

Things get fun and wet when the Orange River turns white  
ALL IMAGES BY STEPHEN CUNLIFFE

Dutch explorer **Robert Jacob Gordon** set out along the upper reaches of the Great River in 1777. Two years and 2160km later he finally arrived at the mouth of southern Africa's longest waterway, naming it the **Orange River** in honour of the Prince of Orange. In recent years the river has officially reverted to its local Nama name of Gariiep, which, interestingly, also translates as 'the great river'. With modern-day river travel rumoured to be far less arduous than three centuries ago, **Stephen Cunliffe** embarked on a six-day adventure to sample the ebb and flow of the Great River.

# PADDLE POWER

**A**s it traces the international boundary between Namibia's Karas Region and South Africa's Northern Cape Province, southern Africa's foremost watercourse determinedly forces a route through the parched Kalahari sands and the arid, rock-strewn landscapes of the hauntingly beautiful Namib Desert. River sojourns of one to eight days focus on the easily accessible and navigable section of crocodile-free river where the Orange bisects the desolate wilderness of the scenically spectacular Ai-Ais-Richtersveld Transfrontier Conservation Area. The area is unquestionably the most mesmerising stretch of the river's entire westward journey to Oranjemund and the Atlantic Ocean.

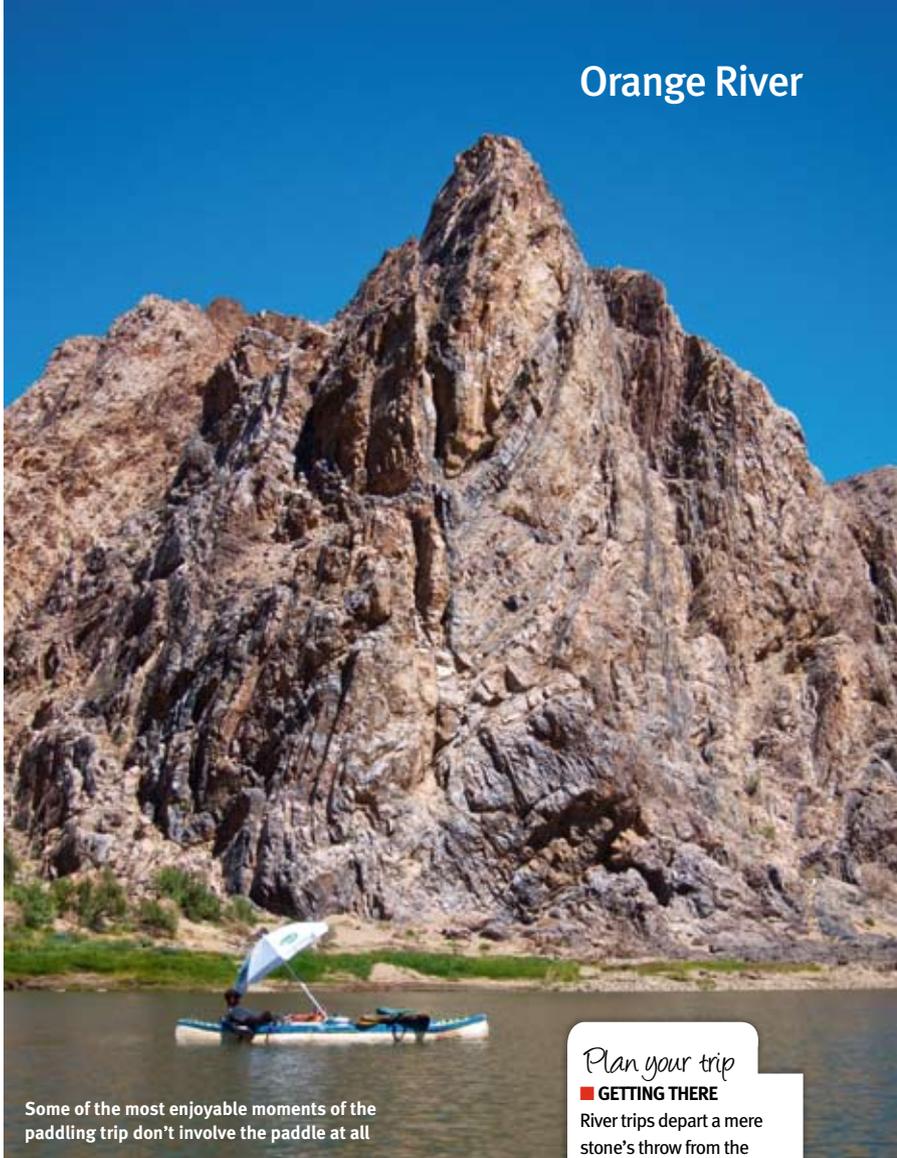
The idyllic Camp Provenance, situated a mere 13km from the small town of Noordoewer on the Namibian bank of the river, is a welcome oasis in the midst of this arid region and an ideal starting point for a multi-day river adventure. After a safety briefing, we climbed into our two-man fibreglass canoes and set off downstream on what promised to be a six-day river adventure to savour.

