

# A grand canyon

Hiking the length of southern Namibia's magnificent Fish River Canyon is certainly no mean feat. But the dramatic, sun-scorched surroundings, wild horses and starlit night skies make it an adventure you'll never forget, says **Dan Slater**

ALL PICTURES BY DAN SLATER



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**W**ith Sossusvlei, Etosha National Park, the Skeleton Coast and more, Namibia is a country so full of splendours that the typical visitor rarely has time to see them all, let alone spend four days at just one.

Even the more remote areas, such as the desert mountains of the Kaokoveld, feature sublime vistas just begging to be explored. For those with the time and inclination, there's no better way to experience one of the world's oldest landscapes than on foot. And of all Namibia's hikes, the Fish River Canyon, Africa's largest, is the most spectacular.

I'd visited the canyon lookout point on a previous trip and knew, at once, that some day I would have to return. As it happened, some years later I was fortunate enough to be living in Cape Town, so a group of friends and I set off on the ten-hour drive to Hobas, at the northern end of the canyon, fully equipped and mentally prepared. We had to be entirely self-sufficient for the duration of the four-day, 85km hike, so we took food, stoves, sleeping gear and first aid kits with us. This was to be no guided, portered, catered trek but an expedition into an unforgiving desert.

On our way up we had detoured to leave one of the cars at Ai-Ais Hot Springs Spa & Resort, at the southern end of the canyon, where we would terminate our hike. As a consequence, we arrived at Hobas too late to descend into the gorge that evening. The upside was that we were able to enjoy our first glimpse of the Fish River, snaking 550m below us, in the dying light of day. Golden rays glinted on distant bends, betraying the precious water hidden there.

The river flows from its source in the eastern Naukluft Mountains, about 650km to the north, to join the mighty Orange River on Namibia's southern border with South Africa. But despite being the longest river in the country, it is often dry due to a vast dam upstream. The section of the canyon that lies within the Richtersveld Transfrontier Park and is managed by NWR (Namibia Wildlife Resorts) is open to hikers only from May to September because of the risk of flash flooding or extreme drought. ➔





**ABOVE** Hair apparent: A juvenile grooms the silverback-Akuervedo  
**LEFT** Monkeying around: Also found only in the Virunga range – and highly endangered – golden-monkeys are a delight to watch. Usually seen in

# The river snaked below us in the dying light of day. Golden rays glinted on distant bends, betraying the precious water hidden there

The following morning we picked our way unceremoniously down the near-vertical rock stairway, taking great care not to trip; we were going to need our ankles in the days ahead. It was early May, and the heat became steadily more oppressive during the hour-long descent but was dry enough to be tolerable. A refreshing plunge in a pool at the bottom was deemed obligatory before setting out along the canyon trail proper.

The ravine twisted and writhed like a mating serpent, and we hopped from boulder to boulder along its edge or navigated the smooth stones of the waterbed. We had all brought spare shoes for the anticipated ten river crossings per day, but as it turned out they remained dead weight. Away from the water's edge the ground underfoot varied enormously – from broken rock to sand dunes, sometimes with scrubby bushes or the occasional camelthorn tree, and always with the cliff walls soaring above us. We were often forced into the shade of shed-sized blocks of gneiss, red as lobsters from our exertion in the unrelenting sun.

After just six kilometres we reached one of the hike's few non-natural curiosities and something one would least expect to see in such a desolate scene: the half-buried remains of an Italian scooter – not evidence of an extinct tribe of mods that inhabited South-West Africa in the 1950s but of a somewhat optimistic attempt by the Cape Town Vespa Club to ride three scooters through the canyon in 1968. They failed. Miserably. Of the three ill-fated machines, this specimen reached the furthest point before the whole trip was abandoned.

It took us a strenuous eight hours to reach a distinctive clump of palm trees sprouting from the riverbank – the camping spot at Palm Springs. Wild horses, reputedly descended from domesticated horses released by the original German colonists, grazed casually on the far side. We gleefully hauled off our rucksacks and were soon frolicking in the hot waters with a bar of biodegradable soap. With



cloudless skies virtually guaranteed, we hadn't brought a tent; instead, we just laid out our sleeping bags in the soft sand – with the Milky Way stretching above us, a long smudge of chalk on a jet-black canvas – and slept like kings.

