

NAMIBIA

Big Fish

Andrew Lowton heads off down the Fish River Canyon in Namibia



'YOU COULD HAVE SHOT AND buried me back there and I wouldn't have cared'. Sitting around our evening campfire, sipping on mugs of tea, it was time for reflection and Peter (the elder) was recalling his worst moment. It was day three of our hike through Fish River Canyon, Namibia, and Peter had hit the wall.

My journey to this mighty rift in southwest Africa had begun in Uganda, where I was working at the time. The appeal of Namibia was its vast tracts of empty space, being four times the size of the UK with a population of less than two million. Also, as a keen hiker, Fish River Canyon was right up there on my must do list.

However, a trek through the canyon is no turn up and go solo experience, it's a highly regulated affair with only one group, of between 3 and 40 hikers permitted to start each day. Two months later, through a friend of a friend of a friend, I'd arranged to join Peter, Mike and Peter (the elder) on their trek permit and stood on the Canyon's rim ready for the challenge.

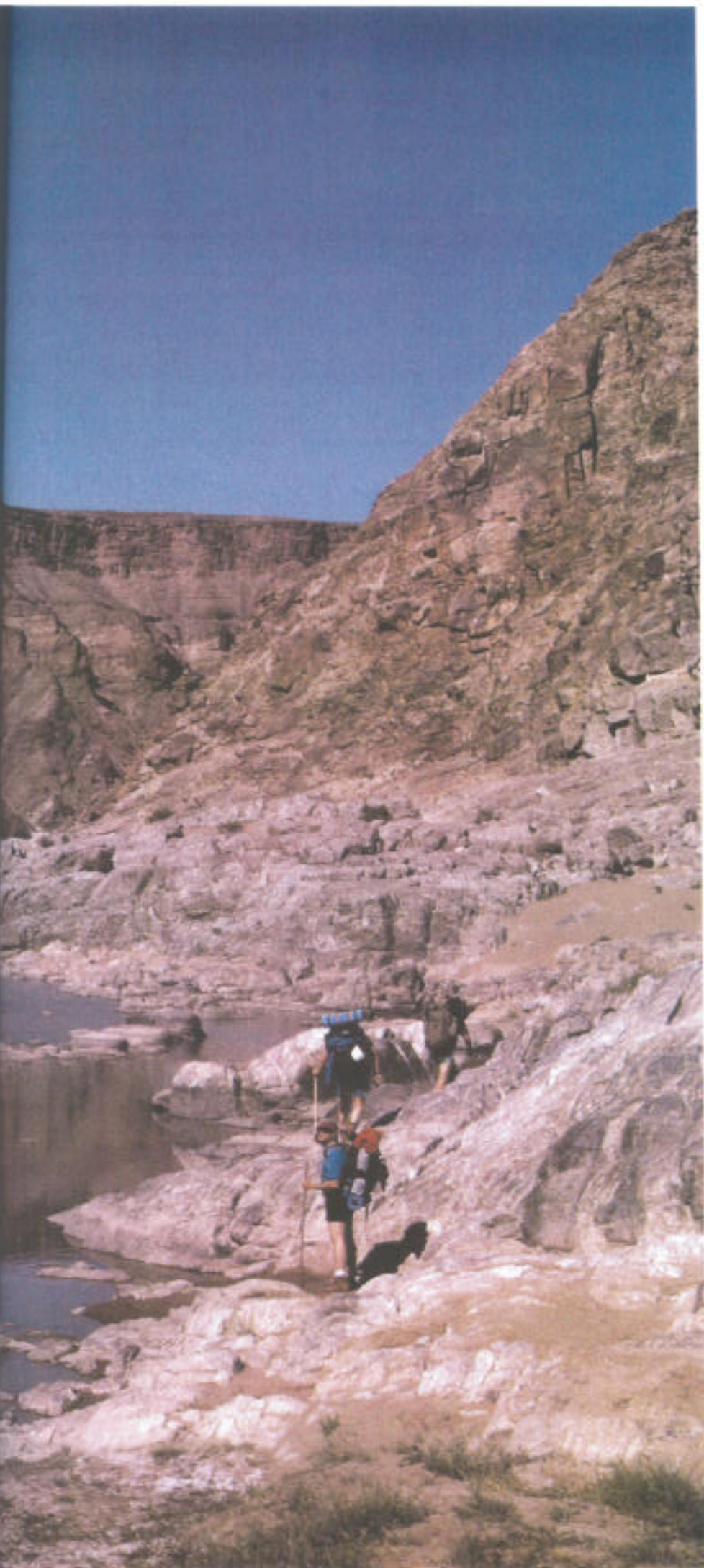
The trail kicks off with a knee breaking descent down the canyon wall from the Hiker's Viewpoint at Hobas where chain handrails have been attached to the rock to aid less stable hikers. The views are magnificent but it isn't until you're arrive at the canyon floor that the true scale of this natural wonder is appreciated.

