WALKING TRAILS
of
Namibia

BY WILLIE OLIVIER

Hikers pause to appreciate the awesome landscape of the Fish River Canyon before setting off on Namibia’s premier back-packing experience.
A GROUP of six backpackers sets off in the early morning haze on an adventure accessible on foot. Following the meandering course of the Fish River in southern Namibia, the group passes through a world of sheer rock walls and solitude. The eerie silence is occasionally interrupted by the warning bark of a baboon. Since there are no fixed overnight stops, the hikers set their own pace along the 85 km long route. Around the welcoming light of the campfire, the team chatter about the day’s events. A pair of klipspringers balancing on a sheer cliff face and tales of hazardous river crossings dominate the conversation. The journey along the Fish River Canyon takes the group five days to complete.

When the weary backpackers enter the Ai-Ais Hot Springs Resort, a group of tourists applauds as they hang up their boots and backpacks outside the tourist office. The refreshing water of the hot springs soothes aching muscles. Pain is quickly forgotten as the team discusses plans to walk the trail again next year.

The Fish River Canyon Hiking trail is one of the most popular in southern Africa. Hiking enables those energetic enough to witness an array of attractions which cannot be seen from the road. There are extinct volcanoes and open-air rock art galleries, as well as imposing rock formations. Despite their seemingly inhospitable surroundings, most of these attractions can be explored on foot either by way of short rambles, day walks or overnight hiking trails.

Further north of the Fish River Canyon the rugged Naukluft Mountains with their deeply incised ravines and rolling hills offer a choice of two circular routes: a four-day route over 58 km or an eight-day route covering 120 km. It is a physically demanding trail with steep ascents and descents, with chains provided at several obstacles. The steep climbs make this trail unsuited to those suffering from a fear of heights. Those who take up the challenge will, however, be rewarded with breathtaking scenery.

An added attraction of the unguided trail in the Waterberg Plateau Park is the possibility of viewing game such as giraffe, roan antelope, red hartebeest and blue wildebeest. Although the four-day trail traverses easy terrain through dense woodlands and interesting sandstone formations, there is always a possibility of an unexpected encounter with rhino or a lone buffalo. Trailists must, therefore, be experienced in the ways of the wild, physically fit and able to take evasive action such as climbing a tree fast.

In addition to these formal trailing opportunities in Namibia’s state-owned game parks, there are several other areas which are ideally suited to backpacking.

An ascent of Namibia’s highest peak, Königstein in the Brandberg, is a formidable physical and mental challenge requiring a high degree of fitness and proper planning. Backpackers have a choice of several routes to the 2 573 m high peak and at least four days should be allowed for a return trip.

Far less challenging, but nevertheless rewarding, is an ascent of Brukkaros, an extinct volcano rising some 600 m above the plains just north of Bersa in southern Namibia. Although a one-day excursion of the 80 million year-old volcano is possible, a two-day trail is recommended. Since there is no water along the route it is advisable to carry at least three litres of water per person and to use it sparingly. Backpackers must be totally self-sufficient and should also carry a tent.

GUIDED TRAILS

On the two guided trails conducted in Namibia’s game parks the emphasis is on interpreting nature. Groups are limited to a maximum of eight people.

The three-day Waterberg Wilderness Trail is conducted from a rustic base camp under the watchful eye of an armed ranger. There is always an exciting possibility of close-up views of roan and sable antelope, buffalo and both species of rhino. Trails start on the second, third and fourth Thursday of every month between April and November, ending on the Sunday.

The inhospitable Skeleton Coast with its windswept gravel plains, boulder outcrops and dolerite mountains can also be explored on foot. Guided hiking trails are conducted along the Ugab River which forms the southern boundary of the Skeleton Coast Park. Trails begin on the second and fourth Tuesday of every month throughout the year, ending on Thursdays. Since these trails are not conducted from a base camp, hikers
sleep under the stars and carry their own equipment such as backpacks and sleeping bags.

DAY WALKS
Those with neither the time nor the level of fitness for overnight trails can set off on the shorter walks which have been laid out in several state-owned game parks. On the 15 km circular walk in the Hardap Game Park near Mariental, visitors can acquaint themselves with the flora and fauna of this arid region. Trees, shrubs and places of interest

The Fish River Trail has no equal in Africa. The route, which covers a distance of 87 kilometres, takes four to five days to complete.

have been marked along the route which partly follows usually dry river courses. The park is the habitat of the southern-most population of black rhino in Namibia. Trailists may also chance upon Hartmann’s mountain zebra, kudu and oryx. For the less energetic there is a shorter, nine kilometre option.

