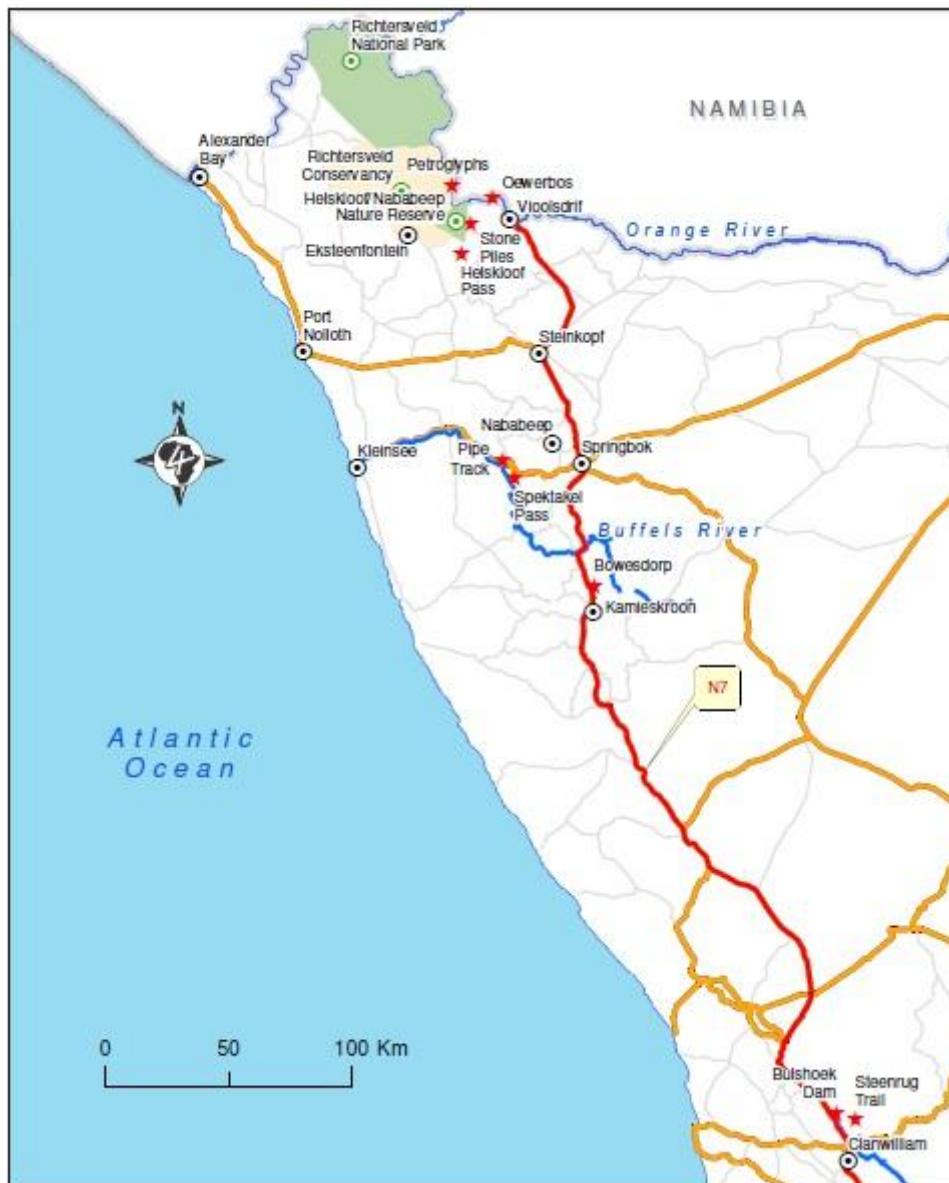


Driving in convoy in the Richtersveld



Some people prefer to drive in a group; others know instinctively they are not made for driving in a convoy. Karin Theron from Tracks4Africa was recently invited on a 4x4 trip to the Richtersveld by OGATO (Offroad Guides and Tour Operators Association of South Africa) and realised that both have their pros and cons, and that it really depends on your personality whether you will like it or not.

The vehicles crawled up Pipe Track like a lazy python. This was the first real challenge on our five day 4x4 trip and we stopped at the bottom of Bakenkop so that everybody could deflate their tyres. At the top the lovely view and plants took my breath away and I realised why people drive 4x4's as it is impossible to get here with a sedan vehicle! The track wound over Olienhoubank and Kliphuisbank towards the Nigramoep Mountains.



