditions, you'd expect death, not life; despair, not hope. Yet the beauty and luminescence of the landscape inspires a near-spiritual devotion in most people who see it. Range upon range of mountains, interspersed with endless

Richtersveld Transfrontier Park lies 180 km from Port Nolloth.



Quiver trees are symbolic of the Richtersveld's diversity, providing shelter and sustenance for creatures such as porcupines, cardinal woodpeckers, malachite sunbirds, baboons, thick-toed geckos, ants and beetles.

valleys, cut through by the perennial Orange River.

Scientifically the Richtersveld is bursting at the seams with species and natural splendour. It's the most botanically diverse arid region in the world, with thousands of plants and animals that survive – and thrive. Most notable is the giant quiver tree *Aloe pilansii*, standing several metres high, a lone warrior guarding its desert dominion. Seth explained how the trees are superbly adapted to the desert heat, storing several litres of water in fibrous stems and limiting heat loss with reflective, powdery trunks.

If you take the time to look, you'll notice that apart from the well-known *halfmens*, *botterbome* and shepherd trees, the Richtersveld is home to countless

other plant species (more than 1 600 – Ed.). Then the animals, rarely seen, but always there. Gemsbok trot, Hartman's mountain zebra gallop, leopards skulk, Verreaux's eagles soar, fish eagles swoop, bee-eaters chirrup and yellowfish splash in the shallows of the river.

As Seth predicted, the wind dropped and the clouds drifted away, leaving us clear to summit Tatasberg. To the northwest, the Orange River wound its way through the mountains to the ocean. To the south lay the Springbokvlakte, huge open plains covered in flowers during late winter. To the west, countless peaks and valleys, jagged canines thrusting skywards. And, far to the south, the Rosyntjieberg, our next destination.

SPRINKLES OF WATER: ROSYNTJIEBERG

The contrasting nature of the Richtersveld is particularly evident at the Oemsberg Amphitheatre. In the southwest interior of the park, about a two-hour walk from Gannakouriep Wilderness Camp, this unexpected geological formation surprises everyone who goes there.

Set far away from the Orange River alongside the Rosyntjieberg, the chalets at Gannakouriep, and the nearby Hakkiesdoring hiking camp, are too hot for most humans during summertime. Exposed to the sun with little shade, most visitors to the park tend to stay away from here, which makes these sites appeal-

ing to adventurous souls, such as dentist-turned-botanist Graham Williamson. Every weekend for 20 years he and his wife Françoise would hike these mountains, documenting the plants, some of which were new to science. For Graham, the Richtersveld had no equal, and the Oemsberg Amphitheatre was one of his favourite places. So we had to go.

Seth and I left well before sunrise, but that morning there was no cold mist. It was going to be a typical day, scalded by the heat and without a breeze to cool us down. There is little shade on the route, so it's best to walk early in the morning. We passed several colonies of ▶



Seth is dwarfed by a fine specimen of the giant quiver tree.



Henry Cloete, a Nama shepherd encountered at De Hoop.



1. Reed cabin at Tatasberg. 2. Double-banded sandgrouse are perfectly camouflaged. 3. A male of the species. 4. Looking out towards the Rosyntjieberg.



The Richtersveld offers new perspective on life, and endless fascination: a strange plant, a fleeting animal, a different view, and the promise of a new adventure around every corner.

THE HINTERLAND
Looking across the Orange River towards Namibia and more wilderness to explore.



WHERE THE RIVER RUNS THROUGH: **DE HOOP**

On my last few days in the Richtersveld I camped at De Hoop alongside the Orange River where there's good shade from several large camel thorn trees. I had the place to myself, mostly.

Once a day a local Nama shepherd, Henry Cloete, would bring his 100-odd goats to drink from the river. The local community owns the land of the national park and are entitled to graze their livestock. While his goats slurped from the river, Oom Henry would sit under the camel thorn tree, drinking one of my cold Cokes and telling me stories of his solitary life, the stubborn loyalty of his dogs and encounters with jackals and leopards.

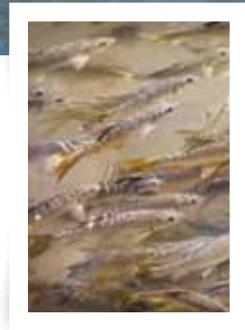
Most visitors are content to simply lap up the atmosphere at De Hoop, watching the river flow past, admiring the mountains and enjoying the complete sense of utter relaxation. But Henry had other ideas for me. He pointed to the mountain, and told me I should walk to the top, saying

something about the impressive views. So after he had left for the day, and the sun dipped lower in the sky, I decided not to disappoint the old man. I shook off my lethargy and set off up the mountain, following a makeshift trail.

The going was steep, but because of the afternoon shade it wasn't too onerous. After an hour I was on top, overlooking the Orange River Gorge, which extends 30 kilometres in either direction, south to Tatasberg and north all the way into Namibia. Far below me, the Gariiep, flowing through the golden mountains.

Perhaps this is why people are drawn to the desert, to remind themselves of the simple things that matter: water, food and shelter. The Richtersveld offers fresh perspective on life and endless fascination: a strange plant, a fleeting animal, a different view, and the promise of a new adventure around every corner. Just remember to pack those cold drinks, you will need them.

Many of the animals and plants are endemic to the region, including the rare desert toad *Vandijkophrynus robinsonii* and a spectacular flowering bulb *Amaryllis paradisicola*, found only deep in the Paradyskloof mountains in the south of the park.



Juvenile yellow fish abound in the river.

kokerboom trees and noticed the increase in vegetation, a result of the south of the park receiving more rainfall than the north.

