



END OF THE ROAD. Kokerboomkloof camp is the furthest you can get from civilization in the park. Pitch your tent between rock formations and ancient quiver trees.



LAND OF MYTH AND MIRACLE

The /Ai/Ais-Richtersveld Transfrontier Park can play mind games with you. Some people say you definitely need a 4x4, others say your Nissan Micra will get you to Kokerboomkloof. We drove every road with a GPS and a notebook – and visited every campsite – to separate fact from fiction.

WORDS & PICTURES **FRANÇOIS HAASBROEK**

Clockwise from top left.

WHERE THE NAMAS HID THEIR

ARROWS. If the Richtersveld were a country, the quiver tree would be its national plant. A fine specimen like this one, part of a forest of quiver trees in Kokerboomkloof, can grow for 400 years.

ON TIPTOES. Game like gemsbok, kudu, springbok and zebra are rather shy in the Richtersveld. You may not see any big game during your visit. Klipspringers are perfectly adapted to this arid environment so keep an eye on the ridges.

PRETTY PASS. You need skill and strong nerves to drive Domorogh Pass. It's strictly for 4x4s, but the views from the top will more than make up for your loose fillings.

COOL BABOON. When the mercury reaches unimaginable temperatures, baboons come to find relief in the Orange River.

It's a cliché but true: The Richtersveld is a harsh place. The roads are gravel and they're full of twists and turns. You drive pass after pass, interrupted by sandy plains. In summer it's blistering hot and in winter the cold seeps in as soon as the sun disappears behind those pointy mountains called the Vyf Susters.

The Orange River cuts through it all: a green avenue that brings relief to the arid landscape. If you walk away from the river – even for just a few metres – you can't believe that anything can survive, let alone thrive.

Yet the Richtersveld teems with life. The biodiversity of South Africa's only mountainous desert is astonishing. More than 4000 plant species grow here and almost half of them are endemic. Dassies, kudus and leopards live in the hills. People also somehow manage to carve out an existence.

The big-picture landscapes are spectacular, but you also have to look closely to experience the true beauty of the place. At night, before the moon rises, the Milky Way hangs so low that you'll feel like you can reach up and pluck a star.

Getting there – slowly

The gravel road starts long before you reach the national park. The tar ends at Alexander Bay and you'll soon pass signs for places like Baken, Sanddrif, Brandkaros and Grootderm. The residents of these villages work on the diamond mines, which is also the reason why the roads in the area are in a relatively good condition.

About 12 km outside Kuboes, the road turns north and my wife Marilize and I start to get a taste of what lies ahead. You don't need a 4x4 here but your Micra will take a beating. Loose stones and potholes make driving difficult, especially when an easterly wind chases sandstorms your way.

It's already late in the afternoon when we reach the park gate 25 km later. The propeller of a wind-powered generator whistles as it tries to keep up with the wind. The guard at the gate runs over, holding the visitor's book over his face to shield him from the sand. You don't pay your park fees here – the guard only controls access. He lets the office in Sendelingsdrift know we're on our way.

"Don't worry about the wind – it blows every afternoon," he says. "It will die down soon."

He's right: About 20 km further we arrive at a wind-still Sendelingsdrift. The place has a strange feel to it. It's a border post, but there isn't a bridge across the river, only a pont. We didn't see much life on the way in, but Sendelingsdrift has a café and a filling station. Between the houses there are green lawns and big trees. In the desert it really helps to live next to the Orange River!

The SANParks office is built in the style of an old fort overlooking the pont. I ask about the kind of vehicles that are allowed in the park. Usually when I ask this question, the reply has something to do with low range. Not today: The official is more concerned that we'll overheat. "Do you have aircon?" he asks. November is not the best time of year for a visit.

We spend the night in a chalet with a view of the river. There's air conditioning and cricket on TV. The only drama is when a vervet monkey makes off with a bag of rusks the next morning as we're having breakfast on the stoep.

We drive out of Sendelingsdrift and into the park, passing the campsite along the way. The first few kilometres take us past another mine, but once we're over Halfmens Pass I start to get that wilderness feel.

According to folklore, there was a time when the Nama people, who lived to the north of the Orange River, banished their conquered enemies south into the Richtersveld. Longing for their home, the conquered people gazed north forlornly and eventually turned into plants. This is how one of the Richtersveld's most unique endemic plants got the name of "halfmens" or "half person". Look at the leaf stems of the halfmens plants (*Pachypodium namaquanum*) growing on the pass – they always face north.

The myth of the halfmens is similar to the story of Lot's wife, who was turned into a pillar of salt when she looked back at Sodom. That's not the only thing that reminds me of the Bible. Deeper into the park, near Tatasberg, the landscape looks like the pictures in the illustrated Bible I had as a child, specifically the desert plains where Jesus wandered for 40 days



while the devil tried to tempt Him. It's so hot that the devil would feel at home.