Going up Pipe Track.

This was my first 4x4 trip with tour guides and I wondered how I would like bush camping for two nights with 37 people and two guides that I don't know from a bar of soap. A few of the people in the 14 vehicles were old camping friends who wanted to share this Richtersveld experience.

Even though the tour organiser, Bruce Jenkinson, advertised it as the Richtersveld trip, we never went to the [Richtersveld National Park \(w136459\)](#). However, we discovered that the greater Richtersveld area between [Steinkopf, \(w136592\)](#) [Eksteenfontein \(w136620\)](#) and [Vioolsdrif \(w136764\)](#) has a huge diversity of plants, rock formations, mountains and even wild horses.

The Richtersveld was declared a UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation) World Heritage Site in 2007. The Richtersveld Conservancy south of the Richtersveld National Park forms the core zone of the World Heritage Site which is 160 000 ha and has a buffer zone of 398 425 ha. It was declared a Cultural and Botanical Landscape World Heritage Site for the way in which it sustains the semi-nomadic pastoral livelihood of the Nama people, reflecting seasonal patterns that may have existed in Southern Africa for as long as two millennia.

The first night we slept close to home, at the [Bulshoek Dam \(w131196\)](#) near [Clanwilliam. \(w136562\)](#) On the second day we drove the [Steenrug 4x4 trail \(w136441\)](#) in the southern section of the Cedar Mountains. It is a lovely trail with stunning plants, rock formations and a beautiful view from [Mount Synott \(w128409\)](#) of Clanwilliam and the Olifantsriver Valley We spent the night at Bloupoort farm near [Springbok. \(w136593\)](#)

One shower and two toilets for 37 people made me realise that driving 4x4 in a big group is not everybody's cup of tea. On top of that we had to pitch camp in the dark for a second night. Even though a few women complained covertly that it actually was their husbands who loved camping, the group spirit was good and everybody enjoyed the company around the bonfire the farmer made before we arrived.

It was freezing cold, but good company, a few hot coals under your chair and a tasty piece of meat and a glass of wine, can mellow any discomfort. I reflected on my first day of driving 4x4 in a convoy. That day we all realised that one should always have a good map, irrespective of whether you have an experienced tour guide or not. The Steenrug Trail became overgrown in a few places since Bruce recently drove the track. We lost the trail once; fortunately one of the vehicles in the back of the convoy informed everybody that they had the latest version of Tracks4Africa's map on their GPS and that indicated where we should have turned.



From the Steenrug Trail one has a beautiful view of the Olifants River Valley.

The area between Springbok and [Kleinsee \(w136589\)](#) is diamond area and through the years many hopeful prospectors came here to seek their fortunes. Some people say that there are just as many diamonds in the Buffels River as the Orange River which flows further north. Prospectors searched the whole area between Springbok, Kleinsee, [Alexander Bay \(w136638\)](#) and Vioolsdrif for gold and diamonds and in the process they found minerals like crystal, mica, copper, etc. This area also has rich flora as it is part of the Succulent Karoo Biome to which about 2 700 species belong.

[Nababeep \(w136808\)](#) is one of the towns that developed due to mining, but deteriorated after the copper mines closed down. There are many young people that were born at Nababeep but now battle to survive because there are no jobs.



Some of the people in Namabeep who suffer from unemployment after the copper mine closed down.

From Springbok we drove west, and just after [Spektakel Pass \(w208737\)](#) we turned north into the Nigramoep Mountains. The surroundings were picturesque and the vegetation changed every few kilometres. We were too early for the flower season, but the green landscape was beautiful enough to compensate for the lack of colour. We saw some wild horses, Halfmens trees, Quiver trees, Butter trees and Honey Flower.



A young Halfmens tree.

Bush camping in a sheltered little valley with Quiver trees and Halfmens trees guarding us was very special. Some women in the group found it difficult to find a private spot when nature called and I battled to burn wet toilet paper, like we were advised to do.

It turned out that the valley was not so sheltered after all. That night a storm came up and a ferocious wind tried to rip off my tent's flaps. In the early morning hours it started raining and I had to really hang onto my tent when we broke up camp.



Driving in the Richtersveld in the rain.

