

RAMPAGING THROUGH THE RIGHTS

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RSVELD

4X4 ENTHUSIASTS HAVE LONG EMBRACED THE RICHTERSVELD'S ARID BEAUTY, BIG SKIES AND SIZZLING SUNSHINE. NOW A BUNCH OF HARDY ADVENTURERS ARE TACKLING IT ON FOOT. STEPHEN CUNLIFFE PARKED AT SENDELINGSDRIFT AND JOINED THE INAUGURAL 200KM CROSS-BORDER WILDRUN





Accompanied by a large group of Wildrunner and Richtersveld Tours' support staff driving a diverse fleet of 4x4s, fifty determined trail runners trotted out of Sendelingsdrift and into the desert at the start of a challenging Richtersveld adventure: one that would see them average a marathon a day for five days.

The new transfrontier route was designed to expose competitors to the very best the Richtersveld has to offer – on both sides of the border – with deep canyons, rocky ravines, boulder-strewn mountains and stony desert plains being the order of the day.

Taking place under a scalding sun, the adventure proved tough-going not only for the trail runners, but also for some of the accompanying vehicles. Despite the trials and tribulations, it was hard to tell whether the runners or the 4x4 drivers were having more fun – all revelling in access to some of the transfrontier park's hidden gems. And, although all the runners would eventually succeed in crossing the finish line at /Ai/Ais Hot Springs Resort in Namibia, a Land Rover Discovery 3

would find itself marooned deep inside the Fish River Canyon near Wilderness Hot Springs campsite number four, awaiting a new side shaft, CV joint and the skills of a local mechanic before it could once again attempt the challenging exit route back out of the gorge.

Richtersveld: a desert beyond compare

As we rested our weary legs on the first evening, we were treated to a presentation of the highest order by Pieter Van Wyk, SANParks curator of the herbarium and nursery for Richtersveld. Pieter, a born and bred local whose family has resided in the Richtersveld since 1847, enthused: “Thanks to a multitude of topographically-induced microclimates, the Richtersveld is one of the most botanically-diverse deserts on earth, with a staggering 29% of all naturally-occurring flora being endemic to /Ai/Ais-Richtersveld Transfrontier Park.”

Two countries; one conservation area

The /Ai/Ais-Richtersveld Transfrontier Conservation Area (TFCA) is a 5,086 sq.

km arid wilderness spanning both sides of the Orange River and incorporating the iconic Fish River Canyon. But, what's so special about TFCAs, anyway? This is the question I posed to Brent Whittington, park manager of Richtersveld National Park, over a cold beer after another tough day of trail running.

“Transfrontier parks are big-picture conservation. From a purely ecological perspective, we increase the land area under protection, and can focus on conserving entire ecosystems. The South African portion of the cross-border park is 162,000ha in size, but there is more than double this land area protected within the Namibian sector of the TFCA.”

During the Richtersveld Wildrun, I had the good fortune to run alongside Roland Vorwerk, the Marketing Manager for Boundless Southern Africa – a unit hosted within the Department of Environmental Affairs that focuses on promoting transfrontier conservation areas across Southern Africa. While chatting to Roland, I learnt a huge amount about the ecological integration of the /Ai/Ais-Richtersveld Transfrontier Park and the reasons behind



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the DEA support for this seemingly insane Wildrun event.

“From a tourism point of view, we are looking to develop and promote the Transfrontier Park as a single destination that will allow visitors convenient access to both sides of the Orange River in a single seamless safari,” Roland said. I learned that the new pontoon at Sendlingsdrift now gives visitors easy entry to /Ai/Ais and the world-renowned Fish River Canyon on the Namibian side. The more we talked, the more I appreciated the value of what Boundless was trying to do by unlocking the huge tourism potential on both sides of the river.

“Extreme-sports junkies of every level of energetic persuasion are catered for in the Richtersveld, and Boundless Southern Africa has been instrumental in pioneering and supporting cross-border Richtersveld adventure-tourism events. The Transfrontier Wildrun is our latest offering.”

Desert Knights – see September 2015 issue of SA4x4 – is a seven-day biannual April and September cycling and canoeing adventure which has 100 guest places per

departure, and has been operating since 2010. An astonishing 70% of the entrants for this mountain-biking event are couples! Desert Kayak Trails follows the languid Orange River in its journey through the heart of the transfrontier conservation area. It is a four-day, full service, fully-catered and guided luxury canoe safari. The most recent addition to this smorgasbord of extreme desert adventure is the 200km Richtersveld Transfrontier Wildrun, which evolved from a 150km trail race that used to take place on just the South African side of the park.

“We realised that if we wanted to grow the Wildrun into a cross-border event capable of attracting local and international athletes, then we had to add further unique selling points, such as crossing the river to run in two countries, as well as accessing the world-renowned Fish River Canyon.”