On the other side of Halfmens Pass, just 150m off the road, you can even see the Hand of God – a strange indentation in a rock that looks like an oversized handprint.

Down by the river

The start of Akkedis Pass is about 5 km from the Hand of God, but I struggle to tell where this pass ends and the next one – Penkop Pass – begins. The road is steep and rocky but our 4x4 Mitsubishi Pajero Sport crawls along smoothly. I don't even have to touch the low-range button.

After the passes, the terrain levels out as you drive across the Koeroegab Plains to De Hoop on the banks of the Orange River. The last few kilometres go through a kloof with ankle-deep puddles of water in places, where a natural spring has seeped into the sand. If you visit in the early morning – and you're quiet – you can sometimes see animals drinking here.

At the river, I turn left instead of right and soon realise I'm lost. Eventually I see a column of smoke rising from a herder's outpost and head there to ask for directions. The man at the post doesn't say a word. He just lifts his arm and points upriver. (*Herders are allowed to graze their animals in the park. See the sidebar on page 42 – Ed.*)

At De Hoop, Marilize and I don't set up camp right away. We first head down to the river to cool off. We're not the only ones trying to escape the heat – on the opposite bank, a troop of Namibian baboons are drinking water. Some of them munch on river grass and others sit in the river like it's a Jacuzzi. Only their heads are sticking out.

I pitch our tent when the temperature starts to drop. Nearby, other campers are fishing in front of their riverside stand. The Orange River in the Richtersveld is a world-renowned fly-fishing destination for large- and smallmouth yellowfish. There are also catfish, barbel and enormous carp lurking in the depths.

After sunset, the nightlife picks up. Baboons bark from across the river and a solifuge arrives, which chases after Marilize. After I manage to calm her down, we turn off the lights and look at the stars. There's no moon and it doesn't take long before we see satellites and shooting stars streaking across the black. Fireflies light up and start patrolling the riverbank. It's magical.

The next morning, we discover that our tent was home to some overnight guests. We find a few small scorpions under the groundsheet and spiders the size of R5 coins between the tent and the flysheet. Luckily the resident African pied wagtails come to our aid: As soon as a spider is shaken out, the birds swoop in and eat it for breakfast.

Don't drive the river road between De Hoop and Tatasberg Wilderness Camp in anything less than a 4x4 with low range. The sand is deep and there are rocks hiding in places. Be careful even if you're in a 4x4, especially if you're towing a trailer.

By the time we reach the wilderness camp, the Pajero says it's 46°C outside. There's a broken rain gauge in the parking area. I wonder when last they took a reading here...

Passes and valleys

Two biomes meet in the northern part of the Northern Cape: succulent Karoo, like Namaqualand, and desert, like southern Namibia. The line that separates these two biomes runs right through the Richtersveld. If you travel from north to south via the Maerpoort or Domorogh passes, you can actually watch the landscape changing through your windscreen.

If you're travelling in a 4x2 and you want to get from De Hoop to Tatasberg – a boulder-strewn inselberg on a sandy plain – the quickest and easiest route is via Maerpoort Pass. If you have a 4x4 and feel like a challenging detour, tackle Domorogh Pass. The views from the 4x4 pass are amazing and there are lots of places to pull over and gawk. (Don't worry: You're not missing out if you have a 4x2 because the best views are still to come.)

Springbokvlakte is the name of a vast open plain in the eastern section of the park. There's grass here after rain, but at the moment it's just sand. You can drive across the plain, but we follow the signs to Kokerboomkloof instead, into the hills.

Along the way we stop at the Tatasberg lookout point. Tatasberg is like a smaller version of Spitzkoppe in Namibia – it looks as if a giant abandoned his pile of building blocks. From the lookout point, there's also a view of the kloof north of Tatasberg. If you shout on a windless day, you'll hear your voice echoing back from down the ravine. But the wind is too strong today so we move on.

PARK INFO

All the places to stay on the South African side of the transfrontier park are managed by SANParks. Make your accommodation bookings via the website, but call ahead to ask about the condition of the roads.

Rates: Conservation fee R70 per adult per day; R35 per child. Camping from R240 per stand per day for two people sharing, plus R88 per additional adult; R44 per child. Chalets at Sendelingsdrift from R855 per day for two people sharing, plus R260 per additional adult; R130 per child. Tatasberg and Gannakouriep wilderness camps from R855 per day for two people sharing.

Contact: ☎ 012 428 9111 (bookings); ☎ 027 831 1506 (Sendelingsdrift reception office); 🌐 sanparks.org

About 3 km further we steer the nose of the Pajero to the edge of a precipice overlooking Springbokvlakte. We can see all the way to the vineyards at Aussenkehr on the opposite side of the Orange River.