The trip, however, got off to an inauspicious start. Barely an hour in, we encountered a fierce and unrelenting headwind that made forward progress exceedingly difficult. The wind strengthened throughout the afternoon with the gale chasing heavy rain clouds across an angry desert sky. My wife shot me a look that said, "What the hell have you signed us up for this time?" I put my head down and kept paddling.

Our veteran guides, Siyabonga 'Siya' Mashaba and Howard 'Bonny' Bezuidenhout, soon realised that pushing on would be futile, so they called an early halt and suggested we camp opposite the innocuous-looking Dead Man's rapid. Having covered barely half the distance we were supposed to on the first day, and with the heavens spitting raindrops into our wind-swept camp, everyone turned in early, retreating to the warmth of their sleeping bags.

There were smiles of relief all around at dawn the next day as the weather was clear, bright and still. Although it would be a long paddle as we endeavoured to make up the miles missed on the first day, the whole team was raring to go in the favourable conditions.

Lunch stops don't only offer food but also opportunities for some rewarding hikes



Some of the most enjoyable moments of the paddling trip don't involve the paddle at all

We began by running the relatively straightforward Entrance Exam rapid and then powered our way towards the first resupply point. While the guides stocked cooler boxes with ice, drinks and fresh produce, we wolfed down tasty smoked gammon sandwiches to refuel for the challenges that lay ahead. There was also an opportunity to hike to an old fluorspar mine behind our lunch spot, but few in our crew had the inclination or energy to brave the vicious heat for the short walk to get there.

After lunch we floated past the distinctive 'King Kong Mountain' before being confronted by the premier rapid of the trip. Sjambok is an infamous Grade III rapid with enough fluffy whitewater to ensure that at least a couple of the canoes capsized during the run. After fishing all the swimmers out of the relatively calm eddy below, and bailing out the canoes, we set off again to tackle Magnetic Rock rapid. The rapid's unusual name is derived from the fact that the current has a nasty habit of pinning boats sideways against this awkwardly protruding rock in the middle of the river. Thankfully, under the watchful eye of Siya and with guidance from Bonny, our flotilla made it through unscathed. By the time we reached Rudi's Campsite we were tired but ecstatic.

After this frenetic start to our trip, we were thrilled to hear that day three would be an easy day on the water, with the tranquil river transporting us languidly through the captivating landscapes of the Ai-Ais-Richtersveld Transfrontier Conservation Area. Upon entering a

## Plan your trip

### ■ GETTING THERE

River trips depart a mere stone's throw from the Vioolsdrift-Noordoewer border crossing with South Africa. Take the main B1 trunk road to Noordoewer, turn onto the C13 and head west towards Aussenkehr.

### ■ WHEN TO VISIT

Canoe safaris are available throughout the year, although September to early April is ideal for swimming and generally considered the optimal time to come.

### ■ RECOMMENDED

#### OPERATORS

There are three well-established river running operators on the Namibian bank of the river. All three are reputable and experienced outfits.

