

■ TOURISM

The Richtersveld is a mountain desert barely touched by humans.

Two rivers, two countries,
one park, one bigger picture.
That's the Richtersveld.
By Stephen Cunliffe

TIME OUT



Pieter van Wyk has discovered several new plant species in the Richtersveld.

P ieter van Wyk, SANParks curator of the Richtersveld herbarium and nursery, has a rare talent for making ordinary people adore plants. On my latest visit to the /Ai/Ais-Richtersveld Transfrontier Conservation Area, I had the privilege of spending a week in the company of this passionate young botanist whose family have resided in the western Richtersveld since 1847.

The Richtersveld is home to the second richest plant biodiversity on earth, Pieter pointed out. “It’s the most botanically diverse desert in the world, with a multitude of different microclimates.”

I obviously wasn’t looking sufficiently awed, because Pieter rained down floral facts to hammer home his message. “Out of 2000 known plant species in the Gariiep area 305 are endemic, and I’ve discovered 14 new species and 56 new records since I started working here in 2013. In fact, the first time I ever collected a spider, it turned out to be a new species to science. Now what are the chances of that happening anywhere else except in the Richtersveld?”

Life has had a long, long time to evolve and diversify in this geologically and ecologically diverse environment. From gargantuan boulders in the Tatasberg Mountains to the lower reaches of the Fish River Canyon, the Richtersveld is all elements. Screaming silence and haunting beauty. Living desert and bountiful wilderness.

A couple of nights later, I had the opportunity to catch up with Brent Whittington, the new Richtersveld

park manager. Chatting with the South African manager while sitting around a campfire in Namibia’s Fish River Canyon underscored how far the trans-boundary conservation concept has progressed. “From a purely conservation perspective, the Transfrontier Conservation Area enables us to integrate more land under conservation, thereby conserving whole ecosystems as part of a bigger picture conservation approach,” he revealed.

In /Ai/Ais-Richtersveld, it is not only about linking ecosystems across international borders. Here Nama cultural linkages play as important a role. The ex-Richtersveld park manager, Nick de Goede, agreed: “The TFCA links the local Nama communities on both sides of the border and ensures their cultural practices are protected and respected.”

Richtersveld is unique amongst our country’s national parks in that it is a contractual park. “The Nama people were here first, so SANParks manages the park on behalf of the local communities,” explained Brent. Consequently, limited farming and livestock grazing is permitted in the South African side of the park, although no new livestock posts are allowed and SANParks polices poaching.

Sharing his five-year vision for Richtersveld TFCA, the park manager divulged that he wants to see the park diversify away from its current near-exclusive reliance on 4x4 enthusiasts. “I foresee a new client base of active young families who enjoy adventure pursuits. We will develop ▶



“Country borders are often silly things created by humans. Conservation can transcend this.”

– Pieter van Wyk, SANParks curator of the Richtersveld herbarium and nursery

Above: |Ai-|Ais Hot Springs Resort on the Namibian side. Below: Offroad fans are drawn to the Richtersveld’s dirt road and 4x4 challenges.



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“Desert Knights involves a crew of 30 Namibians and 30 South Africans, but we don’t even talk about that, we are all just one team.” – Pieter van Wyk

Above: The rugged mountains make an ideal playground for adventurous types. Below: In the Richtersveld the sight of water will put a smile on your face.



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– Brent Whittington, Richtersveld park manager



Park manager Brent Whittington would like adventure seekers to make the Richtersveld their top choice.

a network of mountain-bike trails and day hiking routes around each campsite that will vary in distance and difficulty from a family-friendly biking adventure to more technical 30 to 40 km routes.”

New road signage is on the cards, along with a park gate for greater control. A newly created senior section ranger position will be responsible for co-ordinating joint patrols with Namibian rangers to tackle shared threats, such as alien plants and gill netting across the river, as well as a host of other law enforcement and conservation management priorities.

As the flames gave way to glowing embers below a star-strewn sky, Brent introduced me to Roland Vorwerk, marketing manager for Boundless Southern Africa, a unit hosted within the Department of Environmental Affairs that focuses on the marketing of Transfrontier Conservation Areas in Southern Africa. “From a tourism point of view, we look to develop and promote the TFCA as a single destination. The ultimate one-stop shop. Visitors should

access and enjoy both sides of the protected area in a single seamless safari visit,” he clarified.

Roland went on to explain the Boundless role in pioneering and marketing cross-border adventure-tourism events in the Richtersveld TFCA, including the bi-annual, seven-day mountain bike adventure, Desert Knights; the newly launched four-day luxury canoe safari, Desert Kayak Trails; and the inaugural five-day, 200 km race, Richtersveld Transfrontier Wildrun. These trans-boundary sporting events are organised and run by a joint Namibian-South African team. Such collaborations build relationships and enhance communication.

Pieter agreed. “Desert Knights involves a crew of 30 Namibians and 30 South Africans, but we don’t even talk about that, we are all just one team. It proves to me that country borders are often silly things created by humans. Conservation can transcend this and empower us to jointly manage the transfrontier park as one ecological and geological unit.” 🐾



Roland Vorwerk promotes trips that explore both sides of the Orange River.

TRIP PLANNER

GETTING THERE The park is a nine-hour drive from Cape Town via Port Nolloth and Alexander Bay. A high-clearance vehicle is a must, sedans are not permitted in the park.

ACCOMMODATION Air-conditioned chalets at Sendelingsdrif from R770 for two people. Tatasberg and Ganakouriep Wilderness camps boast showers and kitchen facilities, from R770 for two people. Camping from R215 for two people. Kokerboomkloof is the most rustic, with no water. Other sites have ablutions with cold showers.

CONTACT SANParks Central Reservations 012-428-9111, www.sanparks.org



The |Ai-|Ais/ Richtersveld Transfrontier Park lies 90 km from Alexander Bay.