

Gone Fishing

When **Jenny Bowen** set off to hike the 92km Fish River Canyon, she didn't realise it would prove to be the adventure of a lifetime, which started with a baboon defecating on her kit list (before stealing her lunch). We had to know more



The drive from Ai Ais to the trail head was dusty, and my friend Anna and I were each nursing a can of Coke, having consumed far too much wine and beer in our excitement the previous evening. This was not ideal preparation for a 92km hike. On top of that, a large baboon had wandered nonchalantly

into our room while we were packing, robbed some of our food and left a personal present on our packing list. At least it wasn't our map he had defecated on.

No words can do justice to the jaw-dropping vista that lay before us when we arrived. The canyon snaked its way through the desert and into the distance. It looked and felt formidable; as if we would be stepping out into thin air.

We descended into the canyon, clutching onto a chain rope. It was only then that we could truly appreciate the spectacular strata of richly-coloured rock, like a multi-layered cake with a buttercream filling. Lizards skittered around us and a little bird followed, to see if we might leave any food in our wake.

It took three hours to reach the bottom. It was steep, treacherous and exhausting. So we were relieved to discover a murky pool from which to fill our water bottles. Little did we know that this was going to be one of the best water stops on the whole trip.

Anna and I were alone in the canyon. It was magical. It could have been scary, yet I was delighted.

That afternoon I felt a bit rough, suffering from mild heat exhaustion. After all the excitement leading up to the trip, I was hugely disappointed with myself for not being better prepared for the descent. We decided to walk another kilometre, from one rock pool to the next, until we found somewhere that we liked the look of, and then make camp. That was easy, as we simply rolled out our bivvy bags and stuck our sleeping bags inside, along with a thermarest. I love simplicity.

Both of us were thankful when the sun set and the canyon was suddenly immersed in shade. What a blessing – never have I been more pleased to see the sun disappear! It was so peaceful lying there, just the two of us, watching the stars slowly travel across the sky. I hoped I would feel better in the morning. →

SHUTTERSTOCK

The moon woke me up. It was extraordinarily bright. I heard the plop of fish in the pool we had camped next to, and sat up to see the ripples echoing over the mirror-like surface. September is hot, and this was the end of the Fish River hiking season, so we had planned to walk in the early morning and late afternoon, but now I had an idea.

“Anna, are you awake?” I whispered.

“Yes; have been for a while.”

I rolled over, found my watch and discovered that it was 1.30am.

“Fancy walking in the moonlight?”

And with that we broke camp at a leisurely pace, and began our canyon hike at 3am. The path was easy to find in the gloom and here the canyon was probably only about 30 metres wide, so we couldn't really go wrong. I had heard that some people got disorientated when they were walking the canyon, which I found hard to comprehend: surely walking in a canyon was linear, and difficult to get lost? The last day would prove me wrong — one of the shortcuts we took was a bit discombobulating.

I was amazed at the quiet in the canyon. Darkness and silence often go together, but not often in the African bush. Here, the night had a peaceful reverence to it, and the sky, glowing with the moon, made me feel very small and insignificant in the world.

As we approached, they took off in a blur of white, their wings clattering unusually loudly, amplified by the silence we had become so used to. And then they were gone

We soon became adept at spotting footprints on the not-so-obvious trail, both in the dark and during the day. All we had to concentrate on was putting one foot in front of the other, in the right direction.

The route became tougher, the path weaving between boulders and around large slabs of rock, ultimately disappearing into a gargantuan field of rubble. It can be very tiring walking in such terrain in dark conditions, because you need to concentrate hard on where you're stepping. The boulder field was about a kilometre, and it took us nearly two hours to navigate.

And then the sun popped up over the horizon. It was lovely to have light so we could see where we were going, but it made

for seriously hard work in the heat. Every time we found water I dunked my scarf and hat to keep cool. We were covering only about one kilometre per hour; rather disheartening progress really.

Depending on the time of year, finding water can either be simple or concerning. In May, when the trail opens, the river is flowing. As time progresses there is less of it, and near the end of the hiking season, in September, there are only pools scattered sporadically along the canyon. We were hiking in September, in the midst of a drought, so water became an issue for us. We had to trust the Slingsby map, and filled up whenever we could, being sure to always carry three litres.

Finding drinkable water that was remotely clean proved a challenge, but we had a good routine for water purification which we stuck to religiously. We'd fill our containers with gloopy water, put in some purification drops and set the timer for the recommended 30 minutes, then added a few more for good measure.

Passing the dried-up carcass of what looked like a kudu didn't help. Someone had stood it up against a rock; a stark reminder of how severe the current drought was.

