

EXPLORE YOUR COUNTRY

EPIC

A family of first-time 4x4ers explore the Richtersveld in the TOYOTA FORTUNER EPIC

ESCAPE

Bush camping in a dry river bed near an abandoned mine in the Fluorspar Valley.



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Lying on a sun-soaked boulder with a cold drink in hand, watching the full moon rise over the eastern mountains and the sky cast a pink glow over the kokerboom 'forest', our final evening in the Richtersveld heralded just one more surprise on our incredible adventure.... a huge dust storm that descended and enveloped us all in an eerie light and a fine layer of desert dust. With not much water to go round at this remote inland camp site, it was time to fully embrace the desert life and head to bed with a body full of dust and a head full of memories...

After a tumultuous year, the call of the wild was loud. Our destination? One of the oldest deserts in the world – the Richtersveld is known for its rugged landscapes and harsh climate, where pioneering adventurers, curious travellers and intrepid explorers wander. To recover from the first 700kms of our journey from Cape Town, we spent two nights at The Growcery camp site on the edge of the Orange River - an emerald jewel in the lunar landscape. Then it was time to head off into the desert frontier, winding our way through the mountains of the Nababiep Valley where we marvelled at the layers of history recorded in its geological wonders. In this barren, baked place it was an incredible discovery that life continues -

white butterflies drifted past our windows, black scorpions scuttled over the road and a ground squirrel sought shelter beneath a rock. Despite first impressions, signs of life are everywhere if you seek them out.

Forty kilometres later we arrived at Eksteenfontein in the heart of Richtersveld Community Conservancy area, where the traditional way of life of the Khoikhoi (of whom the Nama are the largest surviving clan) who once occupied the entire south-western part of Africa, still survives. More than a decade ago, this vast southern neighbour to the Richtersveld National Park was returned to the Nama people. It is intended for research and tourism while they continue their traditional lifestyle, migrating seasonally with their livestock and making use of the fragile succulent ecosystem.

Named a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 2007, the Conservancy area is not subject to diamond mining and is the more pristine of the two areas. It offers some of southern Africa's most untouched hiking, 4x4 driving and camping opportunities.

Here, in the Fluorspar Valley, we slept beneath the stars in a dry river bed surrounded by silence and hills scattered with kokerboom.

On the drive to our second bush camp, Tierhoek, we were amazed at the changes in terrain from one valley to another. Here the flat



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1. Endless epic views over Holsgat valley.
2. Aloidendron dichotomum, known as the quiver tree or kokerboom. This tall, branching species of succulent plant is indigenous to Southern Africa.
3. Hiking in Tierhoek.

plain was filled with alien-looking vegetation and delicate desert flowers. This was a great place to stare at the infinite starry night sky, imaging the many generations of nomadic people who had lived in this exact place. At dawn, before the blazing heat of the day descended, we hiked to the top of the mountain, scrambling up through the crags and cracks of the rocks, to enjoy panoramic views over the vast sandy plain.

From there we headed towards the Richtersveld Nature Reserve gate and on towards Sendelingsdrift, a small mining town set on the banks of the Orange River and the SANParks reception area. We managed to have a quick visit to the incredible succulent nursery headed up by SANParks' Pieter van Zyl, an expert in the area who has discovered over 23 species of plants.

The next stage of our drive, from Sendelingsdrift to Richtersberg via De Hoop, was certainly the most challenging. Despite the technical challenges we faced as novice 4x4ers, we enjoyed the two mountain passes, sandy river bed and the final road of razor-sharp rocks as it allowed us to test out the capabilities of the Fortuner Epic. With a 2.8l engine this 4x4 handled the road with ease and shifting from Eco mode to Power Mode ensured that the Epic was more responsive when the rough terrain demanded the extra power, yet delivered a very efficient 8.5l/100km when it came to fuel consumption.

Finally, we arrived at an Orange River oasis, Richtersberg Camp Site, which offered grassy banks and views across to Namibia. The lush contrast that the river brought to the arid surroundings made our stay memorable. The cool, deep water of the river provided endless entertainment for the children – swimming, inflatable boat races and fishing – so that the adults were able to spend time reading in the hammock, snoozing in the shade and appreciating the birdlife – pied kingfishers hovering over a potential catch, masked weavers making nests and fish eagles calling to claim their territory.

