

The Richtersveld **by Eddie Lambrechts** **(A tribute to my parents)**

After having responded to some messages on the forum, Wildtuinman requested me to submit some of my experiences to the forum. Too long for a forum posting I decided to write an (short?) article and share some of my passion and experiences regarding the Richtersveld.



The Richtersveld in my view is one of those places and experiences; one either loves it or hates it or maybe even an OK for a one or two day visit.

Maybe I was fortunate in that I was born and bred in Namaqualand south of the Richtersveld in a place shown on maps as Nababiep, but every staunch namaqualander will tell you it is "Na-baa-beeep" (with a slow drawl on the "baa" and "beeep"). Both parents being nature lovers, we spent many a weekend camping in dry riverbeds, no tents. My father, with his background in

geology and surveying, instilled in us an appreciation of the natural wonders to be found in the Namaqualand, the Richtersveld and Bushmanland regions. My mother again, was born with "green fingers" and together with my father; we shared the wonders of the flowering season that the region is famous for.



In 2001, after not having been back to the region for (too) many years, too involved in my career and kids growing up, I took a trip down memory lane. What a pleasant awakening it was! Since then I have gone back every year, rediscovered a lot of things, and discovered more and more every year, I doubt that I will ever get tired of it. Every time I return I vow to go back as there is just so much more that I want to see or places where I did not spend enough time. My agreement with my wife is that when I die, my ashes are to be scattered at the Richtersberg campsite in the National Park, that is, if SANParks will allow it. Furthermore, if ever SANParks would want to sell a plot there, be sure I will be first in the queue.



formations, the different colours and textures are unbelievable.

What is it that makes this region such a wonderful, mysterious and magnificent place? For those that do not know, it is classified as one of the only "mountain deserts" in the world, more specifically the area where the National Park is located. The rock and mountain



One has to sit still; look and look again, absorb and appreciate. How is it possible that in one relatively tiny area such as this, one can find so many variations? Few pictures can do justice to this awesome display.

From brown rocks to white quartz "koppies", from black to green to shades of ochre and red. Watch these same mountains and rock formations as the sun passes over it and experience the change in colours and the shade creating different effects.

It is here that I can really again appreciate in absolute quietness and solitude what a gift it is that my Creator has entrusted to us. Not to mention the magnificent views of the Springbokvlakte and Rosyntjieberge.



On my first visit to the park after many years in 2001, I was disappointed in the noticeable absence of wildlife, a "klipbok" here and there, few birds, mostly "mossies" and starlings, not even a spider or scorpion to scare the wife after all the stories we told her before our visit. This I attribute to fact that

shepherds (3 with a flock of about 750 "boerbokke" each) were allowed grazing rights in the park. I cannot question the reasons, but during my visit again in 2002 there were no shepherds in the park that we encountered, a few head of cattle were seen, but it is quite



noticeable since then how the wildlife in general "improved", i.e. more noticeable and in variety. I did however have quite interesting discussions with one of the shepherds, by the name of Dawid Gertse.





The good or bad news to some visitors may be that since 2001 we had on each visit to the park, a leopard "visit" us at the De Hoop campsite. Tracks surrounded the tents every morning. In 2002 I was fortunate enough at 2 am in the morning to wake and find her approximately 5 meters from my tent, unfortunately (or maybe even luckily) my cameras were not close by and could I thus not take any pictures. I watched the

silhouette as she walked around the tent, it was an awesome experience, and too this day I do not know why I did not feel scared at all. I can only attribute it to adrenaline and the unreal experience of being "visited" by a very special and shy guest. That morning we found cub tracks as well which indicated to us that it must have been a female with her litter.

A big disappointment was in 2002 on my next visit. Ugly mounds of rocks and earth greeted us at the entrance at Sendelingsdrift, it is still there today with a flourishing mine going, I really hope SANPARKS will have something done about this, it really spoiled the scenery and view to the entrance of such a magnificent place. This carries on for most of the way towards the Potjiespram campsite.



There are a number of campsites in the park, namely Potjiespram (some refer to it as Pokkiespram), De Hoop, Richtersberg, Kokerboomskloof and De Koei. The first three are next to the Gariiep River, the other two inland. There are no demarcated camping sites; it is mostly an open area where one can pick and choose the most favourable spot. One thing I must congratulate SANPARKS on is that the number of vehicles/visitors is restricted to a few vehicles a day. Thus there is no overcrowding of any site, and campers are mostly far apart contributing to solitude that I'd like to experience when I am there. My favourite campsites are De Hoop and Richtersberg, lately I only stay at these sites and plan my daily trips around the surrounding areas.