That first day proved the hardest, and turned out to be the hottest as well. Beyond Palm Springs the canyon walls slowly drew apart as the river spread wider, and we were able to make good time. Each curve in the watercourse had its own name (Hell's Corner, Pen-knife Bush, Wild Fig Bend), but it was often possible to shortcut over a shoulder rather than make the full loop. Water became a concern as the days passed, the intermittent pools shrinking into green and dirty puddles. Our purification tablets rendered it drinkable but did nothing for the taste or texture. NWR had warned us that the river was exceptionally dry that year.

**On one of the days, we lunched beside the grave of** Lieutenant Thilo von Trotha, a German soldier who was killed near here in 1905 during a skirmish with the native Nama people. The colonial army had pledged to hunt them to extinction, a genocide that was formally acknowledged only in 2004. It was a sombre meal. Afterwards, we succumbed to a collective coma under the shade of a tree. Our little assemblage soon resembled a North African WW2 battlefield: a swathe of sandy, bootless bodies showing no signs of life.

A stagnant pool, 16km from Ai-Ais, was rumoured to be the last available water source, so we chose that as the setting for our final campsite. We were woken at 2am by a pleasantly damp mist. Soon it was so 'pleasantly damp' that we had to crawl inside our survival bags to stay dry. Later, a gusting wind whipped at our carelessly scattered equipment, sending us on comedy chase routines to gather our belongings, scrambling over sharp rocks with bare feet.

The fog and drizzle persisted all morning, but we were now approaching our destination. Four bends to go... Three bends to go... Small yet unmistakable signs of civilisation culminated in the whitewashed walls of Ai-Ais, where chilled beer consumed in the hot spring waters of the pool would be the best medicine for our exhausted yet exhilarated bodies. Up to my neck in a soothing, steaming thermal bath, I reflected: I'd seen much of Namibia before, but only now I had come to feel truly immersed in this wild and extraordinary land.

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## SAFARI PLANNER



■ **Getting there** Many companies can provide guides and arrange transport to and from Windhoek. If you'd prefer to travel independently, as we did, Hobas is a ten-hour drive from Cape Town. Please note, a 4WD is not compulsory for this journey. The hike is popular so reserving permits is advisable; these are available from NWR ([www.nwr.com.na](http://www.nwr.com.na)).

■ **Where to stay** Ai-Ais Hot Springs Spa & Resort ([www.ai-ais.net](http://www.ai-ais.net)) at the southern end is the only proper place to lodge, and should be booked well in advance. Otherwise, take your own kit and camp under the stars (they are magnificent).

■ **When to visit** Hiking the Fish River Canyon is possible only between May and September, due to drought and flash floods. In particularly dry years, the route is closed all year; in very wet years, there might be up to ten river crossings per day.

■ **What to pack** All camping equipment, food and purification tablets must be carried. Wear sturdy hiking boots and take a warm sleeping bag as temperatures can fall to 7°C at night. Open fires are not permitted, so bring a stove and fuel, as well as an extra day's food in case of emergency. You should also bring a PLB (Personal Locator Beacon) or satellite phone, if possible.

■ **Health** You will need to show a certificate of fitness (a maximum of 40 days old) from a doctor and complete an indemnity form at check-in. A reasonable level of fitness is required, and although the hike itself is not too strenuous, the heat can cause problems. Heatstroke and dehydration are the main risks, so consume at least four litres of water per day. For safety reasons, the minimum



## FIVE FURTHER HIKE IN NAMIBIA

### Namib-Naukluft National Park

This barren region, southwest of Windhoek, is magnificent (in a scorched earth kind of way). The full eight-day, 120km circuit here is unbeatable, but there are shorter options, too.

### Brandberg Mountain

Translating as 'Fire Mountain', this granite massif in Damaraland is Namibia's highest peak at 2606m. It also doubles as a gallery of 2000-year-old San rock art. The three-day ascent is not for the faint-hearted.

### Waterberg Plateau NP

There's a superb four-day 42km hike across this red sandstone plateau in northern Namibia. Guides are optional, but with rhino and leopard roaming free, one might want to consider taking one. Incredible views over the Kalahari Desert are

### Ugab River

This 50km trail starts on the Skeleton Coast north of Swakopmund, before heading inland up the dry riverbed. Highlights include fascinating geological formations, lichens and microfauna.

### Daan Viljoen Reserve

Situated just outside Windhoek, this unusually attractive game park is easy to access and safe to stroll around, in the absence of predators. The 34km Sweet-Thorn Trail includes accommodation at the halfway point, and you should spot many species of plains game en route.