**Amanzi Trails** ([www.amanzitrails.co.za](http://www.amanzitrails.co.za))

**Bundi Adventures** ([www.bundi.co.za](http://www.bundi.co.za))

**Felix Unite River Adventures** ([www.felixunite.com](http://www.felixunite.com))

### ■ AUTHOR'S TIP

Malaria is not a threat here, but the potent desert sun is. Be sure to remember high-factor sun block, a wide-brim hat and sunglasses.



spectacular gorge near the aptly named Witch's Hat Mountain, we marvelled at the contorted rock strata and eye-catching formations like Scratch Mountain.

After enjoying lunch under a grove of shady willow and ebony trees, we ran a series of small rapids. Rollercoaster proved a damp squib, but the bony Rocky Horror lived up to its name as we scraped and bumped our way over the rocks in the shallows. After negotiating Snotklap rapid, we pulled the boats up onto the bank at Stairway's Campsite alongside another abandoned diamond mine. The campsite is named after the neighbouring Stairway to Heaven rapid, but, thankfully, this ripple was a pale shadow of its frightening namesake on the mighty Zambezi.

Day four took us to the sprawling vineyards and holiday resort of Aussenkehr farm on the Namibian bank of the river. At the farm, which also happens to be the take-out point for the popular four-day canoe trip, we had our second resupply stop. The real highlight there, however, was the unexpected opportunity to use a clean, flushing toilet – a welcome treat after four days in the wilderness!

After bidding farewell to our resupply vehicle, we were confronted by a long stretch of energy-sapping flat water. During this paddle we came across a number of fishing nets illegally strung across the river. Aside from their devastating effect on fish stocks in the national park, these nets also pose a serious danger to swimmers, so Siya made a point of hauling the nets into his canoe, and burned them later that evening.

After the morning's paddle through the becalmed Aussenkehr Flats, we welcomed the excitement of an afternoon run through Gamkab and Surprise rapids. The seemingly innocuous Surprise Rapid, which hides a submerged rock with a potent hole lurking behind it,

**Siya burning some of the illegal fishing nets found en route**

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lived up to its name and capsized half the canoes in our bewildered fleet. Later that evening, as we tucked into cold beers and a delicious Chicken à la Felix dinner at Groot Pens Campsite, we shared heavily embellished stories of the day's ordeals around a crackling campfire until late into the night.

The water on the final day was mirror-calm, and these optimal canoeing conditions made for our most memorable day as we negotiated a procession of fun, splashy rapids. Lovers Lane offered some respite, taking us along a tree-lined channel with chattering monkeys and the iconic call of the fish eagle filling the air. An abundance of kingfishers, herons, darters and cormorants also frequented the braided river channels along this attractive stretch of river.

As we drifted past the comfortable-looking Richtersveld Rest Camp on the South African bank, Siya and Bonny clipped on their lifejackets and became more serious; the long and technical De Hoop rapid lurked just around the bend. Divided into three segments, it provides a solid challenge, even after five days of honing your paddling skills.

With my wife on the look out for shallow rocks, we paddled into the first section of fast flowing water. We were on the perfect line behind Siya's canoe and sailed through. We held a good line through the second section of punchy whitewater, negotiating a long sweeping left bend. It all seemed too easy... until we lost sight of the guide's canoe up ahead. Suddenly, we were all alone.

"Watch out for that massive rock!" yelled Katherine, as I completely misjudged the entrance to the final section of the rapid. Evasive action was desperately required. We paddled as if our lives depended upon it, but, try as I might, I couldn't manoeuvre the boat in the fast-flowing water. The swift current piled into the canoe and rammed us up against the big rock. Resistance was futile – the game was up. The rock launched our hapless canoe into the air, flipping it over in the process and sending us both for a swim. Worst of all, we were the last canoe to negotiate the rapid, so the whole team had pulled over to watch our ignominious run through the final whitewater obstacle of the trip.

The following morning at the take out alongside Sting-in-the-Tail rapid at the Fish River confluence, we were in unanimous agreement: a fun-filled week paddling through the dramatic arid wilderness of southern Namibia surely must be one of the top adventure holidays. 🇳🇦



**Red rocks, whitewater and blue sky – a perfect combination**