Widely touted in southern Africa as the second largest canyon in the world (the Grand Canyon of Colorado is number one) it is, so I'm reliably informed the second biggest in Africa after the Blue Nile Gorge in Ethiopia. But let's not be picky, at more than 180km in length it's a mighty old ditch by any standard and ahead of us lay 90km of hot trekking with the spa resort of Ais-Ais our destination.

During September, at the end of the hiking season, Fish River Canyon has neither fish nor river present - it only flows for a few months between March and June and has reduced to a series of pools.

The first day was tough. The river has cut great sweeping bends into the Canyon and by the first turn we were slogging through long, deep sandy stretches and then clambering over huge boulders. We passed several refreshingly cold pools that provided welcome relief from the incessant heat. A hat soaked in cool water is a great coolant and morale-booster.

■ LEFT : - Setting off



During September, at the end of the hiking season, Fish River Canyon has neither fish nor river present - it only flows for a few months between March and June and has reduced to a series of pools

After 9km we found a flat sandy area near water and set up our first camp. You don't need a tent to camp in the canyon, it's hardly likely to rain and therefore a sleeping bag is enough. There's loads of deadwood scattered around for cooking and thankfully water is never far away.

Once the camp chores were over we sat in silence, entertained by the setting sun washing the canyon walls with colour. Evenings were spent under a blanket of bright, twinkling stars, resting tired limbs and putting the world to rights. As my three companions were living and working in Namibia and I was living in East Africa, the main topic of conversation was the current state of the African continent, despite a great effort we failed to resolve any of the many problems.

After a good night's sleep, disturbed only by the occasional buzzing insect, we set off early hoping to get some distance in before the sun started to roast. Day two was more sand then boulders followed by sand and more boulders but always in spectacular surroundings on a

Evenings were spent under a blanket of bright, twinkling stars, resting tired limbs and putting the world to rights. As my three companions were living and working in Namibia and I was living in East Africa, the main topic of conversation was the current state of the African continent, despite a great effort we failed to resolve any of the many problems.

massive scale. It was tough going and our legs were starting to complain as we arrived at Palm Springs, a small oasis. With a sulphur spring gushing out water at a constant temperature of 57 C and the cool shade of date palms, it was a great place to rest, but not for long, the stench of the sulphur was overwhelming.

As the day wore on there were fewer boulders to negotiate but a lot more strength-sapping sand. Late afternoon and after completing 19k's we decided to call a halt on a very soft and comfortable sand dune.

It was on the third day that Peter took a tumble and took a turn for the worse. As we ploughed through the sand he tripped on a rock and sprawled headlong. He lay there seemingly content to stay forever until we lifted him up by his rucksack and encouraged him onwards. The sand finally gave way to a wide area of gravel, swiftly named 'the superhighway', and progress was brisk.

