Sprawling amber dunescapes undulating upon the outer rim of the oldest desert on Planet Earth... The shimmer of verdant vineyards bisecting the arid plains unfolding along the meandering course of the Great Gariep... Cobalt skies stretching from horizon to horizon by day and morphing into an ether hung with a billion stars when night falls... This is the Northern Cape.

It is a place utterly different from the monochromatic desert landscape you might imagine as a first-time visitor, with a thousand secrets and surprises awaiting you around every corner.

And the good news is that the many attractions of the sparsely populated Northern Cape will appeal to the whole family. Whenever I start packing our 4x4, the first thing the kids want to know is: “Paps, are we heading into the desert?” To their Western Cape sensibilities, everything beyond the Knersvlakte is “desert”, and with it comes that mythical sense of “adventuring”.

We’ve been fortunate enough to experience many of the diverse facets of this area. There are a number of easy-to-explore routes for self-drive travellers, allowing you to discover all the nuances of this expansive province at your leisure. One thing is for sure: You are going to want to return to a destination as varied as this again and again.

The Northern Cape has no fewer than three deserts – the Karoo, Kgalagadi and Richtersveld. The latter, a mountain desert, was also ratified as a World Heritage Site. And then there are the nature reserves and national parks, the full gamut of biomes and ecosystems, South Africa’s two biggest rivers – the Orange and the Vaal – as well as an intriguing mix of indigenous cultures including the San Bushmen, the Griquas and the Namas.

This leaves you with a daunting to-do list – so where to start? Big game viewing, flower watching, river rafting, stargazing, wine tasting, hiking, lazing around at a lodge... We’ll help you to narrow things down. If you’re a Northern Cape newbie, here are four of our favourite tourist routes and corresponding visitor hot spots – each with a unique selection of adventures and experiences. Go and explore!
It is a place where magnificent oryx hold sway on the sandy swaths. Oryx can be spot with their striking antelope with their rapier horns if you cross into the Kgalagadi Transfrontier Park. The meaning of the word “Kgalagadi” is “Place of the Thirsty Sand”. And the landscape seems to absorb in the midday heat. We’ve made many memories here on the Kalahari Plains: on the massive Kalahari Pan where the Bloodhound Supersonic car will be hosted this year, dust tails at dawn, eagle-owl encounters, bobmarow tumbles in the red sand, and close encounters with lions, the proverbial Kgalagadi royal family. It is no wonder the locals say when the red sand slips into your shoes, you will always return to the Kalahari.

**THINGS TO DO ON THE KALAHARI RED DUNE ROUTE**

Once you’re off the main road dust lining towards the gates of the Kgalagadi Transfrontier Park, a whole world of gravel awaits. Comfortable lodges, rustic bush camps, traditional San villages and hospitable guest farms dot the arid wilderness. But, more than anything, you will be able to find privacy and tranquillity here. Dolphins are few and far between, look out for Ashkam, Haldeken Pan and the Mier community.

**Natural Splendour**
The Kgalagadi Transfrontier Park is undoubtedly the premier attraction here. Few things can beat the feeling of queuing at the gate for the morning game drive, with the first rays of the sun streaming over the eastern horizon. You might encounter martial eagle puffed out against the morning chill, wildbeest snorting plumes of vapour into the freezing air, and the deep bass rumble of a black-maned lion proclaiming its territory from a high vantage point. At night.

**Eat & Sleep**
You must be excused if you momentarily mistake Kalahari Lodge for a mirage when you spot this oasis next to the desert highway. Less than an hour from the Kgalagadi gates, it is the perfect place to take a break, either for an ice-cold beer, or for a night of luxury. There is also the brand new Kgalagadi Lodge, which offers a secure environment for the kids to run around in. Only five minutes away from the park, it is a great option if you want to be in the park by sunrise. Try the local delicacies of sheep’s tails and khoobis (Kalahari truffles).

**Culture & Leisure**
The Kgalagadi Red Dune Route brims with cultural activities offered by the #Khomani San people. Activities range from a stop-over at the magnificent Masa Lodge to the Bushmen Living Museum, where you can learn to shoot a bow and arrow and how make the world’s lightest A great family stop on route to the park is Mountain Guest Farm, only a few minutes down the road. It is a typically earthy and no-nonsense Northern Cape adventure destination, where the kids (and any young-at-heart adults, of course) can enjoy an afternoon of play and sandboarding on the other dunes. Natural Splendour

An easy amble from the main camp in the Augrabies Falls National Park will take you to where the mighty Cape Storms River falls into the gorge below. Wooden decks offer excellent vantage points from which to take in the spectacular view.

