

the mountain **THAT** **BURNS**

Brandberg (fire mountain) looms above the flat gravel plains of north-western Namibia. At 2 573 metres above sea level, it is the highest massif in the country and has a history and ecology so magical that it lured corporate sustainability consultant and avid rock climber **Robert Zipplies** to explore its secrets. ▶

TEXT BY ROBERT ZIPLIES



ROBERT ZIPLIES



ERZ COLLECTION

People seek escape from their humdrum days and hamster-wheel minds in different ways. My inclination is to lose myself in the remote, unblemished natural world. There I find beauty – even if at times it is a harsh splendour; stillness – even if it is before a violent storm; and balance. Once in a while I chance upon a place so wonderful it touches my soul. And one such location is Namibia's Brandberg.

The Brandberg massif is located in the north-western Namib Desert, in Damaraland, about 30 kilometres west of the shrunken former tin-mining settlement of Uis. *Brand* as well as *Dâu* (the Damara people call the mountain *Dâures*), mean 'burn' and this, according to various mythological roots, refers to the reddish glow on its granitic flanks at sunset, the heat of the rock on sizzling summer days, and a bygone tradition practised by pastoralists, who set fire to the highland vegetation to attract wildlife, specifically springbok, to hunt once the rejuvenated grasses had sprouted.

Besides its beauty, many other aspects distinguish the Brandberg. It totes Namibia's highest peak (2573 metres) and

has an astonishing abundance of rock art, most famously the White Lady – ironically later discovered to be a male shaman – which is reached via an hour's hike into the Tsiseb Gorge. The 30-kilometre-diameter massif is a classic inselberg or island mountain – one of about 20, including Spitzkoppe and Erongo, in this geologically active area.

Brandberg started out some 130 million years ago as one of many underground magma chambers and then, as things deep in the crust quieted down, the igneous intrusion slowly cooled and solidified into hard granitic rock. Over subsequent aeons the softer surroundings of Karoo Supergroup sedimentary rock eroded more rapidly, leaving *Dâures* to stand proud above the desert plains.

Although the desert around Brandberg receives only 100 millimetres of rain annually, more falls on the massif itself, supporting a surprisingly rich vegetation. The granite slabs concentrate the precipitation

Once in a while I chance upon a place so wonderful it touches my soul. And one such location is Namibia's Brandberg

in crevices, potholes and the little soil there is to nourish the flora which, because there has been limited impact from humans or climatic shifts, is apparently as abundant as it was 2 000 years ago.

When planning our hike we quickly realised that caution was required. The mountain has a reputation. Visitors with broken limbs have needed to be carried off over the roughest of terrains, others have come close to or actually died of thirst and, believe it or not, friends of ours were nearly washed away in a flash flood. When it does rain, the vast granite rockface can swiftly convert even a drizzle into a torrent.

Despite this, the mountain seems to exhibit a particularly intense magneticism

and many devotees return almost obsessively to hike and explore. The most famous of these is undoubtedly Harald Pager, an Austrian commercial artist who spent the last eight years of his life painstakingly finding, photographing, sketching and cataloguing its prodigious rock art history on behalf of the University of Cologne, Germany. There are about 1 000 known rock art sites, which together offer about 50 000 pictures.

Pager was so enthusiastic about his task that he interrupted his work only for the most pressing of interludes. By the time he died in 1985, he had managed to catalogue about 80 per cent of the paintings. But his work lives on. Brandberg enthusiasts Marie-Theres and Tilman Lensen-Erz, also researchers from the University of Cologne, have for the past 25 years used Pager's opus to continue research. We chanced upon them after our hike and, over a few drinks, they explained that the mountain seems to have been inhabited since the arrival of modern man, with the Later Stone Age, between 2 000 and 4 000 years ago, yielding most of the art.

We had meticulously planned our overnight stops to coincide with water sources but, even though there had been good rains, variations in localised precipitation played havoc with

our schedule, leaving us with parched throats on the fourth day. One of our expected water pools was little more than a puddle of mud; and foolishly we hadn't brought a water purification system or an emergency ration. We experienced a worryingly dry afternoon, at one point debating whether to march back several hours to our previous water spot or hike out a day early. We did eventually come across a frothy green, just-drinkable pool. ▶

OPPOSITE Brandberg glows in the sunset – one of the reasons for its name, which means 'burning mountain'.

BELOW Granite rock and a 'reliable' water source make for good camping.

BOTTOM Even a light drizzle can result in a dry riverbed becoming a torrent.

PAGE 59 A climber delicately traverses one of Brandberg's sweeping granite slopes that drops away to the desert.



MALCOLM GOWANS

TREADING LIGHTLY

Desert environments, because of their scarcity of water, poor soils and slow-growing vegetation, are delicate. When in them, take special care to 'take only photographs and leave only footprints'.

- Water is scarce. Don't foul it by washing yourself or any utensils and avoid using soaps, even if they are organic.
- Bury your poo but not your used loo paper – carry that out in a resealable plastic bag.
- Remember that rock art is of vital historical importance – touching it can cause damage.
- Do not remove any artefacts.
- Do not make fires.
- When setting up your sleeping bag, avoid disturbing the vegetation. And keeping to the paths, if they exist, will also protect the plants.
- Above all, enjoy the peace and serenity and lose yourself in the thousands of stars!



FRAN HUNZIKER



MALCOLM GOWANS (2)

The standard routes up the mountain are through the Ga'aseb and the Amis valleys, but we chose a more technical ascent via the vast slabs of the Trichter (funnel) – only advisable for those who have a good head for heights and are sure-footed. It was a giddy experience traversing those granitic expanses curving away into the desert.

