

Hiking the Fish River Canyon

WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW

The Fish River Canyon hiking trail is one of the most challenging hikes in Southern Africa. It is 90 km long, or around 80 km if you take advantage of the shortcuts. It takes four to five days to complete, and once you are down on the floor of the canyon, it is difficult to climb out, so be fully prepared. Please note – there are only two emergency exits along the trail.

Due to the extremely hot temperatures in the summer months – ranging from as high as 48°C in the day and 30°C at night – hiking trips are allowed only from 15 April to 15 September, and hikers must travel in groups of between three to 40. Children under 13 are not allowed to undertake the hike.

Hobas campsite is the starting point for any canyon assault. It is a 10-km drive to the lip of the canyon and the path that takes walkers down to the trail follows the Fish River all the way to /Ai-/Ais, the end point. Once you reach /Ai-/Ais, transportation is available back to Hobas.

READY, SET....

There you are, wearing your most comfortable hiking boots, backpack full of supplies, standing with your climbing group at the edge of the Fish River Canyon where the hiking trail begins, ready to tackle one of the most demanding hikes in Africa. Take a deep breath and then run through your checklist:

- Have you checked in at the Ministry of Environment and Tourism office at Hobas to pay the fees?

- Have you submitted a medical certificate signed by your doctor as proof that you are fit and healthy enough to undertake the hike?
- Do you have plenty of water, litres of it, plus water purification tablets?
- Do you have a sleeping bag and bedroll?
- Do you have cooking utensils and enough food to last without refrigeration – such as nuts, dried fruit, tins of tuna – for four or five days? Remember you must carry all the packaging out with you.
- Do you have a small gas or butane stove for cooking? Remember you are not allowed to make fires on the hiking trail.
- Do you have a comprehensive medical kit?
- Do you have biodegradable soap for cleaning?
Since there are no toilets, bring toilet paper plus a shovel.
- Do you have a good map of the Fish River Canyon hiking trail?

GO!

The descent into the canyon is probably the most difficult part of the entire trail. It is very steep and can take anywhere from 45 minutes to three hours to complete. Chains and handrails are provided in the toughest sections. If the river flow has been good, a splash in a pool of water in the riverbed could be your reward for making it down.

Expect to trek through loose sand and over enormous clusters of boulders the first day. Although there are short cuts, look at your map and follow the stacks of rocks that fellow hikers have left behind to help guide you.



Animals such as klipspringer, mountain zebra, springbok and baboon may be seen in the canyon, and there is a surprising abundance of birdlife, especially around the pools. Look out for rock kestrel and spotted dove, and the yellow-rumped eremomela which occur near /Ai-/Ais. You can expect – and indeed may relish – crossing sections of flowing water in the Fish River, and there are many landmarks that help mark the journey, including:

- Emergency exit – the 14-km mark. But be warned, the climb up and out is daunting.
- Palm or sulphur springs – the 16-km mark. The springs, known for the surrounding palm trees, bubble with fast-flowing water and temperatures of up to 58°C.
- Table Mountain – ± 40-km mark. Like its namesake in South Africa, this flat-topped mountain stands out from the rest and is a preferred camping spot for many climbers after a long, hard first day's trek.
- Four-finger rock – ± 60-km mark. This rock formation, formed hundreds of millions of years ago, is evidence of the natural forces that shaped the canyon.
- German soldier's grave – ± 62-km mark. This is where one of the soldiers who occupied this area during the German-Nama war in the early 1900s was buried.
- Emergency exit – ± 70-km mark. In case of an emergency, a vehicle can reach you at this point, but by now the hard part is far behind you.
- /Ai-/Ais – the 90-km mark and the end! Congratulations, you made it. Hot springs, cold beer and warm showers, what more could you want?

STOP – rules to help you in an emergency

Being well prepared and fit before embarking on the Fish River Canyon hike are the most important requirements towards completing the hike successfully, but if you do get into trouble, practise STOP:

- S – Stop and take a deep breath, and calm yourself.
- T – Think – use your brain. It is your most important asset. Don't panic. Think through your actions and move with deliberate care.
- O – Observe – take a look around, assess your situation and options, keeping in mind your supply situation and the capabilities of your fellow hikers.
- P – Plan and prioritise your immediate needs and make a plan to deal with them systematically. Follow your plan but be willing to adjust it to changing circumstances.

For those of you who left your hiking boots at home, don't worry. All is not lost. There is still plenty to see from the comfort of your vehicle or during short walks in the park.

Viewpoints – along the eastern rim of the canyon, several viewpoints afford visitors stunning views, especially dramatic in the early morning and late afternoon light. Two of the most popular viewpoints are at Hell's Corner and Palm or Sulphur Springs. A leisurely drive is also a great way of seeing the wildlife of the area, and its vast selection of rare and endemic plants.

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Environmental Care Code

Please adhere to the following:

- Stay on existing roads and tracks.
- Do not remove any plants or animals from the park.
- Make sure that what you take into the park, you take out.
- Follow the rules and regulations listed on your permit.
- Report to the Ministry of Environment and Tourism office at Hobas before beginning the Fish River Canyon Trail.

Enjoy the challenge and be inspired!

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