

Namaqualand Getaway, May 2009 by Mike Lauterbach

After our Bots trip last year, we wanted a water trip, and the West Coast sounded like a great plan. Unfortunately, not much time was available, so we decided on a short stint up the West Coast to the Richtersveld, which we had last visited 9 years ago, and a return leg along the Orange River. Because of the limited time available, this would also serve as a recce trip.

After considering various suggestions in response to our questions on the forums, it was decided to spend one day on the West Coast Echo trail, after briefly visiting family in Cape Town, then spend three days in the Noup Divers Huts, 3 days in the Richtersveld, and then head back via the Namaqua Echo Trail.

We left KZN early on Friday 1 May, on our way to Colesberg, our first stop. We made good time, in spite of some road works between Winburg and Bloemfontein, and a few more on the N1, and decided to press on to Beaufort West, where we found a very nice B&B, "Die Herehuis Guesthouse", S32.35217 E22.58612 (R300 per flatlet), and had a delightful supper at "Ye Olde Thatch Restaurant" in the main street.

We managed to leave by 05h30 the next day. The sun came up "late" - remember that it greets us earlier in KZN - and came up directly behind us. It must have been a nightmare for the drivers traveling in the opposite direction, along this long 70km straight stretch.

I was still monitoring APRS coverage (Automatic Position Reporting System, using HAM radios). We have good coverage in KZN, but it only reaches out as far as Bethlehem. Nothing was found in Bloemfontein, which was rather surprising. Then we heard the first radio signals just before the Huguenot Tunnel, which we entered in sunny weather. Three and a half minutes later we exited it on the western side in pouring rain, with APRS coverage!

After stocking up with some last minute supplies in the Kirstenhof area, we visited my youngest sister and then my parents in Bergvliet and Tokai, before setting off for Bloubergstrand, where we stayed with Gudrun's sister for the night. I can't believe how this area has been built up since the last time I was there in '85, when there was just the coastal road, marshland and no houses. These cluster houses in their estates are ugly, in my opinion, but the units themselves are quite nice.



Sunrise, thankfully behind us



Misty Bloubergstrand morning

The third morning saw us off in thick sea mist, on our way to the West Coast. After buying some firewood from roadside vendors in Melkbosstrand, we ambled up the coast, making detours to have a look at some spots we had not visited for ages.



Yzerfontein

Our first stop was in Yzerfontein, a very quaint village. It looks like a popular retirement and holiday destination.

Our next detour was to Langebaan, which we did not recognise anymore. Not much peace and quiet to be found there anymore...

A quick peek into Port Owen revealed that this was also becoming quite popular with retired folk, with many mansions along the river.

By now we realised that these detours had eaten enough into our time, and we made a beeline for Groenrivier, the first camping night of our trip. We deflated our tyres slightly when we reached the first gravel roads, which were in fair condition.

Passing the Lighthouse on the coastal track, we quickly realised that this was exactly what we had hoped for - pristine and absolutely beautiful. We found a great wild sheltered camping spot south of the lighthouse, opened our RTT, got our chairs out and drank in the surroundings with a couple of sundowners. Supper was followed by a session next to a warm fire.



Groenrivier wild camping

After a lazy morning we semi-reluctantly left for the Noup Divers Huts in the West Coast Diamond Area. We followed the coast line back north, mostly choosing the legal tracks closest to the sea. We will definitely have to revisit the complete "Echo Trail", spending at least two weeks here. This must rate as one of our most scenic and enjoyable drives, if you forget about the horrible corrugations of the main gravel roads along here.



Lovely camping spot ahead...



Crossing a white dune area on the way to the seal colony

We found a couple of nice sheltered spots along the way where camping would be great, in fact, where you could stay for a couple of days, just relaxing, watching the waves, reading books, or even fishing, at which I'm pretty useless...

What impressed is that numerous tracks crossing over sensitive areas like sand dunes and virgin beach are closed off with signs and rocks. We later found out that responsibility of this coastal region has been handed back to Parks Board, and they are doing sterling work.

We were forced inland by one of these closed tracks along a horrible corrugated sand road. At the next opportunity we dropped back towards the ocean. This track led us through snow white soft sand dunes, and past a seal colony. The seals



Seal Colony

were incredibly well camouflaged on the brown rocks, and we might have missed them had I not seen reference to them on T4A.