Who needs Domorogh Pass?

We follow the road past Die Toon – a rock formation that looks like a big toe – to Kokerboomkloof. It's the only campsite in the park that's not next to the river, but strangely it's also where we see the most signs of life.

Quiver trees and poison euphorbias grow against the sides of the kloof. We drive until the road comes to a dead end, where we're greeted by a family of klipspringers. They shoot us wary looks before disappearing behind the boulders.

The wind is gusting and I struggle to pitch the tent. Every stand has its own small ablution building. I find some shelter between this building and a nearby rock.

As usual, the wind dies around sunset and the rocks turn to gold while the shadows of the quiver trees grow longer.

I realise that I feel at home here, as far as you can go into the most remote national park in South Africa.

The weather is cool and misty on our final morning in the park. It's the so-called "*malmokkies*" – the mist banks that roll in from the Atlantic Ocean, which sustain the vegetation.

We cross the dry Gannakouriep River and travel to the base of Helskloof Pass, through the Noemmesberg and Paradysberg mountains.

Near the summit of Helskloof, which crests the Vandersterrberg range, the mountain slopes are coloured red by a sea of Pearson's aloes, which are found here and nowhere else on earth. The aloes are struggling in the drought, but like most plants in the Richtersveld, they know how to hang on.

Then the road slopes down to the gate, where that wind generator is still singing in the breeze.

The Richtersveld is not for everyone, but if you value solitude and true wilderness, you'll also find yourself at home in this rocky desert.

VIEWS INTO NAMIBIA. En route to Kokerboomkloof, stop at this viewpoint and look out over Springbokvlakte and the southern mountains of the Richtersveld.





SENDELINGSDRIFT

STAY HERE

SENDELINGSDRIFT

All visitors to the park must report to the main office. Petrol and diesel are available and you can buy supplies from the small shop. There's also a neat little nursery selling local succulents.

The 10 chalets are next to the river and there's a small communal swimming pool. The campsite has 12 basic stands with no power. There are some trees but there's no grass. The campsite ablution facilities are clean. It's not the kind of campsite for an extended stay, but it's a good overnight option before you enter the park or if you want to use the pont to Namibia.

GPS: S28.12373 E16.89086

POTJIESPRAM

This camp is inside the park on the banks of the Orange River, far from the noise of the mines. Potjiespram is a good place to camp if you're looking for somewhere to stay near Sendelingsdrift, but you'd prefer more of a wilderness feel.

It's the biggest campsite in the park with 18 stands under shade trees surrounded by dense riverine vegetation. That said, you won't see much of the river and the campsite is close to a sluggish pool – bring Peaceful Sleep.

The ablution block is on a sandy hill in the middle of campsite.

GPS: S28.07467 E16.96310
(13 km from Sendelingsdrift)



POTJIESPRAM

DE HOOP

This is the most popular camp in the park. It has 12 stands next to the river. The road into the campsite goes over a rocky hill and divides the camp in two. The stands on the northern side are bigger and near a sandy riverbank where you can swim and fish. The southern side of the camp only has access to a rocky riverbank, but there are more trees and you can pitch your tent closer to the water.

Each side has its own ablution block with cold water only. There's also a long row of toilets on the northern side that you can use when the campsite is busy.

The hill that separates the two sides is steep and narrow – camp on the northern side if you don't think your vehicle will make it over.

GPS: S28.18339 E17.17846
(45 km from Sendelingsdrift)

DE HOOP (SOUTHERN SIDE)



RICHTERSBERG



GANNAKOURIEP WILDERNESS CAMP



RICHTERSBERG

If I ever return to the Richtersveld, this is where I'll pitch my tent. Richtersberg is the smallest campsite in the park. It has only six stands and if you're first to arrive you'll even get a stand on grass. It's on the banks of the Orange River and has more shade trees than De Hoop. There is one ablution block with cold water.

GPS: S28.2534 E17.220739 (55 km from Sendelingsdrift with a 4x4; 72 km with a 4x2)

KOKERBOOMKLOOF

This unique camp is tucked into the furthest corner of the park and it's the only camp not next to the river. There are eight stands around a rocky outcrop, far apart from each other with private ablution facilities. The wind sometimes barrels down the kloof so pitch your tent near the rocks.

According to the SANParks website, this camp has dry toilets and no showers or washing facilities, but at the time of my visit there was running water, flush toilets and cold showers.

GPS: S28.30673 E17.29136 (79 km from Sendelingsdrift)

KOKERBOOMKLOOF



TATASBERG WILDERNESS CAMP

Of the two wilderness camps in the park, Tatasberg has the best location. With the Tatasberg mountain to the south and a view of the Orange River and its floodplains to the north, you could easily spend a week here.

