

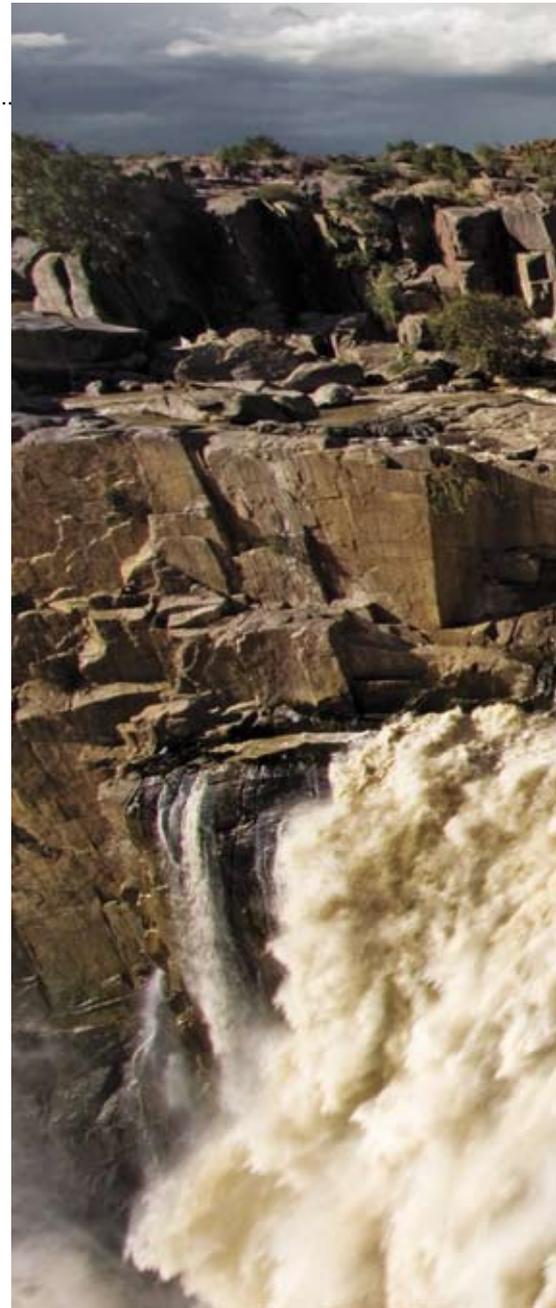


# PLACE OF GREAT NOISE

IN THE PICTURESQUE  
Northern Cape

The Northern Cape is South Africa's largest and least populated province. Rugged and barren, it yields a surprising diversity of flora and fauna.

**I**t's hard to imagine that the arid terrain I'm driving through was once covered by sub-tropical vegetation. But that was during the Miocene period, millions of years ago. Today, the barren landscape around Brandvlei offers little more than brown coarse shrubs, distant mountains and a black tarred road. I haven't seen a single soul for 150 km, save for the odd truck driver and small flocks of pretty black-faced sheep. Driving past this bleak and inhospitable land I wonder why on earth *Ou Brand*, an Afrikaans *trekboer* (travelling farmer), decided to settle on the dry Sakrivier during the 19th century, founding the community that is now Brandvlei.



Cape Town seems a lifetime away; much further than the 521 km I have actually travelled. A solitary kokerboom, towering phantom-like over the stubble of shrubs, occasionally reaches out towards the blue sky while white, cotton-like clouds race with the wind, all of which somehow add to the grandeur of the lonely landscape. There are neither convenience stores along the way nor petrol stations, let alone a place to stop for lunch, and I feel my eyes drawn to the fuel gauge. ■■■



Augrabies Falls



Springbok grazing at Union's End.



A juvenile cheetah resting.

Finally, up ahead in the far distance, the first sign of human habitation arises on the shimmering horizon.

In the passenger seat, my niece sighs with relief as I slow down and pull into Kenhardt, a small town that established itself around a giant camelthorn tree below which magistrate Maximilian Jackson camped during the late 1860s. I switch off and opening the door, stretch my legs.

A windmill heaves across the road, cranking her weary metal blades in a regular, clattering sound. Other than that, nothing else is really going on. It reminds me of one of those old American westerns where the main character arrives in a small frontier town. And like that cowboy, I feel the locals staring at the stranger when I pay for fuel and head to the ladies' for a timely visit.

Remarkably, a great surging river snakes like a giant sea serpent across the landscape only another 100 km further north, transforming the rugged terrain into a lush valley. Smearing a deep green, vibrant smudge across the southern Kalahari, and providing fertile soil for flourishing vineyards, the Orange River, also known as the Gariep, is South Africa's longest river system, originating in the Drakensberg mountains and winding its way west before eventually spilling its waters into the Atlantic Ocean.

It is here in the heart of the Green Kalahari that, like a great belching beast, the waters perform a roaring display at the Augrabies Falls. Cascading 56 m down into a 240 m gorge, the waterfall is the second largest in Africa after the world famous Victoria Falls, also known as Mosi-oa-Tunya.

The 55 383 ha Augrabies Falls National Park, established around the falls in 1966, derives its name from the Khoi word *Aukoerebis*, meaning the Place of Great Noise. Earlier this year, in late January, it was reported that four million litres of water a second crashed over the precipice following flooding in the area after severe summer rain.

Apart from strategic viewpoints a short walking distance from the



Windmills are a common sight in the Northern Cape.

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restaurant complex, the park offers plenty of other activities, such as self-drive routes, hiking trails and accommodation facilities. Klipspringer, springbok, kudu, gemsbok, eland, giraffe reside here, as do jackals, bat-eared foxes, aardwolf, caracal, Cape clawless otter and leopard.