Near Boggerallbaai we headed inland to enable us to get to the Noup Divers Huts relatively early and get settled in. The gravel/sand roads along here are the worst corrugated stretches of evil we have encountered so far. Those of the Hartmann's Valley are highways in comparison. On the way we dropped in to Hondeklip Bay to see what it is all about, and can now say that we were there, but can't tell you what that dust bowl is all about...



A tiny flower found on the rocks at Hondeklip Bay

We arrived in the West Coast Diamond Area early afternoon, and stopped at security to collect our permits. Their computers were down however and they just waived us through. We heard later that the microwave link between Kleinsee and Koingnaas has been down for a while now, but since the mining operation has virtually been closed down, the repair of this link does not seem to be on the critical list.

We filled up with diesel (cheapest diesel on the west coast at R6.50/l), as well as some rolls, tomatoes and firewood at the local Spar in Koingnaas.

The Noup Divers Huts are great, with fantastic sea views. They are quite rustic, with own bathroom. Electricity is supplied between 19h00 and 21h00, and this is the only time you get hot water in the cottages. A short distance away they had clean gas fired ablutions with piping hot water.

We settled in very comfortably and experienced the best sunset of our trip this first night.



Our cottage at Noup



Our first sunset at Noep, which gradually turn blood red

Later, we made a cosy fire in the fireplace, had a braai, and settled down to some reading to the sound of the crashing waves



The Border wreck. Dudley Wessels, in blue longs, is explaining something to one of the Swiss tourists

In the morning we proceeded to the Koingnaas Camp Site to meet up with Dudley Wessels, who was taking us on the Shipwreck Tour. There we joined Swiss tourists with their 8 hired 4x4s. Scenically, the tour was not as good as the coastal stretches further south in the Groenrivier area, but the knowledge gained about the Namaqualand area, local fauna and flora and the shipwrecks was well worthwhile. Dudley is also involved with the rehabilitation of the mined areas and left-over sand hills and mountains.

The cottages, shipwreck and sand dunes tours can be booked directly with Aletta or Dudley Wessels (083 2867080 and 083 3052569 resp) or via noup@kingsley.co.za. Very pleasant and helpful people!

After three nights at Noup, we dragged ourselves away and set off for the Richtersveld, where we booked ourselves in for 3 nights at de Hoop.

The sand roads between the Diamond Area and Port Nolloth tried to shake our vehicle apart again with their monster corrugations, and managed to wreck one of our sound system speakers. The only consolation is that these roads will keep many away from the pristine West Coast area.

In Port Nolloth we bought a couple of provisions and some more firewood, and headed off for the Richtersveld. Once we were signed in, I had a look at the new ferry, which had been nonoperational for 4 days due to high river levels. Looking at it, I could not see why they could not operate it. Maybe it was too narrow and unstable? I did not stay to ask for an explanation.



Our cottage silhouetted by a cloudless sunset

The first section through the Richtersveld was a bit disappointing as the tracks from 9 years ago were now proper single lane roads, and easy going. We noticed many more mining sand heaps. But a little further into the park these stopped and the old tracks were the order of the day. The bad sections were however upgraded with gravel, as well as those sections which suffered from erosion.

We came across the same halfmens we photographed 9 years ago. The botterbome were magnificent, as well as the countless other shrubs and plants.



A couple of Botterbome

We arrived at de Hoop in good time and found two other parties camped there, one was a couple with a Landcruiser plastered with stickers explaining that they were on some photographic expedition. Luckily they were camped close to the ablutions, and we took the camp site we occupied last time - one we had all to ourselves. Being self sufficient we did not need the ablutions. In fact, our shower with hot water under the tree was definitely a lot better than the supplied ones with cold water.



The same Halfmens we photographed 9 years ago

The river level was definitely a lot higher, but we could see that it had dropped by about a foot or so already. While setting up camp, some white eyes came and greeted us, while some bull bulls chatted a bit nervously from "our" tree. We noticed that the surrounding trees have been trimmed to make more space for additional campers. It would definitely be overcrowded in season - would hate to have close neighbours here.