We spent our second night at the Wasserfallfläche (waterfall flats), where there are a few small, seepage-fed puddles. Here the sweeping rock provides a wonderful backdrop to the evolving atmospheric hues of the setting sun. We later spent a mesmerising hour watching an endless stream of bats sweep low over the water, slaking their thirst in preparation for the night's hunting.

But our most exceptional experience took place one evening as we sat on our mats devouring a rather unexceptional meal by the light of our head torches. I don't know why I looked around, but suddenly I was staring at two disconcertingly large eyes not 20 metres away, inspecting not our dinner, but us. Standing up smartly, we saw a large cat. A caracal? No, the ears were too rounded. A serval? No, the head was the wrong shape. It turned to reveal its flank and the long sweep of its tail. It was a leopard!

It seemed smallish, so we rotated nervously through 360 degrees, looking for its mother. With a flick of its tail the cat leapt into the darkness, leaving us with the image of its glowing eyes seared onto our retinas. We were ecstatic, but that

night we moved our mats just that little bit closer together.

On our meanderings on top of the mountain, we visited both Schlangenhöhle (snake cave), which features an image of a several-metre-long snake, and Riesenhöhle (giant's cave), which pictures



ERZ COLLECTION

There are about 1 000 known rock art sites, which together offer about 50 000 pictures

– you've guessed it – a very large person or two. These iconic paintings are just some of many remarkable artworks at each of the sites.

'Who were the artists?' we wondered. What happened to the hunter-gatherers who lived here in small, highly mobile groups? Evidence in the shelters indicates that habitation and the creation of new drawings ceased largely about 2 000 years ago. The reasons are uncertain, but hypotheses include climatic or cultural changes and a shift to a pastoral lifestyle.

The paintings fulfilled a range of functions: ritual, religious, healing, social management and communicating cultural knowledge to the young. Further research indicates that the bulk of the images depicting humans apparently reflect the ideals of 'community' and 'equality', unlike much of our commercial and other art today. Living in such fragile life-supporting surroundings, those ancients had to be keenly aware that their survival depended on the quality of their collaboration and management of their internal group dynamics.

When I visit places of ancient habitation, I like to sit in the shelter or cave to look out and visualise the scene as it must have appeared so many hundreds or thousands of years ago. Here on Brandberg, the images come flooding in. I see the people industriously going about their tasks. I can almost feel them sitting beside me, looking out over the sunset vista, talking about the day's activities and planning tomorrow's hunt or the next place they should move to, where the water, hunting and pickings were likely to be favourable. They must have paid constant attention to their environment to ensure they were not overstaying their ecological welcome.

It was with mixed emotions that I wrote this article, knowing that it may increase human traffic on the mountain. The Dâures ecosystem is of course a proxy for our global biosphere; beautiful and life-giving, but fragile. Undoubtedly it would be best for the massif to remain a truly wild environment, but few such real wildernesses remain and we need to learn

to live in balance with that which sustains and is dear to us. If you travel to Dâures, don't only appreciate its history, geology and biology. Reflect also on its message for the soul of humanity.

TOP A Namibian classic, a kokerboom or quiver tree.

OPPOSITE When the going gets tough, it's just a step at a time!



BOOTING UP FOR A DESERT CLIMB

Namibia's attractions are unparalleled. One of the least populated countries in the world, it has sweeping expanses of uninterrupted landscapes, deserts that incorporate bizarre plants, towering dunes and curious creatures, an unpredictable coastline, treasures beneath the soil and the remnants of ancient works of art on its rocks. Unexpectedly, perhaps, the road network is very good and there are numerous excellent lodges, hotels and guest farms for visitors. But if you're planning to venture off the better roads to see remote desert attractions like the Brandberg, there are a few pointers to keep in mind.

PREPARATION

- The mountain lies close to the town of Uis, some four hours by road north-west of Windhoek. The hikes take three to five days, walking for seven to eight hours per day.
- When you go depends most on water availability – the best months are usually from February until June.
- 'It is advisable to use guides,' says Rob Zipplies. 'They know the paths and available water sources.' Contact the community-based Dâures Mountain Guides (e-mail nlg@mweb.com.na or tel. +264 6450 4162), or one of the commercial operators found online.
- Let someone know your departure and return dates.

THE RIGHT GEAR

- Take a satellite phone, if possible. (You can hire one in Windhoek.) There is almost no mobile phone reception.
- A 55-kilogram backpack, warm sleeping bag and lightweight hiking mattress. Leave room to carry extra water.
- Be equipped for hot days and cold nights. Pack hiking sandals, good boots or hiking shoes, long trousers and long-sleeved tops, a windbreaker, sunhat and beanie or buff.
- Lightweight cooking stove.
- Head torch.



FIRST-AID BOX

- Water purification tablets or equipment, and bottled water (at least two litres).
- Sunscreen and antiseptic cream.
- Elastic support bandages to ease joint pain in your knees when descending.
- Plasters to help protect your feet against blisters.
- Anti-inflammatories and antihistamine medication.



CAPE UNION MART (3)

GEAR RECOMMENDED BY SOUTH AFRICA'S FAVOURITE OUTDOOR STORE



Explore

WIN!

Answer this easy question and you could win a R250 gift voucher from Cape Union Mart to purchase some of the kit necessary for your scaling of Brandberg.

What is the name of the highest point on Brandberg?

E-mail your full name to travelpack@africageographic.com and insert 'Travel Pack' in the subject line. The sender of the first correct answer drawn will be the winner. (Closing date 26 September 2012; the winner will be announced in the November issue of the magazine.) The winner of the July 2012 competition is Fahima Ryklief of Cape Town. The answer is desert rose *Adenium obesum*.