A distinct floral feature of the Northern Cape is the kokerboom, or quiver tree, which is a slow-growing aloe that can reach a height of up to eight metres. The first Europeans to see the kokerboom in 1685 were members of Governor Simon van der Stel's party during an exploratory journey through Namaqualand.

We overnight in one of the park's comfortable chalets and, after a last peek at the falls, travel about 120 km east the following morning to arrive in Upington, a large, booming town that was founded on the Orange River in 1884. After checking into one of the lovely little B&B's on the banks of the river, we head into the CBD to stock up on five litre water drums, food and firewood. ■■■



Quiver trees.

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## THE ROADS

Roads in the Kgalagadi are regularly maintained but tend to deteriorate quickly, rendering them unsuitable for sedans. Driving a 4X4 or a vehicle with high clearance is strongly advised. The /Ai-/Ais/Richtersveld is 4x4 only. Augrabies is accessible to all vehicles. For more info, visit [www.sanparks.org](http://www.sanparks.org)

At one of the local eateries, we enjoy a simple meal and a sampling of some very nice locally produced wine before returning to the guesthouse, where hundreds of little frogs croaking in the river produce chime-like sounds.

The Kgalagadi Transfrontier Park, 260 km to the north, is a massive 3.6 million ha wilderness area, formerly divided into two separate parks. But on 7 April 1999, a historic treaty was signed between South Africa and Botswana to merge the two adjoining parks into one comprehensive wilderness area. This is Africa's first Peace Park, an initiative that was conceived to allow migratory game free and unrestricted movement across international borders. The Kgalagadi was officially opened in May 2000 by South African President Thabo Mbeki and President Festus Mogae of Botswana.

Entering the park at Twee Rivieren, we have the petrol attendant lower the pressure of the car tires to cope with the gravel roads, and fill up on fuel. After driving along a winding road for about 20 minutes, we reach the crest of the dune and pause to digest the stunning view before rolling down into the dry Auob River. A herd of springbok seek shelter from the fierce midday heat in the dappled shade of a camelthorn tree, while further along we observe a line of wildebeest, marching north. We take some pictures and continue along the riverbed to Urikaruus, one of the park's six wilderness camps.

A pretty Cape fox with long pointed ears trots daintily towards our lofted little tree house later that evening to sit beneath the wooden deck with expectant eyes. It's heartwrenching to ignore the pleas for scraps, but feeding wild animals is not only prohibited, it encourages a dependency on easy handouts that experience has shown results in problem animals that face destruction.

The next morning we scan the shrub-dotted dunes meticulously for signs of predators, and laugh at mistaking tawny-coloured clumps for lions. But then we are unexpectedly rewarded by three beautiful juvenile cheetahs, lying beside ■■■



Chalet at Grootkolk, Kgalagadi Transfrontier Park.

It is, in fact, a biodiversity hotspot that supports an astonishing diversity of plant life, many of which are found nowhere else on Earth.



Kori bustard.



the gristly remains of a recently killed springbok. The cheetahs are not far from the road and take turns feeding, leaving a sibling to watch the hills for oncoming lion or hyena.

At the other end of the 54 km dune road, we descend into the sprawling banks of the dry Nossob River. The eastern side of the Kgalagadi feels very different. With her undulating hills and grasses, the Auob has a gentle feel about her landscape, unlike the Nossob, which, weary with thirst, appears far more rugged and harsh. But herein lies an advantage to her visitors. Animal tracks are easily noticed in the soft, loose sand and before too long we come

across spoor the size of my hand. Lion! We slow right down, keeping an eye on the tracks, and following them, sleuth along until they veer off the road.

We turn off at the next waterhole and there find a magnificent male lion. Raising his inscrutable amber eyes momentarily as our vehicle rolls to a slow stop, he laps at the surface of the water before lifting his massive head to give a casual shake of his luxurious mane.

It's with a heavy heart that we exit the park at Twee Rivieren, heading back to Upington from where we drive in a westerly direction to Springbok.

Tucked away in the far north-western corner of the Northern Cape, the Richtersveld is probably the most desolate and least explored area in the country. Its mountainous desert terrain appears lifeless; too stark and unforgiving for anything to survive, but surprisingly, a wide variety of arthropods, reptiles and smaller mammals are found here. It is, in fact, a biodiversity hotspot that supports an astonishing diversity of plant life, many of which are found nowhere else on Earth.

Receiving their life-sustaining moisture through dew and early morning fog that rolls in from the Atlantic coast, the desert's flora are uniquely adapted to thrive in this unforgiving land. A perfect example is the *halfmens boom*, a stem succulent that is named for its human appearance when seen from afar. Revered by the Nama people as being the embodiment of their ancestors, the half-human tree is internationally protected and listed as highly endangered by the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES).

The Richtersveld National Park is incorporated into the /Ai-/Ais-Richtersveld Transfrontier Park with Namibia's /Ai-/Ais Hot Springs Game Park and the Fish River Canyon Park. To the south, the Richtersveld Community Conservancy was inscribed in the World Heritage Site list for its "outstanding value to humanity". It has since been renamed the Richtersveld Cultural and Botanical Landscape.

With so many jewels in her chest of treasures, the Northern Cape is truly one of South Africa's most rewarding places to visit, and I can't wait to return. 🐾

## WEATHER

Weather conditions are extremely variable in the Northern Cape with temperatures ranging from  $-1^{\circ}\text{C}$  during winter to  $+53^{\circ}\text{C}$  recorded in the Richtersveld. Distances are vast. Use every opportunity to fill up with petrol, carry enough drinking water and stick to designated roads.