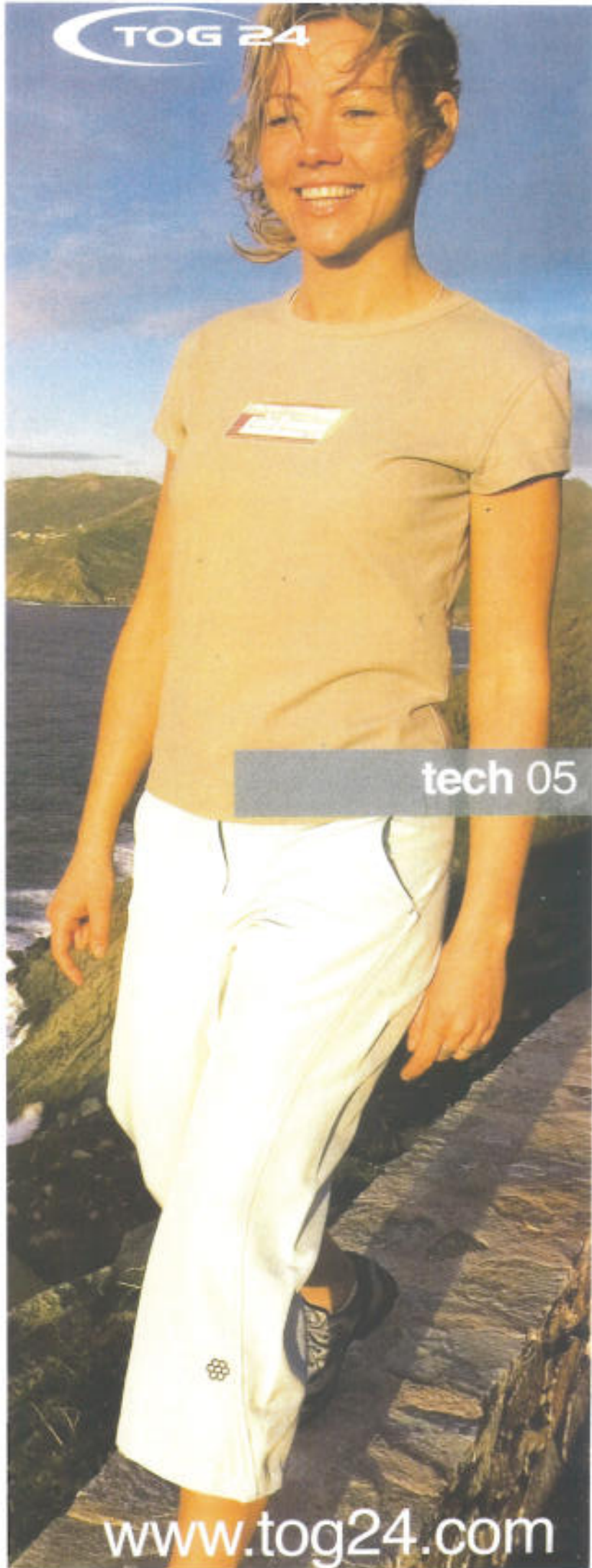
From the 20km marker the twists and turns in the canyon become even more exaggerated. According to local Bushman Fish River Canyon was carved into the sandstone rock by a mighty snake, Kouteign Kooru, as he slithered across the desert to escape from hunters. As you negotiate the sweeping bends it's easy to believe these tales.

On the fourth day, with Peter in relatively good order again, we made it to the 83km marker. The scenery was changing, with the canyon opening out and becoming much wider. We passed several notable landmarks including Four Finger Rock, an outcrop that would not look out of place in America's famous Monument Valley.

In the afternoon we came across a large stone-covered mound and

■ LEFT : - One of many reflecting pools

■ BELOW : - Following the river



tech 05

NAMIBIA

wooden cross. It was the grave of Lieutenant Thilo von Trotha, a German officer killed in a skirmish with the local Nama people in 1905. Typically, as in most ex-colonies, there was no monument to the local casualties of the day.

Later we crossed a large open area where the canyon sides up to privately owned land. Here we found some vandalised buildings that were once a shop with toilet facilities for hikers. On a ridge overlooking the buildings was a troupe of baboons, eyeing us up like the way native Indians were portrayed in old western movies. As we moved, they followed. When we stopped they came to a halt. This went on for some time until they disappeared over the skyline and we felt safe enough to strike camp. We pulled up at the 83km marker, only 7km's short of the trailhead but we wanted another night under the stars before re-joining civilisation.