After we had settled in, we got out our binocs, camera and books, and settled down to some more relaxing. The bird life was not as prolific as last time, with no bird life in the reeds, but we put this down to the recent rains they had in the park, and possibly the breeding season. The birds were also not as tame as last time, but after a day or two they did come closer for some bread crumbs.



We experienced full moon on the second night, and the evening lights were fantastic, especially in how the reflections played on the river. The picture on the right is from the second night (full moon), and if you look closely, you can see the drop in the river level.

Even though we did not have the prolific bird life we experienced last time, we did see quite a number of different birds. A special event was observing a Goliath Heron, who was perched on a rock all day on our second day, not catching anything except a stiff neck. Then half way through our third day he struck it lucky, catching a fair sized fish (looked like a Brim). He flew off to some nearby rocks, where he tried to position the fish for swallowing. He lost the fish, but managed to snatch him from the water, and shortly afterwards swallowed him head first.

He stayed on the rock pretty motionless for a few hours, and then started his fishing vigil again.

We did not see any monkeys last time, but on the first day we had a lone Blouaap and two Baboons, who visited us again on our last day. Three very tame Frankelins visited us on our first and last day as well.



This Goliath Heron was lucky on day two with a sizable catch!

We packed our awning on our last night before going to bed. Packing up in the morning was very quick, and we were mobile shortly after sunrise. Below are some pics of some of the scenery on our way out.



We decided to take southern route out along the river. It was obviously open as we had traffic along here every day, even a local with his rattling 4x2. You hardly see the river along this stretch, and pass through an area with deep bull dust. We had to reverse once in this area and just marveled at the local with his 4x2 - they obviously know the firmer tracks through this area.

Like last time, the way out of the park seemed to take forever. We did however pass through some lovely gorges, stark barren planes and then areas with wonderful vegetation, like in the pictures. We took the route past Eksteenfontein and Vioolsdrift. As expected, the initial route to Eksteenfontein would be tedious, but it did not take long. The route between Eksteenfontein was however very scenic, and worth the detour.

In the Vioolsdrift area we tried to get a Sunday paper, but they laughed at us saying that when they eventually get newspapers, the news contained is written in history already. We bought some cold drinks instead, and headed south along the tar road, looking for the first track taking us east onto the Namaqua Echo Trail, along the Orange River.

Negotiating the local farm tracks, through beautiful grasslands surrounded by koppies, we eventually arrived at Ramansdrift, and after driving around a bit, found the track onto a grassed patch next to the Orange River. Judging by the fireplaces here, it looked like a favorite site for the "locals", who might come from Upington, a mere 3 hours away.



At first glance, it was a great spot. We then realised that we were spoilt by the previous camp sites - here, water was not easily reached, unless you were prepared to wade through 2m of sticky mud to get to it, the rapids were on the far end of the river, as was the bird life, and there was no shade. That evening we decided that we would cut the journey short and try and make Kimberley by the end of the next day, after visiting Pella.



Typical Namaqualand scenery



Pella Mission Station

After we got up just before sunrise, we legged it out of there, visited Pella, ignored the local drunks, and headed for Uptington, where we stopped briefly for a hasty Kentucky lunch, before carrying on towards Kimberly. An hour before we reached Kimberly, we decided to phone ahead for accommodation, using telephone numbers extracted from the T4A map. Gudrun phoned about 7 establishments, and they were fully booked out. When she enquired with the last one what was going on in Kimberly, she was told that the IPL cricket was in town - everything was booked out! We did not even bother with the campsite.

She then phoned two establishments outside Bloemfontein, and booked us into the Wen-Do-Lin B&B. What a nice spot - belongs to an American who married a local lass, Wendy. Turns out that he is a radio Ham as well. Alas, they are trying to sell and move closer to the ocean. It was an excellent spot to spend the last night.

Even though the complete route was condensed into 11 days, it felt a lot longer. Probably because we spent a few days in two spots, where we could relax. It was a good recce trip, and we now know where we would like to go again sometimes in the future. It would probably involve using the Namaqua Echo Trail as a route to get to the West coast (2 or 3 days), and then head to the southern start of the West Coast Echo Trail, and spend 2 weeks on this section, finishing off with 3 days at the Noup Divers Huts, before legging it back home.



Wild camping in Groenrivier - absolutely magic!