Then there is the different kind of visitors to the park. I started off with a 4x2 with diff-lock and upgraded to a 4x4, done the necessary training and have done many 4x4 trails, I am no 4x4 addict, my prime motive was and still is to be able to go to places where others normally can't, know my vehicle's ability and to be able to deal with a situation. I found 4x4 clubs to form cliques, not my scene, nor into impressing or competing with anybody. This may be an over-generalisation, but I find many of the

one to two-day visitors to be 4x4 "junkies" whose sole purpose it is to come and do



the 4x4 section next to the river between De Hoop and Richtersberg with a "a place on my list I have to visit, been there, done it" attitude. Also have I seen many of these come "second" to the thick dust (real, real "poepstof") and the hidden rocks underneath the dust. Then there are those that come with half of Jo'burg's lights. I must confess I am past the survival stage myself, have a dual battery system with a deep freeze (nothing like a steak and

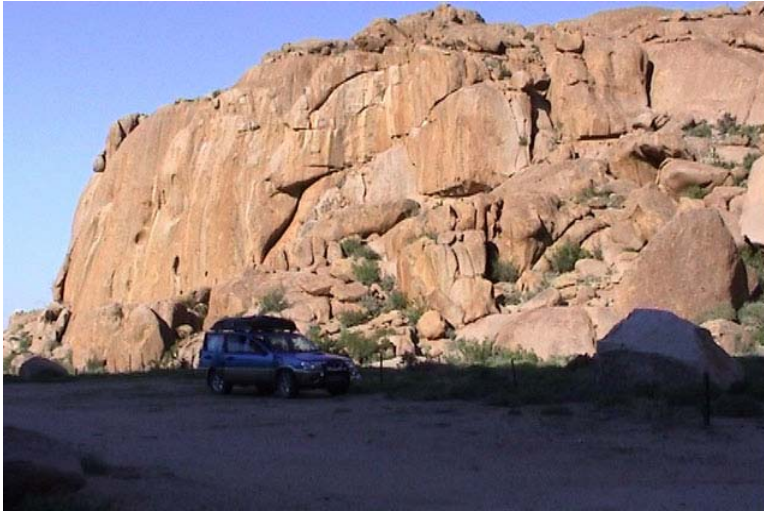
a bottle of good red wine), my gas-heated hot water field shower and I sleep on a stretcher with a thin foam mattress underneath me to keep out the cold and damp. Once at De Hoop camp we had neighbours who had no less than 25 of these 12V lights one normally fits into one's kitchen or above one's bar at home, strung around their site. That is excluding the gas and other lights they also had. Really lit up the place like a Christmas tree.

If one really wants to experience absolute quietness and actually want to hear what NO SOUND sounds like, then a visit to Kokerboomskloof is a must. Standing on one of those massive boulders at 22h00 at night, watching the moon rising, one can actually hear how quiet and still it is, and you actually feel like touching the stars.

One of the best pieces of advice I can give to any visitor to the park is to get hold of the Conti aerial map of the park that is stocked at most 4x4 or outdoor shops. It clearly shows the routes in the park with distances and on the reverse side has a map of the larger Richtersveld, Bushmanland and Namaqualand. Then I'd also recommend the "Kom Rus 'n Bietjie" guesthouse in Eksteensfontein as a stop over on the way to the park.



It is run by a couple of local ladies, nothing lavish or extravagant, good enough for a well deserved rest and a hearty breakfast. If you ask nicely, you can get some genuine "oondkoeke" with the breakfast. And, oh yes, if you do not have a cold beer, there is an off-sales as one enters Eksteensfontein. I normally take the gravel road turn-off from the Steinkopf to Port Nolloth road, it is mostly in a fair condition, however much can be said for the next 40km's from Eksteensfontein to where it links up with the main road coming from Lekkersing to Kuboes. Nearby this junction is Tierhoek where up to recently it was mainly open space and could one camp there unhindered.



During my trip in 2004, I met some folk who also stayed at the guesthouse, busy surveying the area, apparently a conservancy of the area south of the park down to Eksteensfontein and then to the Gariep River, north of the old famous Peace-of-Paradise campsite is to be declared. Had some interesting chats with some of them (from a well known local university), however I must confess that I was, with the exception of one person,

really disappointed in the knowledge the people had of the region or how they were going to or plan to manage the area. I really do hope that they address this properly, I was fortunate enough in 2003 to explore some of these "unknown" areas where few people ever came and where we actually were required to "build" roads as we went along. An overcrowded tourist attraction will soon spoil the mystique and natural attraction the region has to offer to those who really appreciate and love it for what it is.