Expect the unexpected in the Fish River Canyon. On our first night we came across

the Vespa Memorial 'Vidi' 1968. Yes, there is a scooter in the canyon. How on Earth it got here, one does wonder. We were delighted when we saw it, because it showed it was now light enough for us to see things, and now we knew exactly where we were on the route.

Sometimes looking at the map can be daunting and depressing. According to ours, on our first day we had walked 17km. Only another 75km to go!

We soon got the hang of finding the best route on the larger bends of the river, taking the inside of the meander while avoiding 'cobblestone city', often situated on the inside of the bend. We kept our path as

short as possible and stayed out of the sun as long as we could. Luckily these two goals coincided nicely.

During our lunch break — which we took from midday until 4pm — we stayed out of the searing sun, napped, had something to eat, sorted kit and looked after our feet. Feet need plenty of loving care on such a hike: they have to be aired and checked for blisters, and decent socks are imperative. We also swam. Well, that would be an optimistic use of the word. Realistically it was a wade in very smelly mud that was probably mostly bird poo, sloshing water over ourselves in a desperate effort to cool down.

You might imagine that the scenery would stay the same throughout the meandering canyon, yet with each corner we rounded there seemed to be something else to see: weird colourations in the rock, ranging from pink to black; strange boulder formations; delicate flowers pushing through the sand; strangely shaped pools of water... and the sun casting peculiar shadows across the scene.

There was wildlife too. A heron silhouetted itself on a boulder overlooking one of the pools, and a pied kingfisher hovered and then plunged into the water. Some tenacious mice picked at our food at our second campsite. That day we came across a pool full of pelicans — it was surreal watching them glide back and forth on the water. As we approached, they took off in a blur of white, their wings clattering unusually loudly, amplified by the silence we had become so used to. And then they were gone, the only evidence of their presence being an occasional feather dancing gently in the breeze.

There are also wild horses here, which gave me the fright of my life when I disturbed them a few nights later. Pounding hooves thundering towards us under the veil of darkness conjures terrifying scenarios!

Then there were the territorial barks of baboons. We only truly encountered them once, and that was enough. I have a healthy respect for baboons; and they also scare me a little bit. Who wouldn't be nervous knowing that they have the largest canines in the animal kingdom, in relation to their skull size. We had seen them foraging high above on the top of the cliffs, and the occasional animal scurrying away in front of us in the →



ALL PHOTOS: JENNY BOWEN, EXCEPT VESPA (SHUTTERSTOCK)



distance. But we needed a rest and found a lovely shaded spot with easy access to some murky green water.

Anna got the stove out and it was then that I noticed a rather bold baboon looking at us from about 30 metres

away. We had fallen foul of these animals before; it was not to go to happen again, ever. I gesticulated at him with my walking poles. He sat down, nonchalantly scratching himself, giving me a sideways glance, clearly assessing the likelihood of getting some food. He tried from different angles, slinking around the boulders, but I made sure he never succeeded. My vigilance paid off.

We really had to concentrate when finding short cuts across the bends, especially if we were walking in the dark. We kept an eye out for footprints created by the multitude of people that had travelled before us. Stone cairns helped, and sometimes there were large rock arrows pointing us in the correct direction.

The shortcuts were easy to walk and we could pick up the pace. The ground was solid underfoot, not sandy as it was along the river bed in the canyon. Walking on sand is hard work.

On one occasion, we dropped back into the canyon to discover a series of pools and decided to stop for breakfast. What a great decision that proved to be: with the combination of location and timing, we had accidentally chosen a spot for a spectacular sunrise. I've never seen anything quite so extraordinary: the tops of the mountains were burnt orange, and the contrast with the dark canyon made them appear to be on fire.

We had not seen anyone else for 40 hours and I would have been disappointed if I had. The solitude was wonderful. We were self-reliant, self-sufficient and totally disconnected from technology. We were at one with nature, and it was glorious. The stress of modern-day life simply sloughed away; it was like finding a new skin.

So it was weird seeing people again. In the distance, walking towards us were the heroes of the Fish River Canyon: the rangers. Every day they walk 20km carrying jerry cans to fill up strategic water points for hikers. They started doing this during the drought, and we

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were the lucky recipients. We said a huge thank you, on behalf of all hikers, and continued on our way.

We were nearly at the end. I found myself thinking about the ice-cold beer that I was going to enjoy, but this was a mistake: we still had another 8km to go and they became the longest 8km I've ever, ever walked in my life. That's a story for another time, though.

