

HOME OF THE HALFMENS

The Ai-Ais-Richtersveld Transfrontier National Park

As the gale battered the truck I understood why the crippled shepherd's trees that clung to the barren rock faces of Potjiespramberg bent double, all facing north. It was pitch black and bitterly cold. The blasts of dust around the truck were redolent with the sweetish, goaty smell of "bokdrol" (goat droppings). I was cramped and uncomfortable in the front of the truck. My head pillowed by my camera bag and my knees jammed against the steering wheel, I cursed not having brought a tent. The few people I'd spoken to who'd visited this far-flung area had ranted on about the stifling heat. No one had mentioned the wind. So much for my plan of spending glorious nights on the canopy of my truck, sleeping under the stars.

The Richtersveld National Park is a 162 445 ha wedge of harsh beauty, hugged by an elbow of the Gariep River (formerly the Orange) in the extreme northwestern corner of South Africa's Northern Cape province and now incorporates the Ais-Ais and Fish River Canyon National Parks and the Sperregebiet of Namibia. This region is regarded as the southernmost extension of the Namib Desert due to its scant rainfall, less than 50mm in some areas. Proclaimed in 1991, this reserve is one of a new breed of protected areas called 'contractual parks' focussing on community involvement and joint management. Its status as one of South Africa and Namibia's first Transfrontier parks was formalized in 2003. The original inhabitants of the area (the descendants of Nama-pastoralists), continue to live and maintain their goat-herding lifestyle within the park's boundaries while leasing the land to South African National Parks. The contract allows for a maximum of just over 6 000 goats to be grazed within the reserve and for revenue to be earned from tourism.

In the failing light, as we had made camp below Potjiespram on the banks of the Gariep River, we noticed several deserted shelters. The copious goat droppings that littered the ground suggested this must be a favoured watering place for local herders. Throughout the reserve the remains of many abandoned shelters can be found - complete with ancient wagons and rusted water drums, crumbling foundation slabs and ruined walls. Stark testimony to the harsh, unwelcoming nature of this environment, it seemed as if, unable to eke out an existence on this lunar landscape, the inhabitants had wandered off, leaving their possessions to litter the gravel plains and slowly decay beneath the unrelenting gaze of the sun. But incredibly, people do live here. We awoke one morning to the crack of a whip as an elderly herdsman drove his goats and fat-tailed sheep, bleating up the river to nibble on the wild tamarisk trees growing along the banks. He lifted his hat with old-world dignity as I waved. The goats looked fat and healthy and we marvelled at their ability to thrive on such a spartan diet.

The centre of the Richtersveld National Park is a wasteland of glittering gravel. Black magma sills intrude across barren plains covered with a bum-fluff of bleached, blonde grass. The horizon crowds in with layer

upon layer of jagged mountain ranges, each one a different shade of blue. As far as the eye can see there is no sign of life. Not even an insect. The heat is intense.

This rugged landscape was shaped over 660 million years ago during a major glacial ice age. Ancient volcanoes belched masses of molten granite into fantastic, surreal shapes and under enormous pressure and heat, gave birth to precious stones and metals resulting in several diamond mines unfortunately still active in the park today. It is difficult to believe this area, once clothed in thick forests, has yielded fossil remains of prehistoric ostriches, elephants and bear dogs, testament to a cooler, more temperate past. Human habitation in the reserve can be traced back to 250 000 years ago with the discovery of Middle Stone Age axes along the Gariiep River. Radiocarbon analysis of charcoal from ancient hearths indicate that these shelters, thought to have been constructed by the San, are at least 900 years old. At various points along the Gariiep, petroglyphs can be found, engraved into rocky banks. These are believed to have been the work of the pastoralist Nama-Khoikhoi who arrived in the Cape from the north. The fat-tailed sheep that can be seen in the park today are the genetic descendants of the livestock these people brought with them. Eventually the first Europeans arrived in 1779 and the Richtersveld is named after an inspector for the Rhenish mission, Dr Richter, who visited the area in 1830.