A multi-stage event of this nature is no easy undertaking, but Roland was most complimentary about the Wildrunner events company and their competence. “We really are on the right track with an accomplished operator like Wildrunner; they bring professionalism and proven

event-management experience in the hosting of a challenging event of this nature in a remote location. All this enables us to get closer to our goal of promoting and opening up the /Ai/Ais-Richtersveld Transfrontier conservation area to a wider audience of visitors.”

When I shared with Pieter what Roland had told me about the Transfrontier conservation area, he wholeheartedly concurred. “What’s so amazing is that conservation has the ability to transcend lines on maps, which allows us to manage the /Ai/Ais-Richtersveld as one ecological and conservation unit. Our work does not stop at the international border. We have an amazing friendship with the Namibian staff, which enables us to work together and to learn from one another.”

Community involvement and event support

The Richtersveld is a contractual park, which means that the Nama community were there first, so SANParks manages the park on their behalf. Consequently, farming and livestock grazing are still permitted inside the park, although no new



livestock posts are allowed and SANParks prosecutes the perpetrators of poaching incidents.

As we lumbered across the exquisitely beautiful Springbok Vlakte on day three of the trail run, my conversation with Roland progressed from cross-border tourism events to the local Nama community and their involvement in the park and Wildrun. I learnt that Boundless sponsors four runners annually – two from South Africa and two from Namibia – to compete alongside the rest of the Namibian, South African and international participants.

Although Oom Koos Josob, a Richtersveld ranger for the past 22 years, has completed all three Richtersveld Wildrun events to date, this year saw Dawid Kaswari – an unemployed local Nama youth – selected as one of the

sponsored Boundless entries. Despite never having competed in a trail race in his life before, this local Richtersveldler blew most of the field away to finish second overall.

In my experience, this type of sporting event typically considers ‘community participation’ to be synonymous with ‘manual labour’ requirements, but the Boundless approach is vastly superior, striving to develop community ambassadors as well as to provide jobs to members of impoverished local villages.

“Yes, there is value in these sporting events providing short-term casual labour opportunities,” continued Roland, “but we also want to see locals taking part and excelling as bona fide participants, as this is a huge morale builder within the park staff and local communities.”

Roland’s points about breaking

stereotypes and ensuring greater buy-in and support from the park’s neighbouring Nama communities were well made and resonated strongly with me. The success of the Boundless Southern Africa approach is evident in the fact that each year the trail race is becoming steadily more popular locally, with increasing numbers of staff and community members stepping forward and wanting to take part in the Wildrun experience.

4x4 tourists or off-road terrorists?

Despite the steady growth in extreme sports events and active adventure tourism, 4x4ing remains the undisputed prime attraction for most of the 7,000 tourists who visit the Richtersveld each year. The desert-driving conditions demand a robust 4x4, but the routes are neither overly



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challenging nor particularly technical: any reasonably accomplished 4x4 driver should have no problem in getting around and exploring the highlights of the TFCA.

The downside to the park's growing popularity is visible in the road proliferation. The new South African park manager agreed. "I am deeply concerned about the number of people driving off-road with blatant disregard for this fragile and sensitive environment. The tracks left behind are unsightly to future visitors, as well as being confusing to other law-abiding drivers trying to stick to the official routes. The problem is that we are under-resourced, and there is very little visible policing... People take advantage of this."

While running through the Kokerboom Kloof wilderness area, we were exposed to first-hand evidence of people having driven

off-road and pulled doughnuts, scarring the fragile landscape for decades to come. It was hard for all of us to comprehend how anyone coming to an arid wilderness like this could not show restraint and respect.

Discussing what we had seen over an ice-cold Windhoek Draught at the end of another sensational day of wilderness trail running, Pieter said that the damage had come soon after the new road and campsite were put into the Kokerboom Kloof wilderness area. "Most 4x4 tourists are good people, but it's the 4x4 terrorists, as I call them, that make me want to ban all vehicles from these sacred wilderness areas," confided Pieter.

Visitors trying to avoid corrugations also cause road proliferation, and the original jeep track is now 30 metres wide in places. More worryingly, there are

seeds, geophytes and bulbs – which might lie dormant for 15 years waiting for rain to trigger their growth – which are destroyed by off-road driving. Since the park was declared in the early 1990s, the area has flowered just once in 2006. Pieter said, "I know the place looks like it's all sand to the unknowing eye, but it's a unique and fragile landscape that just needs water for it to spring to life once more, albeit briefly."

Like many other protected areas in Africa, the Richtersveld needs tourism to help 'pay' for conservation, but tourism should never dictate the way a park is run or managed. People inevitably bring with them an element of environmental impact and level of landscape damage, especially in a sensitive environment like the Richtersveld – where vehicle tracks will remain visible for up to 200 years



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on the more fragile loam soils like those at Koeroegab. These estimates don't even factor in water- and wind erosion, and how much longer the recovery might take in that case. The park manager said that new road signage and an access gate for greater control are already on the cards, as a first step in addressing these problems and challenges.