**Adventure & Adrenaline**
A number of adventure operators offer white-water kayaking and rafting trips on the Canyons River – from full-day to multi-day trips. If you prefer to stay on terra firma, saddle up and go on a 30 km bike ride in the park, paddling down Mouse Rock, Aran and Echo Corner.

**Culture & Leisure**
Riemvasmaak is located north-west of Augrabies, within a mountain desert landscape shaped by volcanic, actively millions of years ago. Visit the residents and experience their traditional dancing and food, or laze in the hidden mineral spring in the gorge. There are also several mountain biking routes, covering a total distance of almost 160km.

**Eat & Sleep**
Orange River Wine Cellars: is the biggest wine cooperative in the southern hemisphere, and no trip to the Orange River will be complete without a tasting along this wine route. Also pop in at Bokkeveld and Die Max cellars. Accommodation options include the luxurious African Haven Guesthouse, where you can enjoy excellent claw food and lose yourself in the rural tranquility.
The Richtersveld is South Africa’s only mountain desert. You will enter a place that is real back-of-the-moon stuff – it will make you grab the camera and your family to venture further on foot. You can follow rugged gravel roads to quaint villages such as Lekkersing, Kuboes and Sandrift or take the more challenging 4x4 routes in the /Ai/Ais-Richtersveld Transfrontier Park or in the Richtersveld World Heritage Area.

Changing weather, migrating mists in the valleys, steep hills, fang-like rocks, unusual plants, the Orange River valley, extraordinary scenery and traditional goat herders all play a role to draw you into an adventure of a lifetime. This area is not about game viewing but look out for small herds of zebra, oryx and the occasional klipspringer.

The Richtersveld park and World Heritage Area are best explored in a well-equipped SUV or bakkie. Thesew in some comfortable hiking boots, extra water and guidebooks on plants, birds, reptiles and geology, as well as extra batteries for the camera.

**THINGS TO DO ON THE RICHTERSVELD ROUTE**

Drive inland towards Eksteenfontein and Sendelingsdrift, and you will reach one of South Africa’s foremost World Heritage Sites: the Richtersveld Transfrontier Park. The Richtersveld Route not only traverses the unique and diverse park, but also a number of traditional Nama settlements dotted along its edge. Here, time seems to have stood still for a thousand years.

When you travel deep into the Richtersveld you will have a persistent feeling of being far from anything familiar. You may even feel as if you are on the movie set of *Indiana Jones* given all the strange plants, landscapes and rock art. The natural attractions will give you goose bumps – make sure to add the Richtersveld to your itinerary when choosing your next adventure.

**Natural Splendour**

If you decide to leave your vehicle and explore on foot, keep an eye out for the small plants growing in the many quartzite crystal patches. Take some time to admire the 10 metre-high giant quiver trees, and oddly shaped butter trees (botterboom).

**Adventure & Adrenaline**

Engage low range along the 600km Namaqua Eco 4x4 Route as you approach Vioolsdrift on the edge of the Richtersveld. Driving a 4x4 is a given when you travel through the Richtersveld. Making your way up Domrog Pass and down Akkedis Pass past the Hand of God rock formation will provide enough adrenaline for the day.

Crossing the Helskloof area will test any 4x4 driver’s mettle.

The Orange River offers excellent opportunities for river rafting and the best wilderness fly-fishing in South Africa. Plus, all of the Richtersveld is a mountain biker’s dream.

**Culture & Leisure**

Spend a day following the footsteps of a traditional goat herder while taking unique photographs of the life of nomads. In the villages the locals will entertain guests with storytelling and traditional Nama step dancing for a small fee. Buy a traditional Nama waistcoat or a kappie to take home.

Early morning and late afternoon hikes are recommended to soak up the ambience of the desert and don’t forget to look for the many petroglyphs in the park.

