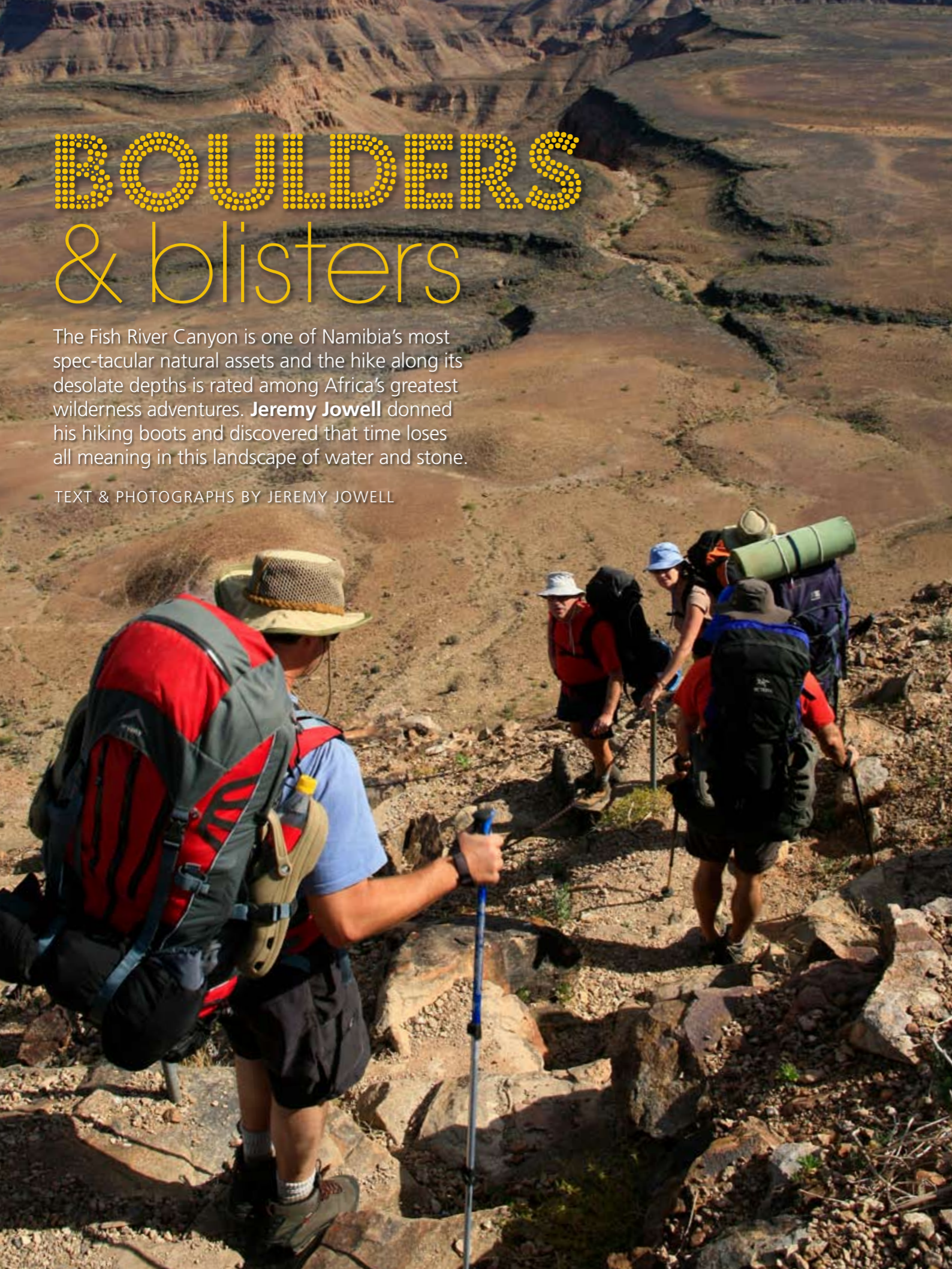


# BOULDERS & blisters

The Fish River Canyon is one of Namibia's most spec-tacular natural assets and the hike along its desolate depths is rated among Africa's greatest wilderness adventures. **Jeremy Jowell** donned his hiking boots and discovered that time loses all meaning in this landscape of water and stone.