On a ridge overlooking the buildings was a troupe of baboons, eyeing us up like the way native Indians were portrayed in old western movies



Hiking Fish River Canyon was different from all other trails I'd experienced in Africa. On the mountains of East Africa there are always lots of other people, from fellow hikers to guides and porters and locals going about their life. But this was a more solitary experience and through very different terrain. It was tough going alright, due to the amount of soft sand, boulders, and the extreme heat, but a challenge definitely worth taking on for the spectacular scenery alone. The towering canyon walls, the unusual and magnificent rock formations and the sheer scale of this natural wonder.

On our final morning we arrived at the busy campsite at Ais-Ais after a 90 minute walk. A number of campers came running over to congratulate us and they all seemed impressed by our unshaven, dishevelled appearance and insisted on taking our photo.

After visiting the Park office to collect our certificates for completing the hike we made straight for the hot relaxing pools. Ais-Ais is Nama for 'scalding hot' and the spa is renowned for its natural thermal baths which originate under the riverbed. As we moved from pool to pool with the temperature increasing with each one I overheard Peter (the elder) telling a young lady how he had walked the trail with ease in two days, his recovery was indeed complete. 🏕️



ABOVE FROM TOP : - Typical view across the canyon

- Wide open spaces
in monument valley

WHAT'S UP?

The Fish River Canyon, in southern Namibia, is one of the world's biggest canyons. Despite this obvious attraction it won't be crowded when you visit. Although you may find more than a few visitors on the rim and at the hot spring resort of Ais-Ais at the end of the hike, especially during South African school holidays, once you descend and start walking you'll be alone – except for the other hikers in your party.

WHEN TO GO?

Due to the risk of flash floods and the punishing heat in the mid summer months the hiking trail is open only from May to September. It will be hot and dry whenever you walk it.

GETTING THERE

The nearest international airports are at Cape Town (South Africa) and Windhoek (Namibia). There are many flights from the UK to both these destinations. There is no public transport to either Hobas (the starting point) or Ais-Ais (the finish) so the best bet is to hire a car. This is easily done at both airports but usually cheaper if booked in advance.

GEAR

Lightweight cool clothing is the key and a sun hat a must. Sunglasses are also vital as the glare from the sand and rocks can be intense. A tent is not required as it seldom rains and the insect activity is next to nothing. Driftwood for cooking is plentiful so a stove is not essential but would mean you could set camp anywhere. Water can be found in pools throughout the length of the canyon, even at the end of the hiking season, but needs to be treated before drinking.

ACCOMMODATION

There is a camping site at Hobas, 10 km from the starting point with prices from £15 for up to 8 people. At Ais-Ais there are camping sites (same price as above) plus flats and bungalows from £50 per room).

DETOURS

Namibia is immense and has many sights worth seeing from giant sand dunes to well-stocked game parks.

MAPS 'N' BOOKS

Maps of the Fish River Canyon are obtainable from the Tourism Office and bookshops in Windhoek and at the Hobas Park's office. For more extensive the Bradt guide to Namibia is recommended.

RED TAPE

UK citizens don't need visas. The Trail must be pre-booked at a cost of N\$100 (around £10) per person, with only one group of between 3 and 40 people permitted to start each day. Hikers must be over 12 years of age and present a medical certificate of physical fitness, issued within 40 days prior to the hike, at Hobas. An indemnity form must also be signed. The Trail is very popular and reservations should be made well in advance although cancellations do occur.

**CONTACTS**

Reservations for accommodation at Hobas and Ais-Ais and for the Trail permit can be done through the Namibian Government Tourism office:

Director of Tourism, Reservations, Private Bag 13267, Windhoek, Namibia. Tel: (+264 61) 236975/8 Fax: (+264 61) 224900 E-mail: reservations@www.com.na

