

Conquer the canyon

IT'S EVERY BIT AS IMPRESSIVE AS THE GRAND CANYON AND, EVEN BETTER, IT'S A LOT CHEAPER AND EASIER TO GET TO. THE FISH RIVER CANYON IN NAMIBIA DESERVES A VISIT

By Nick Dall

KNOW THIS

GETTING THERE

The Fish River Canyon is 173 km away by road from Windhoek. No. 1000 is the main road. No. 1000 is the main road. No. 1000 is the main road.

GETTING AROUND

A car is essential, either rent one or bring your own.

VISAS

South African citizens do not require visas but remember to pack your passport.

MONEY

The Namibian dollar is pegged to the rand. Rands are accepted in most places.

LANGUAGE

English and Afrikaans are widely spoken.

MEDICAL

There are no nearby hospitals, so bring a good first-aid kit.

Geologists will tell you that the mind-blowing Fish River Canyon was formed by a combination of water erosion, glaciation and continental drift – but this explanation is far too clinical for me. A local legend passed down from generation to generation tells of a giant snake that plagued the Nama people, eating livestock and terrorising humans. The tribe banded together to take the snake down and the beast was speared. But as it writhed in agony, its tail cut deep swathes into the desert, thus forming the serpentine canyon we know today.



Inside the canyon, the life-giving water provides a different environment

Trail prep

The 86 km hike from the main viewpoint near Hobas at the north of the canyon to [Ai-]Ais in the south involves descending to the canyon floor and following the course of the river for between four and five days. It's one of the most beautiful hikes in the world but, because of the terrain and location, it's absolutely essential that you're well prepared. Follow these tips to make sure it's memorable for the right reasons.

PLAN AHEAD

The trail is only open from 1 May to 15 September and booking is essential as numbers are limited.

Hikers must be older than 12 and need to produce a certificate of fitness before they begin. Contact Namibia Wildlife Resorts to make a booking (R275 pp, ct.bookings@nwr.com.na).

PACK LIGHT

You'll have to carry everything you need, so choose wisely. Because of the weather in this part of the world, most hikers don't bother with tents and instead sleep under the stars.

ON YOUR FEET

You'll need at least two pairs of shoes.

Sturdy hiking boots with strong ankle support and hardy mountaineering sandals for river scrambling and crossing are ideal.

WHAT IF?

There's no cellphone reception in the canyon and the only escape routes are at the beginning and end of the trail. Take a comprehensive first-aid kit – and someone who knows how to use it!

KNOW YOUR LIMITATIONS

Not a seasoned hiker? There are other options. If you still want to experience the beauty of the trail, consider doing a guided hike with The Cardboard Box Travel Shop, (namibian.org) or a four- or five-day mule trek (you'll only have to carry yourself) with Canyon Lodge.



budget tip

Before you book, enquire about a Gondwana Card: South African residents can enjoy up to 40% discounts on all Gondwana Collection properties.

Where to stay

Any budget is suitable for a visit to the Fish River Canyon. There are various accommodation types for everyone...

Canyon Lodge, where the chalets are literally built into the rock face.

Canyon Village, atmospheric lodging where a mule-drawn cart will take you to your room.

Canyon Roadhouse, which also has a campsite on its grounds. It's a quirky and more affordable option.

All the above belong to the Gondwana Collection. gondwana-collection.com



ENDLESS VIEWS

The luxury Fish River Lodge is the only hotel that overlooks the canyon. All of its rooms are less than 10m from the edge. fishriverlodge.com.na