The Gariiep River, the source of life both past and present in this thirsty area, winds between rocky massifs like a brilliant snake. Three of the five campsites in the park are located along the river and cool rest is afforded in its pebbly shallows. Herons, cormorants, darters, kingfishers and other waterbirds inhabit the reedbeds and the majestic voice of the African fish eagle may be heard, tumbling from the steep mountains.

The first scientific interest in the rich plant diversity of the region occurred in 1830 when a certain Johann Franz Drege collected specimens at Sendelingsdrift on the Gariiep River. Since then the Richtersveld has become renowned for its bizarre and widely diverse vegetation. Many species of plants have evolved to exploit the diverse ecosystems and niches created by variations in climate, altitude, moisture availability and geomorphology. An important feature that plays a role in defining the distribution of plant species are the moisture-laden fogs that roll in from the Atlantic Ocean. The '!hurries' or 'malmokkie', as these mists are called by the local inhabitants, increases the annual rainfall in areas of high altitude to 300mm.

Because of the extremely low rainfall, succulents thrive in this park. The most noticeable are carpets of annual 'vygies' (little figs), particularly the 'natvoet' (wet foot) (*Opophytum aquosum*), appearing during November and December on sandy plains after good rains. It is worth spending a few hours exploring rocky outcrops and drainage lines as many species, such as the stone flowers (*Lithops sp.*) are difficult to spot due to their cryptic colouration when not flowering.

Stapeliads are also common, the largest (*Hoodia gordonii*), is a giant reaching over a metre, with waxy,

pink flowers the size of a small saucer. One of the rarest stapeliads in the reserve, (*Stapeliopsis neronis*), was named by the famous botanist Neville Pillans in honour of his wagon driver, Nero, who first drew his attention to the plant.

The bizarre 'halfmens' (half person) (*Pachypodium namaquanum*), probably the best-known and most endangered of the Richtersveld flora, bow their crinkly heads to the north to protect their growing shoots from excessive heat. According to local legend these trees are half-plant and half-human. Seen silhouetted from a distance, they do indeed resemble a bowing person.

Also found in rocky kloofs is the 'botterboom' or butter-tree (*Tylecodon paniculatus*), a commiphora look-alike with peeling, olive bark and scarlet flowers. This dwarf, succulent treelet can cause death if browsed by stock. Most boulder-strewn ravines are inhabited by regiments of quiver trees (*Aloe dichotoma*). This tree was first recorded by Simon van der Stel, who noticed that the San used its soft branches to fashion quivers for their arrows, giving rise to its English name. The bastard quiver tree (*Aloe pillansii*) - easily confused with the true quiver tree - is extremely endangered and endemic to the region.

Highly visible euphorbia species make up a very important constituent to the flora of this region. Their perennial green stems provide welcome splashes of colour during the dry summer months as well as food and shelter for a multitude of birds, insects and small mammals.

Most Richtersveld plants have adapted special mechanisms to cope with the vicious summer winds and high temperatures that dessicate the region during the dry season. The Namaqualand ceraria (*Ceraria namaquensis*), a strange, pale barked tree that grows to about 2 m in height, has tiny leaves to combat moisture loss through transpiration. These leaves drop off altogether during summer when evaporation is at its greatest and the plant enters a dormant stage. The notorious winds of the Richtersveld sculpt many species into twisted, stunted shapes. A good example is the sweet thorn (*Acacia karroo*). Often reaching a towering 15 m in the rest of the country, it seldom grows to half that height in the Richtersveld. The shepherd's tree (*Boscia albitrunca*) has developed impressive root systems similar to the 'rock breaker' fig species to anchor them securely to exposed, windswept outcrops.