But then, around the corner, following us, appeared Juanita and Willem, fellow walkers we had met on the drive to the start of the trail on day one. And so we ended as we had begun: four random people with smiles on our faces. That beer never tasted so good.

Walking the Fish is a rollercoaster ride of emotions. In those five days in the canyon, I went through every emotion possible.

I was euphoric for actually getting into the canyon and starting the trek. I was angry at myself for not being as fit as I could have been. I was nervous about being so totally self-reliant in this remote wilderness. I was at peace with the silence and solitude of the inspiring environment. I was disgusted by the loo roll we kept finding from previous trekkers. I was proud of myself for creating the challenge as my 50th birthday present.

And I was relieved when we got to the end. We had experienced tough hiking conditions, and I gave everyone permission to shoot me if I ever considered doing it again. But there is a magnetic appeal to the Fish River Canyon: it is magical, rewarding, humbling and grounding; it gifts the opportunity to reset and reflect on what is important in life. I may need to purchase a bullet proof vest. 🦏

Jenny Bowen is the owner of specialist tour operator Sense Earth.

Planning for the Fish

01 Book your permit a year in advance; they are in high demand as only 30 people are allowed to enter the canyon each day.

02 The trail is open from May to September. In May there is abundant water, but by September the river will have dried up, to leave only pools of stagnant water.

03 Make sure you are hiking fit; do not underestimate how tough the trek is.

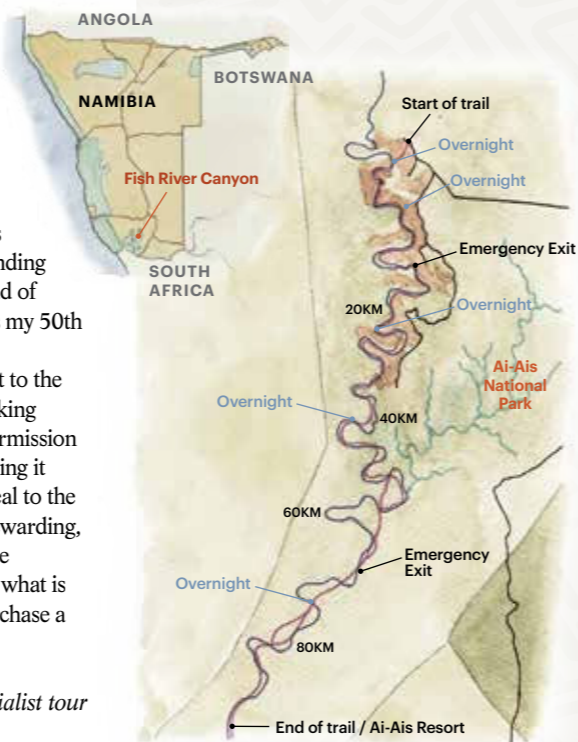
04 Practice walking with your pack on, so you get used to the weight. Remember, the hike is 92km long and you will be carrying all your food and provisions for five days.

05 Pack light. Be ruthless.

06 The end point is Ai Ais. Book to stay at the resort here and take the shuttle to the start of the trail. You will not want to collect your car after walking for five or six days! Besides, the hot springs are magic for the aching body!

07 Do your research. There is a Facebook group called 'I hiked the Fish River Canyon', which has brilliant members willing to help.

08 Most people do the hike themselves in a small group, although you can book a guide to accompany you.



KIT ESSENTIALS

You are camping wild There is no alternative. Take a decent sleeping bag with either a bivvy bag or a tent. I took a bivvy bag as it was lighter, but the wind picks up in the evening and a tent could have made it more comfortable. We learnt to set up camp, eat supper quickly and get into bed early to avoid the worst of the wind.

Comfortable walking boots Break your boots in or wear a trusty pair that your feet love.

Breathable ankle gaiters You don't want blisters from sand grains finding their way into your boots. I made my own from the Tubigrip that I used as support for my knees on the descent into the canyon, simply shoving them down over the top of my boots for the remainder of the trek. I was well pleased with myself – they were breathable and comfy.

Printed map The Slingsby map is very accurate, and the permanent pools were correctly marked on the map – a lifesaver if you are hiking in September in a drought, like I did!

Water bottles and purification system Have this sorted, as the water available was mostly a green gloop.

Head torch Essential for camping and night walking.

Gas stove and cannisters There is wood in the canyon but it is not guaranteed, so it is best to have a backup option.

Nappy sacs for loo roll and rubbish Be respectful. Please don't litter. Seeing loo roll fluttering in the breeze, left by inconsiderate hikers, makes my blood boil.

JENNY BOWEN (3)