Many visitors to the Daan Viljoen Game Park, west of Windhoek, are unaware of the two short trails along which the park can be explored. The “Wag-’n-Bietjie” Trail follows the Augeigas River for about 1.5 km to a dam.
Several species of water-birds and game can usually be seen before returning to the rest camp along the same route. The relatively easy terrain makes this route ideal for families with small children. The more demanding nine kilometre Rooibos Trail follows river valleys and traverses undulating hills. Trailists will, however, enjoy far-reaching views of the Komas Hochland and the Windhoek Valley.

Two day walks in the Naukluft section of the Namib-Naukluft Park afford hikers an opportunity to explore this rugged mountain with its deep ravines and interesting tufa formations. There is the possibility of seeing game such as Hartmann’s mountain zebra, kudu, klipspringer and oryx (gemsbok) on foot. To complete the 10 km-long Olive Trail takes between four and five hours, while between six and seven hours should be set aside to hike the 17 km Waterkloof Trail.

The Tinkas Trail in the Namib section of the Namib-Naukluft Park is usually hiked in five to six hours. Highlights of this route which follows two tributaries of the Swakop River include fascinating rock formations, a natural spring and enormous granite boulders. The starting point is only accessible by four-wheel drive vehicle.

Visitors to the Skeleton Coast Park should not miss the six kilometre Uniab Delta Trail, just north of Torra Bay. A small stream seeps from the pools in the delta for most of the year. About 20 minutes beyond the start of the trail the water cascades unexpectedly into a narrow canyon which has been eroded through the layers of red sandstone and yellow calcrite. The trail continues to the beach and then returns more or less along the same route. A variety of water-birds and game such as oryx and springbok are attracted to the reed-fringed pools in the delta.

Nine walking routes have been laid out in the Bernabé de la Bat rest camp at the Waterberg Plateau Park. Not to be missed is the Mountain View Walk which leads to the top of the plateau, offering spectacular views of the sheer cliffs in the late afternoon. Other routes include the Forest Walk which winds through a cool forest, the Fig Tree Walk with its enormous common cluster figs and Mission Way, which leads past the ruins of the old station to the cemetery.

TRAILS ON PRIVATE LAND
Several trails and walks have been established on privately owned land. In southern Namibia a 34 km hiking trail has been laid out on Oas Farm, north of Karasburg, while the Steinfeld Nature Reserve, south of Keetmanshoop, has 40 km of unspoilt gorges and ravines which can be explored. The Dassie Trail network on the farm Namib- Grens, 170 km west of Windhoek, consist of 43 km of trails, while Phillip’s Cave on the farm Ameib, north of Usakos, is a pleasant early morning walk.

Hints on walking trails in Namibia
On account of excessive summer temperatures, the months between April/May and September/October are generally the best for trai ling. The Fish River Canyon is open to backpackers between May 1 and September 30, the Naukluft Hiking Trail between March 1 and October 31 and the Waterberg Unguided Trail between April 1 and November 30.

Even during the cooler winter months precautions such as applying sunscreen and wearing a wide-brimmed hat should be taken to avoid sunburn. Since evenings and early mornings are generally cold, a warm sleeping bag and warm clothing are essential.

Walking is most enjoyable during the early mornings and late afternoons, with an extended break during the hottest part of the day. Always carry at least two litres of water per person and keep water intake up, but use it sparingly.

On account of the rough terrain traversed by most trails and walks, a sturdy pair of well worn hiking boots is essential. Comfortable walking shoes will suffice for the walks in the Uniab Delta, the Hardap Game Park and the Bernabé de la Bat rest camp. No fires are permitted on the Naukluft and Waterberg unguided hiking trails. The scarcity of firewood in the Brandberg and the Brukkaros makes a lightweight backpacking stove essential.

Information and reservations
Contact the Director of Tourism, Private Bag 13267, Windhoek, Namibia, Tel. (061) 233875 for information on the Fish River Canyon, Naukluft, Waterberg and Ugab trails.

At present no permits are required for Brandberg and the Brukkaros or any of the day walks in state-owned game parks, although visitors are required to pay entrance fees to game parks.

For trails on private farms, contact the farms directly: Oas Farm, PO Box 4, Karasburg, Tel. (06432) 44321; Steinfeld Nature Reserve, PO Box 1394, Keetmanshoop, Tel. (063) 11831; NamibGrens, PO Box 1322, Windhoek, tel. (0623) 1111 for information on NamibGrens 1322 and Ameib Ranch, PO Box 266, Usakos, Tel. (062242) 1111.