TEXT & PHOTOGRAPHS BY JEREMY JOWELL



It's serenely silent as I hike down the canyon walls. The only sounds are the crunch of my boots on the boulders, the occasional twitter of a bird and the gentle tumbling of the river. High above, towering orange cliffs loom, outlined against the deep blue sky. It's a hot morning and I'm in no rush, so I stop for a swim. The cold water refreshes me instantly and I linger, soothing my complaining muscles. Our group is spread out and I hike on alone, feeling small and insignificant in this vast space.

Namibia's Fish River Canyon is a harsh and beautiful place. Purported to be the second largest of its kind in the world after the Grand Canyon in the US (some say it's only the second largest in Africa, after the valley of the Blue Nile), it measures approximately 160 kilometres in length, stretching southwards from Seeheim to the Orange River. The hike that penetrates its base is strenuous, winding through 85 kilometres of jaw-dropping scenery from the Hobas viewpoint to the spa resort at IAI-IAIs.

There is no defined path to follow – trailists have to clamber over boulders, climb embankments and trudge through thick sand or across open plains. There's also no set route – using the map as a guide, you simply follow the river, watching where the canyon curves. You also need to find the short cuts; if you don't, you'll add many hours of hard slogging to the journey. Nights are spent beneath the stars, with groups finding a flat sandy space and rolling out their sleeping bags.

You carry your backpack for five days, so it's vital to be well prepared with the barest essentials. Mine included sachets of tuna, cracker biscuits, instant soup and pasta meals, powdered energy drinks, energy bars and a spare gas canister. Instant oats with raisins and honey would do for breakfast, and I added several slabs of Lindt chocolate.

Clothing consisted of a few T-shirts, two pairs each of shorts and underwear, a jersey, a sunhat, a beanie, a sarong and tracksuit pants. My biggest problem was my camera gear, which totals four kilograms. After squeezing in cooking equipment, medical supplies, a sleeping bag and an inflatable mattress, I was shocked to see that my pack weighed a hefty 23 kilograms. I became ruthless. Out came half my



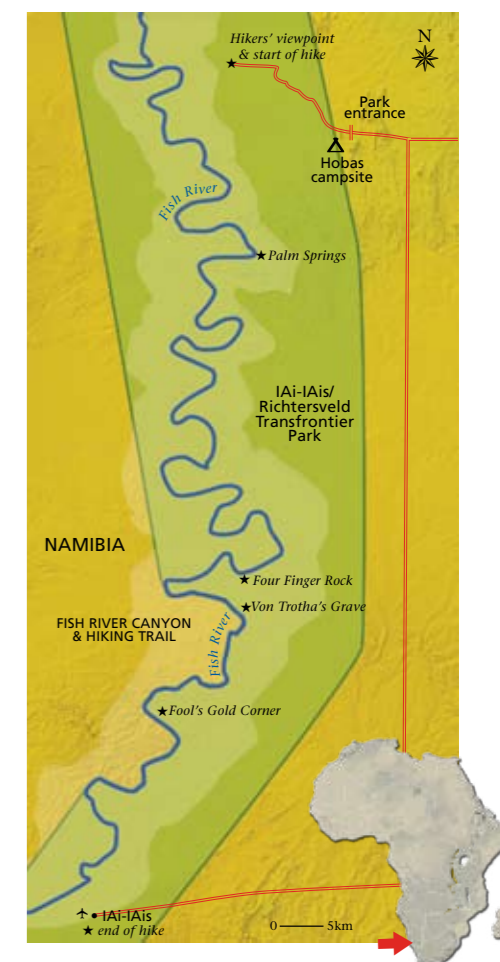
clothing, a few packets of soup, some energy bars and my wide-angle lens. The weight registered about 18 kilograms. The chocolate stayed.

I wake before dawn and leave Cape Town as a violent thunderstorm breaks over the city. I fetch fellow hiker Julian Abramson and we head along the N7 towards Namibia. Just past Springbok the clouds disperse to reveal a bright, sunny day. At the border we negotiate customs with little fuss, and drive across the Orange River. The sun has just set when we arrive at IAI-IAIs, where we rendezvous with the other hikers in our party. Everyone is excited and, after a barbecue, we soak in the hot spring water and chat about our forthcoming adventure.

The next morning we take the shuttle bus to Hobas, where we pose on the edge of the canyon for the obligatory team photograph. I slap on some sunscreen, do a few stretches and heave on my pack. 'Enjoy it everyone,' shouts someone from the rear. 'This is the beginning of our Fish River adventure.'