Early mornings here were quiet and slow. Shadows shifted across the volcanic mountains



BEFORE THE BLAZING HEAT OF THE DAY DESCENDED, WE HIKE TO THE TOP OF THE MOUNTAIN.

and the river, receding as the heat rose to full mid-afternoon intensity. To escape the heat, we took air-conditioned drives from the camp to discover desert secrets, such as the hidden valley that leads to the Tatasberg view point. Here, layers of lava rocks lie alongside massive boulders and shimmering sandstone cliffs. Outside the car, we escaped the blazing hot air by sheltering under the perfect "shepherds tree". It was a great spot to soak in the silence and seclusion of this copper-tinged valley with views across the infinite gorges and mountains of the vast Namib.

We wound our way upwards and inland through kloofs of burnt black rocks and stark baked earth. The landscape ever evolving to reveal more raw beauty. Our final night on our epic escape was spent at Kokerboomkloof... a surreal spot where the silence is astounding and the plant life fascinating. Favoured by photographers for the kokerboom "forest" and some of the best rock formations in the Richtersveld, the light here is particularly beautiful and we were lucky to watch a full moon rise behind the boulders and experience a desert dust storm descend at dusk as the colours of the day dissolved.

Packing up camp early on our final morning for the epic 14 hour drive home into the shimmering horizon, we realised something we'd been warned about. It seemed a certain thirst had set in... for the untamed and the unpredictable. The journey to these places may be long, the destination may be dusty, but the reward will always be great. It was a privilege to drive these little-explored roads and to visit these wild, pure places that few people experience.

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**WE WOUND OUR WAY UPWARDS AND INLAND
THROUGH KLOOFS OF BURNT BLACK ROCKS
AND STARK BAKED EARTH.**



Namibian dust storm approaching
en route from Richtersberg to
Kokerboomkloof via the Tatasrivier valley.

EXPLORE YOUR COUNTRY



SEE

The Hand of God. Locals believe God pressed his palm into a schist rock face, leaving a handprint on the mountain.

Petroglyph engravings of the San people. These can be found in several places in the Richtersveld such as the Nababieb valley – and some are as old as 10 000 years. They are geometric in design and incorporate dots, spirals and grids. It is thought the San chipped these engravings on the black dolomite rocks in the first stage of Shamanism - a trance like state brought about through dance.

KNOW

The Richtersveld is one of the Earth's richest reservoirs of plant life and it is a treasure-trove of desert flora. A staggering assortment of plant life (approximately 4 849 species, some occurring nowhere else on earth), is found here - mainly succulent and aloe species. The Nama people revere the human-like "halfmens" trees as the embodiment of their ancestors, mourning for their ancient Namibian home from which they were chased south in the late 18th century by the Germans.

DESPITE FIRST IMPRESSIONS, SIGNS OF LIFE ARE EVERYWHERE IF YOU SEEK THEM OUT.

DRIVE

A 4x4 is essential in the park and driving in convoy is recommended. Don't miss:

The incredible Helskloof mountain pass, a 78km route out of the park from Kokerboomkloof to the main exit gate (approx. 4 hours).

The mountain pass between Eksteenfontein and Vioolsdrift through the Nababiep reserve.

The drive up to the Tatasberg View Point to see the incredible intrusive igneous rock formations that are about 500 million year old.

The route between De Hoop and Richtersberg is challenging for even experienced 4x4 drivers due to the deep sand and sharp rocks.

STAY

Camping accommodation is offered at a variety of rustic camp sites in the reserve. Potjiespram, De Hoop Camp Site, Richtersberg are all located on the banks of the Orange River.

Kokerboomkloof Camp Site is the best of the 'inland' campsites in the park and although there is no fresh water so take your own for drinking, cooking and ablutions.

GETTING THERE

From Cape Town head straight up toward the Namibian border post on the N7. The most common route is north from Springbok on the N7, turning left at Steinkopf (49km) onto the R382 to Port Nolloth (94km). From Port Nolloth you head north for 84km to Alexander Bay. This is where the tarmac ends. From Alexander Bay head back inland for 90km to the Park gate and on to Sendelingsdrift.

GPS COORDINATES

Richtersveld Park Entrance | S 28 17.494 E 16 56.382

Sendelingsdrift | S 28 07.514 E 16 53.496

WEBSITES

sanparks.org/parks/richtersveld/
richtersveld-conservancy.org/
richtersveldnationalpark.com/
richtersveld_community_conservancy.html



HERE THE FLAT PLAIN WAS FILLED WITH ALIEN-LOOKING VEGETATION AND DELICATE DESERT FLOWERS.

1 2 3

1. Our 4x4 crew taking in the view from the top of the boulders at Tierhoek campsite.
2. Traversing the Nababiep Valley in the Fortuner Epic.
3. Desert sentinel.