The soulful /Ai/Ais-Richtersveld TFCA is a rare and extraordinary place. Cell phones don't work; and except for Sendelingsdrift and the /Ai/Ais Hot Springs Resort, there are no shops. Consequently, Pieter's final comment really struck a chord with me: "The Richtersveld remains wild and undeveloped; it's a true desert wilderness and I hope it stays this way forever."

Unlocking a Namibian gem

Overnighting deep inside the Fish River Canyon on our final evening, I found myself seated at the campfire alongside Wayne Handley, the park manager for the Namibian side of the transfrontier

conservation area, and we started chatting. "The place where we are camped tonight is known as Old /Ai/Ais, which translates as 'burning water', although we usually refer to this special place as the Wilderness Hot Springs Camp. It is closed to the general public, so only a few people have ever been here."

Wayne went on to explain that the eco-sensitive approach of Wildrunner and their efforts to promote the transfrontier park through the Wildrun event finally convinced Namibia's Ministry of Natural Resources and Tourism that it would be a good idea to allow the new Transfrontier edition to have carefully-controlled access to one of the Fish River Canyon's best-kept secrets. To get vehicles into the canyon involved an exciting drive along a dry tributary of the Fish River: a rare privilege offered to only a handful of fortunate 4x4 addicts.

Owen Middleton, owner of the Wildrunner events company, finished with a tantalising proposition for adventurous

4x4 enthusiasts: "We are always on the lookout for volunteers with 4x4s to join our support team for these Wildrun events, as long as they are willing to pitch in and pull their weight. If they bring technical skills, so much the better. In fact, we are now discussing the possibility of running a parallel event for 4x4 drivers in the future, to accommodate wilderness lovers who simply want to experience these special parts of the TFCA that aren't accessible to the average tourist."

If exploring off-the-beaten-track desert wilderness and shooting the breeze with fellow adventurous souls around a campfire under star-studded night skies sounds appealing to you, then I recommend that you don your running shoes for the run of a lifetime. However, if the prospect of running 200km through the desert sounds too much like hard work, then get in touch with Owen and Tam Middleton to discuss the possibility of joining the crew of one of their sociable Wildrun events for an entertaining adventure in 2017. ■



Wildrun specifics

Wildrunner hosts three Wildrun events annually: Mapungubwe, Richtersveld and Wild Coast. Wildrun events are synonymous with wilderness trail running of the highest quality. Runners carry mandatory safety equipment, rain gear, sun protection, water, race sustenance, a map and GPS. All personal kit is transported by vehicle between the overnight camps. All Wildrun events are fully catered, with ice-cold beers and soft drinks available, and sports masseurs are on standby to relieve aching legs.

You don't need to be an Olympian or an Iron Man athlete to enter: any reasonably fit and healthy person can take part. Participants vary in age from 20 to 70+ years. Because of the complex logistics involved, each race is limited to a maximum of 80 participants and entries

often sell out in minutes, so don't hesitate: click on the event link below for full race details and entry procedures.

The Richtersveld Transfrontier Wildrun

www.wildrun.com/event/richtersveld — is a 200km, five-day stage race from South Africa to Namibia through the ancient arid landscapes of the /Ai/Ais-Richtersveld Transfrontier Conservation Area. The run takes place annually in June. Support and catering are provided by Johan and Magda De Waal of Richtersveld Tours: www.richtersveldtours.com

Top Richtersveld 4x4 routes

The best 4x4 experiences available on the South African side of the TFCA are:

1. Vandersterrberg (coming soon);
2. The flower-viewing 4x4 trail into

- Aramanshoek (open for July/August only);
3. Domorogh Pass (the best of the main Richtersveld 4x4 routes).

The three best 4x4 experiences available on the Namibian side of the TFCA are:

1. Boom River, which is rumoured to have a hectic 4x4 route that is neither marked nor maintained. (Please investigate carefully before attempting);
2. The drive to the Wilderness Hot Springs Camp inside the lower reaches of the Fish River Canyon. (This is closed to the general public; invitation only, with Wildrunner).

*This 'Top Five 4x4 Routes in the TFCA' compilation is derived from the author's conversations with /Ai/Ais-Richtersveld conservation staff and his own experiences.

ANSWER & WIN



Answer a simple question about the Richtersveld Transfrontier Wildrun and stand a chance to win a Front Runner Spare Tyre Mount Braai Grate. This stainless steel grate (value R985) fits over your spare tyre and takes up virtually no space.

Question: How many kilometres did the runners cover over the course of five days?

Send answer to: editor@sa4x4.co.za, using the tagline Front Runner Wildrun #01. Remember to include your Name, Delivery Address and a Contact Number.