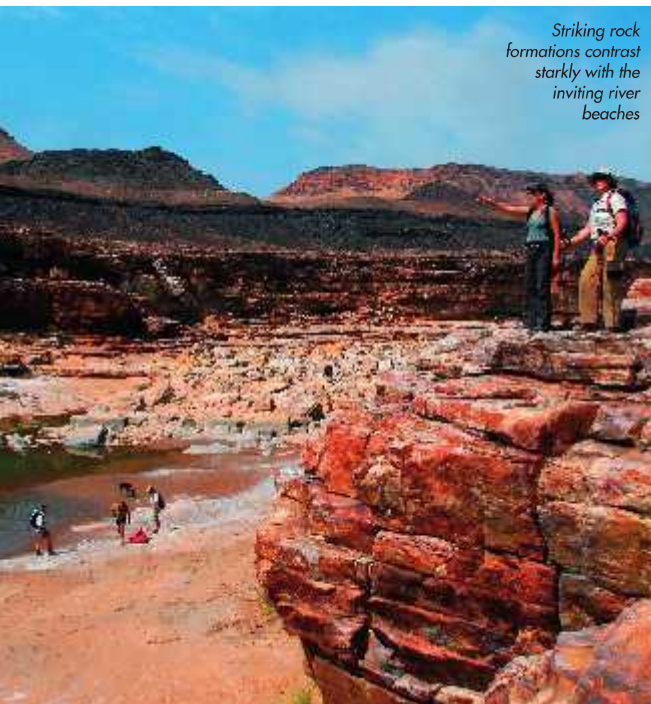
FAMILY FUN

The government-owned campsite and hotel at the IAi-IAis Hot Springs Spa is great for families: Dad can hike while the kids swim in the natural hot springs and Mom gets a massage.

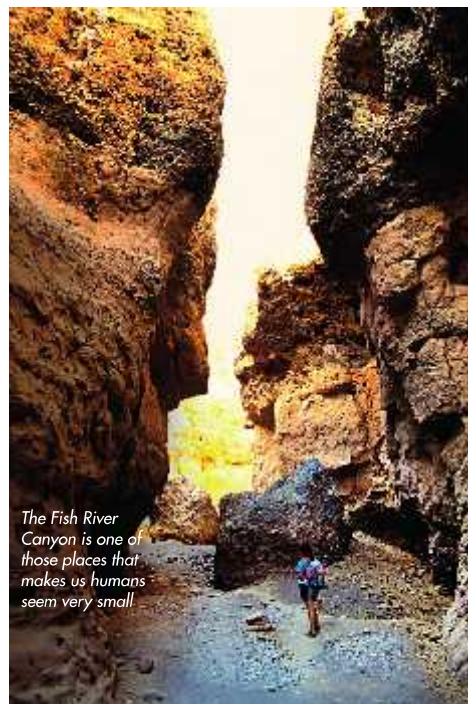
nwr.com.na



IAi-IAis Hot Springs Spa offers great facilities for R&R



Striking rock formations contrast starkly with the inviting river beaches



The Fish River Canyon is one of those places that makes us humans seem very small

PHOTOGRAPHY: GALLO/GETTYIMAGES/ALAMY, COURTESY IMAGES

The Fish River Canyon is one of those places you simply have to see before you die. Standing at the Hobas viewpoint, you are taken on a 1.5-billion-year journey through the Earth's history in one single instant. You'll have to drive quite a long way – on incredibly smooth gravel roads and through barren, haunting landscapes – to get there. But this is how it should be: the canyon's incredible twists, turns and incisions are made all the more amazing by the monotony preceding them.

Taking it all in

The first and most important thing to do is also the easiest: look at the canyon. Drive to the viewpoint at Hobas and make sure you remember to charge your camera batteries beforehand. The canyon is best seen at sunrise or sunset, when the temperatures are a bit cooler and the rock glows orange.

A visit to the hot springs at IAi-IAis Hot Springs Spa is also essential

FAST FACTS

➤ The canyon is almost 550m deep, 27 km wide and 160 km long. It's the world's second largest canyon and is more than 500 million years old.

➤ The Fish River is the longest river in Namibia and flows for 650 km before joining the Orange River and emptying into the Atlantic Ocean.

➤ It can get very hot in summer: temperatures as high as 48°C have been recorded.

➤ In 2012, South African trail runner Ryan Sandes ran the 90 km Fish River Canyon hiking trail in six hours and 57 minutes.

and the Canyon Roadhouse, with its fascinating collection of motoring memorabilia, is a great place to grab a meal or drink. If you've got the cash, enquire at your hotel about a trip in a light aircraft – the canyon looks even better from above.

You should also make time for a walk – either in the canyon itself or in the hills and koppies around it. Most lodges and hotels have a few options, from multiday guided walks to short DIY sunset loops. Whatever you choose, you'll be rewarded with breathtaking views of rock formations and quiver trees and hopefully see some of the resident wildlife such as dassies, klipspringers, baboons and black eagles. Scorpions and snakes are also common sightings, so be very carefully and always wear closed shoes when out.

One thing's for sure, you'll be planning your return visit in no time. 📅