This brings me to another point, which I do not know how true it is, but there is no access from the normal routes to the Springbokvlakte or the Rosyntjieberge. It is my (mis)understanding that someone has "exclusive rights" to this southern part of the park to take tourists there with his 4x4, if this is true, then it is a big disappointment as from what I was able to see when I did the area south of the park and views via my binoculars, the scenery there is beautiful, why does this restriction or "special privilege" apply?

During 2002 we found one pair of Fish Eagles near Richtersberg, every afternoon at exactly 17h00 hours they would start with their calls, circle more or less above us and feed in the area. What a magnificent display it was every time. During our visit in 2004, there were a lot more Fish Eagles, mostly between the area known as Debbie's River and the Richtersberg campsite. In general the birdlife has increased significantly in my opinion since 2001. Sightings were made of the European Bee-eater, the Half-collared Kingfisher, Striped Kingfisher and various different starlings. At Richtersberg we enjoyed the company of 15 Reed Cormorants, a couple of White-breasted Cormorants and a troupe of "blou apies". Luckily they did not bother us at all or did we encounter any problems with them.

Mostly the roads are not too bad, it is classified as "rugged farm roads", however we did find that the roads leading to and around Kokerbooms kloof and De Koei to be a corrugated mess, most of the damage done by mining vehicles using these roads. The entrance roads to De Hoop and Richtersberg camp sites follow dry river beds, and can change slightly from year-to-year depending on the rainfall and then also the flood around March/April 2004.



I must confess for almost 4 years the famous "Drum sticks" rock formation at Kokerboomskloof evaded me, simply because I relied on some description in a publication as to where it was located, we even used a compass, climbed up and down Toonkop (or also known as Eierkop), I could not believe last year when I eventually literally stumbled over it, how many times I must have walked right past it! Swallow thy pride; it does no harm

to ask a question or directions! Now I have a beautiful picture of it as wallpaper on my pc's at home and work, just enough to wet my appetite on a daily basis and longing to go back. There is also the magnificent Sphinx formation, the Baboon skull and then tragically the "Kokerboom woud". Trees are dying, no new ones growing, do not know how true this is, but according to some park officials it is some "virus" that are killing the trees. Soon there will be nothing left.

Some other advice to visitors, the best time of the year in my opinion to visit the park is from May to September, reason being, if one is not used to the hot dry temperatures of the region, then one may suffer a lot. I have been very fortunate, I mostly visit the park in July or August, with daily temperatures ranging between 28 C to 32 C. Do not rely on the weather forecasts for Oranjemund or Alexanderbay; those 80 km's make a substantial difference in the climate.



Take your own water for drinking and cooking, I work on about 2 litres per person per day. Water for showering and washing I get from the river.

The ablutions were in the process of being build during my visit last year, i.e. 2004, at most of the campsites. Will miss my walk with the spade and roll tucked under the arm, always has been part of the Richtersveld

experience, yet at the same time it has become a problem with the wind and rain washing away the top soil and then one has all these white and the occasional pink or yellow "flags" fluttering in the wind all over the place. The number of "flags" clearly indicates the most frequented locations.

In the past four years I have only encountered one scorpion and that was during 2004. Advice that my father gave me many years ago is that for some reason the

spiders and scorpions do not like "foreign matter". Thus a large ground cover under the tent (it should be about a meter larger than the tent on each side) keeps the spiders and "goggas" from getting into the tent, except for those with wings. The few mosquitos normally feed on my wife, for some reason they dislike me, thus something like Tabbard or Peaceful Sleep may be useful for some too take along.

Since my first visit again in 2001 I have read and acquired a number of publications on the Richtersveld, the most outstanding one was a gift from my brother-in-law whom accompanies me on most of my excursions. This is the publication by Graham Williamson which has further wet my interest and appetite for the Richtersveld, really a must for the Richtersveld lover.

I have been fortunate enough to travel overseas, however, every time I return or when I travel through this wonderful country of ours, I realise how blessed we are with amazing variations in geography and climates, condensed in a country not much bigger than two or more of some of the states in the USA. Yet there, one can travel through nine different connecting states without the scenery changing substantial. Wildlife in some of the parks is almost non-existent.

Yet it is shame at the same time when I travel through some areas in our country and I see the damage that has been done and how we have allowed certain areas to go to waste. On the other hand, I also experience that there is a will and a lot of dedicated people to ensure that we do not lose this wonderful inheritance and that we should take responsibility to protect it.

In a month's time I'm off to the Kgalagadi Park, can't wait to get there. Hopefully by next year this time the Richtersveld Transfrontier Park will be in operation, then I'll be back there again.