Not many people can boast that they got washed out of the Richtersveld! The group spirit was low because everything was wet, and on top of it the group got five flat tyres that had to be repaired in pouring rain. That day I experienced the value of a tyre repair kit with which the guys quickly repaired cuts of up to 3cm long in the side walls of their tyres. The environment changed and we were now driving through a breathtakingly surreal moon landscape.



The group decided to skip the bush camp and drove through beautiful rocky mountains to [Oewerbos \(w131405\)](#) on the Orange River near Vioolsdrif. They had lovely hot showers, and those of us whose bedding got wet, could sleep in the camp's equipped pre-erected tents.

The weather cleared by late afternoon and we got a wonderful surprise on [Helskloof Pass. \(w128076\)](#) Near the top of the pass the landscape transformed into a fairy tale world. We were surrounded by [stone piles \(w126869\)](#) that looked like little castles! While I was still wondering whether fairies, gnomes or maybe aliens built it, I got the answer to my question. In an instant all the people in our group, adults and children, were making their own little stone piles. There were so

many rocks that tourists were able to build little castles for the next hundred years without running out of stones.



Stone piles on the Helskloof Pass.

The hot showers and cosy campfire warmed us, and everybody was looking forward to our last day. After a hearty breakfast, we started out on a 4x4 trail alongside the [Helskloof/Nababeep Nature Reserve \(w136351\)](#) to visit an old crystal mine. On the way there we stopped to view [petroglyphs \(w132389\)](#) that were engraved by the early San people. The landscape was breathtakingly surreal with rocks in all colours, sizes and shapes as far as you could see. Here and there a Poison tree fought for a place among the rocks.



A lone Poison tree.

Our Richtersveld trip was concluded with a challenging trail next to the Orange River. After the dry landscape with its surreal rock formations that we have traversed over three days, the refreshing green belt next to the river was in a different way food for the soul. The water rushed past a little rapid and a fish eagle called its mate...



The scenic trail along the Orange River is quite a challenge in some places.

On the way back we stopped at a mica mine and at [Bowesdorp](#); the town that is not a town. According to www.genza.org.za Bowesdorp developed in 1850 when the Dutch Reformed parish of Namaqualand was separated from the mother parish of Clanwilliam, and a church was built on the farm Wilgenhoutskloof. A village developed around the church, but Springbok which had been established by 1863, endangered the future of Bowesdorp. There were also limited water and space for future development in the narrow kloof between the granite mountains. The once beautiful church was in dire need of reparations but, because of the above reasons, it was decided to build a new church 8 km closer to Garies where there were enough water and space for development. Shortly after the new church was finished in 1924, the post office, police station and shop moved and the new town of [Kamieskroon \(w136786\)](#) was established.



The ruins of the old church at Bowesdorp.

Today Bowesdorp is a ghost town with only the ruins of the once beautiful church and the foundations of the hotel, police station and prison close to the current farm house.. If you drive south on the N7 from Springbok, you will get a signpost left to Bowesdorp shortly before you reach Kamieskroon.

I think the advantages of driving in a convoy can at the same time be the Achilles heel of driving in a group.

1. You can meet lovely new friends, but a few moaners can really spoil your trip.
2. If you get into trouble, there are people with capable vehicles that can assist you. However, never be so complacent that you leave your own GPS, map, tools and vehicle rescue equipment at home.

3. A good tour guide can provide you with extra information about the environment and the area. However, if yours is not a nature or culture guide, you can miss out on valuable information if you did not do your own homework or failed to take along some reference books.
4. You can't do a trip like this without two-way radios because communication between the group members is vital. Appropriate jokes on the radio can be very entertaining, but the continuous interruption of your own party's conversations can be intrusive.
5. If you drive in a group with an experienced tour leader, you may get to places that you would not have been able to otherwise. You should, however, be very aware not to try and show off your vehicle's capabilities or your own driving skills to the group because you can easily damage your own vehicle or the environment.

Before you decide to do a 4x4 trip with a big group, carefully consider what you and your travel partners are up to and what not. If you want to travel remote and inaccessible areas like the Richtersveld, you should either do it with an experienced 4x4 guide or your planning and safety precautions have to be very good. If you decide on using a tour guide, rather use one of OGATO's members, as they are trained and committed to the responsible and sensitive conservation of Africa's natural and cultural heritage.



The surreal Richtersveld.



Tour leader Bruce Jenkinson (right) explaining the route of the day to the group.



*Be aware of your own driving capabilities
as well as that of your vehicle.*