One of the mightiest rivers in all of Africa, Stephen Cunliffe takes us through the trials and tribulations of negotiating the Gariep by canoe.

It’s almost unacceptable if any South African with the necessary time and resources at hand, and any inkling of an adventurous spirit, hasn’t rafted down the Gariep (formerly known as the Orange) river at some point in his or her lifetime.

With its source hidden deep within the Drakensberg mountains along the border between South Africa and Lesotho, the more than 2 000 kilometre long Gariep River is one of southern Africa’s foremost waterways. The Gariep flows across South Africa, joining forces with the Vaal River southwest of Kimberley, before continuing its relentless westward progress toward Alexander Bay, Oranjemund in southern Namibia and the cold Atlantic Ocean. The final 700km of its long journey are undoubtedly the most scenically spectacular, with the sluggish river forcing a route through the parched Kalahari sands and arid, rock-strewn landscapes of the hauntingly beautiful Namib Desert region.

The navigable and easily accessible stretch of river below the Vioolsdrif-Noordoewer Border Post, where the Gariep traces the international boundary between Namibia’s Karas Region and South Africa’s Northern Cape, is of prime interest to river runners. Visitors have a chance to enjoy one of the top adventure holidays on offer in southern Africa, as the crocodile-free
Gariep carves its way through the desolate wilderness of the Ai-Ais/Richtersveld Transfrontier Conservation Area. Beginning at Camp Provenance, a mere 13km from the small town of Noordoewer on the Namibian side of the river, canoe enthusiasts can opt for river sojourns of one- to eight days, although the standard four-day canoe trip to Aussenkehr is by far the most popular. There are, however, plenty of good reasons not to rush off from Provenance.

Boasting cosy cabanas for the cool desert nights, and with air conditioning and ceiling fans capable of tempering the scalding midday summer heat, as well as a luxurious honeymoon suite and verdant lawns for camping, the Felix Unite base camp is a true oasis in the midst of an arid Namibian landscape. With a fully stocked shop, automated teller machine, Internet café, poolside bar, not to mention breathtaking views from the cliff-top restaurant and swimming pool deck, Camp Provenance is a lush green paradise alongside the sluggish, life-giving river.

After taking a couple of days to destress and adjust to the more relaxed pace of life in southern Namibia, our team of inexperienced – but enthusiastic – canoeists finally tore ourselves away from the idyllic base camp and set off on what promised to be a six-day river adventure to remember.

The trip, however, got off to an inauspicious start. Barely an hour in, we encountered a brutal headwind that blew the boats back upstream the second we stopped paddling. The wind strengthened throughout the afternoon, with the gale chasing heavy rain clouds across an angry desert sky.

Our veteran guides, Siyabonga “Siya” Mashaba and Howard “Bonny” Bezuidenhout, soon realised pushing on would be futile, so they called an early halt and suggested we camp opposite the innocuous-looking Deadmans Rapid. (It earned its terrifyingly sounding name from the discovery of a local fisherman’s body below this little rapid during the 1988 floods that occurred here.)

Having covered barely half the distance that we were supposed to on the first day, and with the heavens spitting raindrops into our windswept camp, everyone turned in early, retreating to the warmth of their sleeping bags. I was surely not alone in wondering what the hell we had signed up for!

There were smiles of relief all round when day two dawned 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 entire team was raring to go in the favourable conditions. We began by running the relatively straightforward Entrance Exam Rapid and then powered our way toward the first resupply point.

While the guides restocked 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 take a 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 easily recognisable King Kong Mountain before being confronted by the premier rapid of the trip. Sjambok is an infamous class III rapid with enough fluffy white-water to ensure at least a couple of the canoes capsized during the run. After fishing all the swimmers out the calm eddy below Sjambok 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 an 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. Situated below an abandoned diamond mine, the shady grass-covered campsite was the perfect spot to rest up after an epic day of river action.

After the frenetic start to the trip, we welcomed an easy day on the water. Day three was by far the hottest day of the expedition, and regular swim breaks became mandatory! Shortly after entering the Richtersveld National Park, the river flowed into a gorge near the aptly named Witch’s Hat Mountain. We marvelled at the contorted rock strata and eye-catching formations such as Scratch Mountain, as we drifted through this geological paradise.

After lunch, we ran a series of small rapids, with Rollercoaster proving a damp squib, but the bony Rocky Horror lived up to its name as we scraped and bumped our way over the rocks of this shallow rapid.

After negotiating Snotklap Rapid, we pulled the boats up onto the bank at Stairway’s Campsite alongside yet another old mine. The site 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 met our second resupply and reloaded with ice, drinks and food, but the real highlight was the unexpected opportunity to use a clean, flushing toilet – a welcome treat after four days in the wilderness!

After bidding our resupply vehicle fare-well, 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 a couple of inches below the surface. Aside from their devastating effect on fish stocks within the national park, these nets also pose a serious danger to swimmers floating downstream, so Siya made a point of hauling the nets into his canoe to be burnt 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. Hiding a submerged rock with a potent hole lurking behind it, the seemingly innocuous Surprise Rapid lived up to its name and capsized half the canoes in our bewildered fleet.

Later that evening, as we tucked into a delicious Chicken à la Felix dinner at Groot Pens Campsite, heavily embellished stories of the ordeals encountered in this unexpected rapid were shared around a crackling campfire until late into the night. Our final day on the water dawned mirror-like, and the optimal canoeing conditions made for the most memorable day of the trip as we negotiated our way through a procession of fun, splashy rapids.

Lovers Lane offered some respite, taking us along a tree-lined channel with noisy monkeys and the call of the ubiquitous fish eagle floating overhead. A multitude of kingfishers, herons, darters and cormorants also frequented the braided river channels along this entertaining stretch of river. As we paddled past the comfortable looking Richtersveld Rest Camp and Campsite, Siya and Bonny clipped on their life jackets and became more serious: the long and technical De Hoop Rapid lurked just around the bend. Divided into three segments, this unexpected rapid were shared around a cracking campfire until late into the night. Our final day on the water dawned mirror-like, and the optimal canoeing conditions made for the most memorable day of the trip as we negotiated our way through a procession of fun, splashy rapids.

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GARIEP RIVER RAFTING

Worst of all, we were the last canoe negotiating the rapid, so the whole team had pulled over to watch our run through the rapid. Needless to say, claps and cheers from the onlookers followed.

The next morning when we reached the take-out alongside Sting-in-the-Tail Rapid at the Fish River confluence, everyone agreed our canoe flip in De Hoop provided the perfect grand finale to a fun-filled and action-packed week paddling through the spectacular, arid wilderness of southern Namibia.

Operators and recommended accommodation options

Amanzi Trails – www.amanzitrails.co.za – can be emailed at info@amanzitrails.co.za or call them on +27 21 559-1573.

Felix Unite River Adventures – www.felixunite.com – and Camp Provenance can be reached at reservations@felix.co.za or call the head office on +27 21 702-9400.

With my wife spotting shallow rocks from the front of the canoe, 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 white-water, negotiating a long sweeping left bend. It all seemed too easy … until we lost sight of the guide canoe ahead. Suddenly, we were all alone in the middle of a rock-strewn river.

“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 and we paddled desperately. But, alas, 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.

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Photo: Stephen Cunliffe

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