Because of its aridity this park is host to only 38 mammal species, the largest being Hartmann's mountain zebra, greater kudu and the occasional gemsbok. Grey rhebok, klipspringer and steenbok are some of the smaller species. Predators such as brown hyaena, blackbacked jackal, caracal and leopard are mostly nocturnal and therefore seldom seen. Due to harassment by the local herders they have also unfortunately become very shy of human contact and inhabit the more inaccessible mountains.

We spent our last night at a campsite tucked away in the boulder strewn Kokerboomkloof. Nearby a spectacular rock formation called 'Die Toon' (The Toe), towered over the landscape as if in readiness to

stamp on anything that moved below. We watched the setting sun from a viewsite on top of the Tatasberg, a series of granite exfoliation domes that encircled a secret valley. Wrinkled with dry watercourses, a black mountain of volcanic origin squatted in the centre, ancient and enigmatic. Overhead a jackal buzzard shrieked in the thin air, then plummeted to the misty plains below. Everything was still. A cold breeze started up and we made our way back through the shattered landscape to camp.

Visitors Information

Campsites in the park have limited facilities so visitors should be totally self-sufficient if they intend camping. Several chalets have recently been constructed at some of the campsites and offer the visitor a more luxurious option. All the campsites now have long-drop toilets. Fuel and maps are available at Sendelingsdrift, the park headquarters. To maintain the wilderness atmosphere groups are restricted to 3 vehicles and about 12 people per campsite. Vehicles with high clearance, preferably 4x4's, are essential as some of the roads are very rocky and deep sand can be encountered in the riverbeds. DO NOT leave the road as this is an ecologically sensitive area and off-road driving damages the fragile plantlife impacting on the environment for many years. An extra spare tyre, toolkit, spares and water is essential. Do not sleep on the ground as scorpions and other arthropods are abundant. Days can be extremely hot while nights may drop below freezing. The Richtersveld National Park is best reached from Springbok on the N7. Travel towards the Namibian border and turn left to Port Nolloth, then along the coast to Alexander Bay. A good gravel road leads to Reuning/Sendelingsdrift, a distance of approximately 94 km. Visitors must arrive at the park headquarters before 16:00 to allow for travelling time to their campsite.

Contacts

Bookings may be made through South African National Parks, tel: +27 12 343 1991, fax: +27 12 343 0905, or e-mail: reservations@parks-sa.co.za.

LIST OF CAPTIONS

1. This being a contractual park, herds of goats are allowed to be grazed by the local Nama-pastoralists in the reserve.
2. A flock of goats at De Hoop campsite is a common sight. The Nama people still have many fat-tailed sheep in their flocks.
3. An abandoned wagon – often the only signs of habitation in the park.
4. The Gariiep (Orange) River flows like a bright strip of emerald through the parched landscape.
5. The Gariiep River at sunset when the colours of the landscape are much more forgiving.
6. Large animals such as this gemsbok are seldom seen in the park, but plans to re-introduce more game into the area is on the cards.
7. A hidden valley in the Tatasberg – typical rocky scenery of the Richtersveld.
8. The waxy flowers of the *Hoodia gordonii*
9. The biggest of the *Hoodia* species, this specimen stands nearly a metre tall.
10. The fleshy stem of the *Botterboom* (butter tree) can cause death to stock if it is browsed.
11. Large carpets of 'natvoet' (wet foot) indicate that there were good rains in the previous season.
12. The bizarre 'halfmens' (half person) is an iconic species of the Richtersveld.
13. The 'kokerboom' or 'quiver tree' was used by the San to make quivers for their arrows.

14. The 'kokerboom's' range is moving further south due to global warming and the region becoming too arid to sustain it.
15. The peeling bark of the 'kokerboom' makes for good photographic subject matter.
16. This skink species rests under a rock during the heat of the day.
17. These fast moving Tenebroid beetles take a second out of their busy day to mate.
18. One of the more remote campsites on the banks of the Gariep River.
19. The road to nowhere.
20. Clumps of green euphorbia bushes relieve the starkness of the desert landscape.