**Eat & Sleep**

Great restaurants and a fine hotel await you in Port Nolloth, but unpretentious community-owned guesthouses are found in almost every village. These offer a good night’s sleep and traditional food is available on request. Fresh from the grid roosterkoek is a firm favourite. Campsites in the /Ai/Ais-Richtersveld Transfrontier Park offer beautiful views of the area. If you travel with one of the local guides, they will even put up your tent and can prepare meals that will delight a tired traveller.

In spring, hordes of tourists flock to Namaqualand. The reason is of course the spectacular fields of wild flowers that bloom throughout this area at this time of year. The dry and dusty plains are transformed – almost overnight – from dull browns to a kaleidoscope of colour, with millions of flowers coming alive to salute the sun.

This carpet of colour stretches from the main centre of Springbok – located within the embrace of the Klein Koperberg range – all the way to the rugged coastline.

There are too many travel secrets to mention within this mythical region where Nama pastoralists once roamed, but the best way to discover them is to roam along the dirt roads spider-webbing through the Richtersveld.

**MAIN CENTRES:**

Port Nolloth / Steinkopf / Eksteensfontein / Sendelingsdrift

Colloquially known as Namaqualand

**REGION:**

Namaqualand

**MAIN CENTRES:**

Hondeklip Bay / Lieferfontein / Groenriviermond

Colloquially known as Namaqualand
among rocky koppies and across shimmering plains.

There are dozens of action and leisure options for tourists passing through, including the Namaqua National Park, nature reserves, hidden coastal hamlets (do not miss Hondeklip Bay and Kleinsee), and some of the most remote hiking and 4x4 trails you could envision. Here are a few recommendations from my list of must-see places.

THINGS TO DO ON THE NAMAQUA COASTAL ROUTE

Best you invest in a generous dollop of adventurous spirit when you head into this hinterland. I've covered many of the places in this region in my book Things to do in a Dorp and there are some not-to-be-missed gems along the way: places like Garies, Kamieskroon, Hondeklip Bay, Koiingnaas and Kleinsee, but those are just the tip of the proverbial iceberg.

Natural Splendour

Outside the spring wild flower season, the expansive Namaqua National Park is pretty much an exercise in minimalism. Looking at the seemingly barren plains, the stark outcrops and dry riverbeds, you wonder what the attraction is. That is until you step back and re-focus on the minute detail embedded within the scorched tableau – microscopic bluebells, diaphanous daisies, neon-striped skinks … Once you train your eyes, the wonders come alive.

Adventure & Adrenaline

Mountain bikes, hiking boots, binoculars, trail shoes, GPS, power kites, celestial scopes … You had better bring all your toys, because you will need them in this incredible outdoor arena. Hike the Silversands Trail on the edge of the icy Atlantic or pedal among oryx within the Goegap Nature Reserve. Just get out there and clear your mind!

Culture & Leisure

Stargazers, history boffins and soul searchers will all feel welcome here. Go succulent sleuthing with a botanical guide or hike the Springbok Klipkoppie for a dose of Anglo-Boer War history. Visit the Blue Mine along the Kleinsee Road or see Namastat, a traditional matjies-hut village, to name but of a few of the cultural attractions.

Eat & Sleep

A sign on the N7 near Springbok fires a warning shot across the bows of any vegetarian travelling north: “This is Red Meat Country”. Immediately visions of slabs of rump, rolls of boerewors, cabanossi, skilpadjes and unapologetically fatty lamb chops come to mind. On the flipside, you will find a number of farm stalls and unique getaways such as the Naries Namakwa Retreat.

TAKE ME THERE … NOW!

In the Northern Cape, around every corner, over every little rise, and at the end of every road, there is something new to discover. Imagine yourself sitting next to a glowing fire somewhere far, far away from the daily grind. A cool evening breeze whispers through tall tufts of grass and high above you the heavens hang heavy with stars. The sounds of the night drift in from a distance, and you can sense adventure within every cell of your being. This is a sensation you will remember for life.

Take it from me: The Northern Cape routes have fantastic destinations, where you can celebrate everything you love about life: weddings, birthdays, friendship, parenthood, new beginnings, growing older and becoming bolder … The Northern Cape is all about real people, real culture, real adventure and real nature. Come visit us now, and make memories to last a lifetime.

For more information on the above routes, please visit our websites at www.openafrica.org and www.experiencenortherncape.com