We descend the precarious path cautiously, negotiating the rocks with care and using the chains secured at the steeper sections. It's very hot. Unaccustomed to the heavy backpack, my hips are hurting like hell so I stop to adjust the straps, but I'm still uncomfortable. After two knee-jarring hours I reach the river, strip off my clothes and plunge into the water.

Lunch is tuna with crackers, a square of cheese and an energy bar. 'Your pack is now about 250 grams lighter,'



TOP A hiker takes advantage of an opportunity to refresh her weary limbs and wash off the dust.

OPPOSITE The descent into the canyon is steep but there are chains to hang on to and a cool pool at the bottom.



jokes Abramson. We take a short siesta, then walk in the afternoon heat along the stone-strewn banks of the river. The canyon is so still that the silence is almost deafening. 'This place is amazing,' he smiles. 'I sat for a moment and it was so quiet that I could hear the insects talking.'

I trudge on slowly through thick sand and over big boulders, stopping every hour for a swim, until the light softens and we reach a wide sandy bank. I ease the load off my aching back and level out a stretch of sand, then unroll my mattress and sleeping bag. The sun sets and a thin band of pink cloud colours the sky. Dinner is leftover steak and sausages from our barbecue last night, followed by *rooibos* (red-bush) tea with whisky and honey. Before scrambling into my sleeping

bag, I rub my limbs with arnica oil to soothe my sore muscles. Despite being tired, I'm entranced by the twinkling stars and dark heavens, and fall asleep lulled by the river gurgling and murmuring around the rocks.

Day Two dawns cloudy and after a quick cup of tea we set off downriver. The conditions are ideal for hiking and some of the speedsters in our group rush on ahead, leaving us dawdling behind, stopping to swim and take photographs.

The first two days are spent covering what is considered to be the most rugged part of the trail as it involves plenty of boulder-hopping and plodding through thick sand. Finding that the left bank has become too steep to negotiate, we make the first of many river crossings. Some of us step confidently from one exposed rock to another, whereas others are more hesitant, unsure of their footing. One slip could mean a dunk in the river or even broken bones.

I walk on alone, enjoying the silence. Suddenly, amidst the barren scenery, white lilies bloom up from the earth. Fragile footprints of insects and lizards pattern the sand. The ascending sun illuminates the orange cliffs, then appears overhead, glinting on the green water. After two hours we stop for

breakfast and Abramson fires up the Cadac cooker to boil some water. Instant oats have never tasted so good.

Trekking on, the going becomes tough as we struggle across long stretches of giant boulders and soft sand. We soon learn to read the canyon by watching the curves of the gorge ahead. I fall into the so-called 'Fish River rhythm' and the hours fly past.

The birdlife is plentiful and we watch two grey herons swoop over the river, their cries echoing off the canyon walls. A booted eagle glides gracefully in the thermals, then suddenly flies off in a frenzy. 'It's being chased by a kestrel that probably has a nest in the area and is protecting its chicks,' says Meidad Goren, the team's birding expert.

Hours later, we stop at a small rocky cove for lunch: chicken noodle soup, tuna with oven-dried tomatoes and a herb dressing, with the usual crackers. By late afternoon we still have not caught up with the frontrunners, and we decide to make camp on a wide beach.

●●● wake early the next morning and  
 ●●● check my boots for scorpions  
 ●●● before pulling them on. Two of our  
 ●●● party set off immediately to try to catch the others. We linger over breakfast until the sun strikes the upper canyon walls. I wash the cutlery with sand and water, then heave on my backpack. It definitely feels lighter today.

Soon we encounter the unmistakable stench of sulphur at Palm Springs, where boiling water gushes from the earth and flows into the river. We spend an hour soaking our limbs, but cannot linger too long or we will fall even further behind. I follow the river and see fresh evidence of the wild horses that frequent this area.

Abramson and I trek on past Klip-springer Ridge and as the peaks of the canyon turn gold, we're treated to the majestic sight of three wild horses drinking from the river. We also spot a large monitor lizard before it vanishes under a rock. The sun disappears and we find a perfect site to spend the night. While collecting firewood, we see three of our companions walking on the opposite riverbank. 'We crossed a little way back but it's too deep here for us to come back over,' they shout. 'We'll camp further down and meet up with you tomorrow.'