After some persistence the mountains loomed larger and we found our way into a narrowing gorge with cliffs 100 metres high. Almost instantaneously the glare, the sun, the thirst in my throat and the sweat on my back disappeared. Like stepping across the threshold of consciousness into a pleasant dream, we stumbled into a huge amphitheatre of rock, about 70 metres long, almost

entirely shaded overhead by the towering cliffs.

At the southern end was a trickling waterfall. In rare heavy downpours it can turn into a torrent. Echoes of dripping water tinkled like a xylophone, while starlings and swallows tweeted deliriously above our heads. We lay down on the cool sand, staring up at the slice of bright blue sky above.

If I were a leopard, I thought, this would be my lair. On the way in, we had spotted fresh leopard spoor. Imagine coming face to face with a leopard in the Richtersveld.

At De Hoop the Orange River brings relief from the heat.



River-front camping at De Hoop

Looking for solitude?
You'll find it here
aplenty.



TRIP PLANNER

GETTING THERE

The park entrance at Sendelingsdrif lies about 85 km east of Alexander Bay in the Northern Cape, on the border of Namibia. Access from Namibia is also possible by using the pont across the Orange River. You must have a fully equipped 4x4.

WEATHER

Best time of year to visit is autumn, winter or spring when temperatures are cooler.

ACCOMMODATION

Campsites are R195 a site for two people. Ablutions at Potjiespram, De Hoop, Richtersberg and Kokerboomkloof. Tented camps at Tatasberg and Gannakouriep are R710 a tent. For Hakkiesdoring hiking trails base camp see page XX. Sendelingsdrif has comfortable, air-conditioned chalets R715 a night.

CONTACT

Park 027-831-1506, SANParks reservations 012-428-9111 www.sanparks.org.za

3 OF THE BEST MUST-HIKE TRAILS

A GPS with Tracks4Africa software will make your trip to the Richtersveld far easier. For me it's a critical piece of gear, especially when walking in the park. Without it, you could get easily lost.



Tatasberg Trail (3 km, 2 hours one way)

GPS COORDINATES

START: S28 18.673 E17 14.396, a few kilometres south of Tatasberg Wilderness Camp

TOP OF MOUNTAIN: S28 19.077 E17 15.107

From the camp, follow the track away from the river into the valley to the south. Better still, ask ranger Seth Domrogh at the camp to point you in the right direction. Once you've parked your 4x4 at the start, walk up to the ridge, then follow your nose left to the top of the mountain. There is no dedicated path, but the route is self-evident. Look out for the impressive giant quiver tree (S28 18.590 E17 14.537) growing alongside the track near the start of the trail.



Oemsberg Amphitheatre Walk (7km one way)

GPS COORDINATES

START: S28 24.877 E17 10.325

AMPHITHEATRE: S28 27.704 E17 08.815

Drive south of Gannakouriep Wilderness Camp or Hakkiesdoring Hiking Camp to R18, as shown on the official park map. From there, drive on the track south to the start coordinates given above. On a rock nearby you will see a 'white-shoe' trail marking. Continue south along the bed of the Gannakouriep River, towards the mountains, following the trail markings. After about 7 km, the gorge begins to narrow. Scale a few boulders and you're there! Along the way, look out for some impressive quiver trees, especially at S28 26.054 E17 09.047.



De Hoop Mountain Walk (xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx)

GPS COORDINATES

START: S28 11.268 E17 10.538

TOP OF MOUNTAIN: S28 11.725 E17 10.313

Walk a short distance east of the campsites, then into a little valley and straight up the highest mountain behind De Hoop. This is the shortest hike, but it is arguably the most difficult because of the loose rock. Go slowly and be sure to walk in the late afternoon shade, and you'll be fine. The views are worth it!



Perhaps this is why people are drawn to the desert, to remind themselves of the simple things that matter: water, food and shelter.

A 4x4 is essential for exploring the Richtersveld.

3 OF THE BEST 4x4 DRIVES

Hand of God

Very accessible and well signposted, this is a deservedly popular point of interest, so if you're a first-time visitor to the Richtersveld, be sure to check it out at S28 07.319 E17 00.569.

Helskloof Pass

This classic 4x4 road leads out of the Richtersveld through spectacular mountain scenery in the southwest of the park. There are superb botanical specimens along the way. Look out for thousands of Pearson's aloes *Aloe pearsonii* growing near S28 19.964 E16 59.427. A lovely colony of *botterboom* trees *Tylecodon paniculatus* grows to the north of S28 17.285 E17 02.556. Don't miss the impressive and distinctive giant quiver tree just to the left of S28 17.532 E17 04.037.

Rocky terrain can slow progress. It's best to take it nice and easy.



Road to Richtersberg Campsite

This road, from R6 to R11 on the official map, is officially closed, but if you're not pulling a trailer and your vehicle is not too wide, you may go for it. At some points (especially S28 17.532 E17 04.037) the gorge narrows to a car-width, so you'll have to drive slowly and very carefully. Severe rocky terrain also slows progress, but it's great fun. Look out for the sheer cliffs at S28 15.606 E17 10.704.

3 OF THE BEST CLASSIC VIEWS

The jeep tracks of the Richtersveld lead to brilliant vistas.

S28 13.059 E17 07.290 looks south over a huge valley towards the mountains along the Orange River.

S28 19.396 E17 14.443 overlooks Boulder Valley just below Tatasberg, at the end of a jeep track that branches off west of the road to Kokerboomkloof campsite.

S28 19.848 E17 15.867 looks across the Springbokvlaktes towards the impressively rugged Rosyntjieberge. It is signposted off the road to Kokerboomkloof.