There are four cabins on a hill overlooking the river and each sleeps two people (no camping). Behind the units there are solar panels and a wind turbine to keep the lights on, the water hot and the fridge in the kitchen running. The camp has no power points.

GPS: S28.24881 E17.24685 (58 km from Sendelingsdrift in a 4x4; 75 km in a 4x2)

GANNAKOURIEP WILDERNESS CAMP

This wilderness camp is near the dry Gannakouriep River, with the same facilities as Tatasberg: four cabins that sleep two people each, hot water and lights. Each cabin has a kitchen with a fridge. Each wilderness camp has a caretaker who keeps everything neat and tidy.

GPS: S28.38697 E17.15984 (64 km from Sendelingsdrift)





LIFE IN THE RICHTERSVELD

Hendrik Prins has been the hospitality manager of the park for the last seven years. He makes sure the campsites and wilderness camps are maintained – or as he puts it: “It’s my job to keep you happy and make you smile.”

What’s your favourite place in the park? Kokerboomkloof – it’s unique. There’s always something to surprise me, whether it’s a tree that has fallen over or a sudden rainshower.

How do you survive the summer? You get used to it. From November to February the temperature often exceeds 40°C. On average, Kokerboomkloof is the hottest place in the park, but the highest temperature we’ve recorded was 62°C in the shade in the Gannakouriep riverbed.

I didn’t see a lot of game... The park does have wildlife, including gemsbok, springbok, kudu, red hartebeest and mountain zebra, but you won’t often see the animals. They prefer the deep mountain kloofs where there are natural springs, or they stay near the Orange River. But they’re shy and they’ll move off when they hear vehicles approaching.

I saw fresh big cat spoor at Tatasberg. Could it have been a leopard? For sure. I followed the spoor of a male leopard up and down the course of a dry riverbed there. There’s often leopard spoor in the area between Richtersberg and Tatasberg, where there are some herder outposts.

Tell us about the relationship between park rangers and the herders in the park. The rangers and herders get along. If there’s conflict, we sort it out. We have to keep the peace. The places you see in the park aren’t settlements, they’re outposts. You’ll usually see a cooking shelter next to the herder’s camp. The herder mostly sleeps outside and keeps his or her cooking supplies and clothes inside the shelter. He or she will usually head out midmorning and follow the goats to the grazing fields. The herder returns to the outpost at night – the goats know when they should start walking back.

How many herders are there in the park? A maximum of 36 are allowed, but there are currently only 33. In total, there shouldn’t be more than 6 600 goats in the park. They only farm with Boer goats.

Any advice for people visiting the park in a 4x2? Stay away from the challenging passes like Domorogh. Akkedis Pass has one steep, rocky section and it’s easier to drive from east to west. To drive the pass in this direction, plan your route so you enter the park at Helspoort and exit at Sendelingsdrift.

SENDELINGSDRIFT PONT



KNOW BEFORE YOU GO

Road conditions? Most of the roads in the park are traversable in a 4x2 with high ground clearance. There are two 4x4-only roads. (The other 4x4 routes have been closed.) If you don’t have a 4x4, steer clear of the river road between De Hoop and Richtersberg, and stay off Domorogh Pass. All of the campsites are accessible in a 4x2. Road conditions vary so enquire at reception when you arrive.

Water? Bring your own drinking water. Even if there’s running

water in the camp, it might not be potable. Water has to be transported to the camps so use it wisely. Forty thousand litres of water stored in tanks should last three to four months, but a camper once left a tap open and emptied the tanks in a week!

Don’t litter. Don’t leave your rubbish in the camps and don’t bury it. There is a green cage at Sendelingsdrift where you can drop off your rubbish bags when you leave the park. The camps are so



remote that caretakers sometimes only visit every few months.

Best time to visit? Not November! Go in the cooler winter months: April to August. The park is one of the hottest places in South Africa. Temperatures in winter are moderate in the day and cold at night (3–5°C) so bring a decent sleeping bag.

How to get there? There isn't an easy route to Sendelingsdrift. From

Springbok, drive to Port Nolloth and make your way up the coast to Alexander Bay. Then turn inland and follow the course of the Orange River to Kuboes. About 12 km from Kuboes, turn north and continue to Sendelingsdrift.

There's another, shorter route that leaves the road between Springbok and Port Nolloth and goes via Lekkering. There's more gravel along this route, however, and it might take longer to drive.

Fuel? Petrol and diesel are available at Sendelingsdrift. If you plan to spend a while in the park, take an extra fuel container or visit Sendelingsdrift again to fill up.

Navigation? Use our map. If you'd prefer to go by your GPS, check all your waypoints beforehand. If you type Kokerboomkloof into Google Maps it will show you the way, but remember there's no cellphone reception in the park.