Abramson lights the fire and we relax. 'It doesn't get much better than



## Fish River Canyon at a glance

- At 650 kilometres, the Fish River is the longest waterway in Namibia, cutting deep into the dry plateau from the eastern Naukluft Mountains to the Orange River.
- Along part of its length, the river runs through horizontal dolomite strata. Seismic activity cracked the earth's surface here some 650 million years ago, creating a fissure that became eroded over the millennia to form the well-known canyon.
- The gorge is a 160-kilometre-long zigzag, up to 27 kilometres in width and in places almost 550 metres deep. The trail that winds along its base is about 85 kilometres long.
- The area around the canyon forms part of the IAi-Hais/Richtersveld Transfrontier Park.
- Wildlife in the gorge includes klipspringers, baboons and rock hyraxes (dassies). On the plains are predators such as leopards, brown hyaenas, jackals and bat-eared foxes. Reptiles and insects are in abundance: look out for monitor lizards, Cape and black spitting cobras, and puff and horned adders. Bird species include olive thrush, Cape robin-chat, African fish-eagle, martial eagle, rock kestrel, grey heron and ostrich.



this,' he says. 'We're sitting beside a crackling fire, under a starry sky, next to a flowing river, with the horses nearby and pasta cooking on the coals. This is paradise,' he smiles.

We rendezvous with the others in the morning and find a short cut before scrambling down to yet another river crossing. 'Shoes off,' warns Abramson. 'There aren't enough rocks to walk across.'

Shadows creep across the folds of the canyon as the sun lights up the land. We pass Dassie Ridge, then negotiate a series of boulder fields and a vast rocky plain. At last, after a tiring 10-hour slog, we camp below towering Four Finger Rock. After dinner we sit around the fire, toasting marshmallows and listening to the distant cries of baboons and jackals. ▶

ABOVE Four Finger Rock marks the end of the deepest part of the canyon, and the beginning of the last day of the hike.

TOP No facilities exist on the trail, but sleeping beneath the stars is perfectly safe and comfortable.

OPPOSITE, TOP Concentration is essential when stepping from rock to rock across the river.

OPPOSITE, BELOW The walls of the canyon are a geologist's fantasy. Its lowest levels were laid down almost two million years ago. The spectacular erosion created by the Fish River, which occasionally comes down in flood, dates back just 50 million years.



ABOVE Wild horses roam the canyon floor.

RIGHT The vistas are breathtaking, and the silence is absolute.

It's the last day and our small group wakes long before sunrise. We still have 25 kilometres of hard hiking ahead to reach IAi-IAis by evening and my feet are taking strain. I've got four big blisters and, despite padding them with plasters and cottonwool, every step is agony. Nevertheless, as the sun's rays touch Four Finger Rock, we're packed and ready to go. A quick march across a rocky plain leads us to the grave of Lieutenant Thilo von Trotha, a German officer killed here on 14 June 1905 in a skirmish with the local Nama people.

At a tricky river crossing, a few members of our group slip on the rocks and splash into the water. My blisters are really killing me. Others are also suffering and every break turns into a communal first-aid session. There's no escape, so I shut my mind to the pain and hike on doggedly. We finally stumble onto the last short cut at 15h00. There's still 12 kilometres to go, but we're on the home stretch and I allow my thoughts to turn to the comforts awaiting us at IAi-IAis – clean clothes, a sirloin steak, a cold beer.

Crossing the river for the final time, I hobble on for the last few kilometres until, as the light softens and the rocks glow gold, we round a corner and spot the campsite. We dump our packs, order beers and jump into the hot water. Our aches and pains are soon forgotten and we pledge to return to this wilderness of water and stone. ■



## infotravel

The Fish River Canyon can only be hiked in winter, between April and September, as summer temperatures are too high. The trail is demanding, so participants should be relatively fit and have prior hiking experience. A medical certificate must be submitted before you'll be allowed to set off. Rescue facilities are limited and there is no cellphone reception. In an emergency, hikers have to be airlifted to assistance.

There are no facilities provided in the canyon and participants need to be entirely self-sufficient (tents are not necessary as it rarely rains here in winter). Water can usually be taken from the river but purification tablets may be needed.

For more information or to make a booking, contact Namibia Wildlife Resorts on tel. +27 (0)21 422 3761, e-mail [ct.bookings@nwr.com.na](mailto:ct.bookings@nwr.com.na) or go to [www.nwr.com.na](http://www.nwr.com.na)