

## Fish River Canyon | Namibia



**The spectacular Fish River Canyon, second only in grandeur to the Grand Canyon.**

Photo: Leigh Kemp

So vast that your eyes cannot cope with the full view all at once. At the northern end of the gorge are amazing viewpoints and the start of a 5-day, **86 kilometre (54 mile) hike**, along the river in the belly of the ravine. Conditions can be so hot and tiring, that only hikers with a current medical certificate are allowed to do this walk. They emerge 5 days later at Ais Ais Hot Springs, where blistered feet and exhausted bodies are soothed in therapeutic bubbling water.

The canyon is the habitat of some small hardy mammals such as rock-hopping Klipspringer Antelope, little Dassies (rock hyrax) and Baboons. There are also **Kudu, Leopard and Mountain Zebra**, whose spoor you might come across, but are unlikely to see. Birdlife is more prolific with well over 60 species such as Herons, hammerkops, Egyptian Geese, Plovers and Wagtails. In an area plagued by drought, the Fish River was an oasis to early inhabitants of the region. Early, middle and late Stone Age sites have been found, dating as far back as 50,000 years ago. Today, it is a place to visit not live. The sights are so incredible that your camera can hardly do justice to its natural magnificence.

**Climate:**

## Winter:

Daytime temperatures from May to August range between 20-25°C (68-77°F). The agreeable temperature and dry atmosphere create ideal walking conditions and this is the best time to do the **Fish River Canyon** hike. However, be warned it can get hot and reach 40°C (104°F) at midday. Evenings are usually mild, although nights can go below 5°C (40°F).

## Summer:

This is an area of summer rainfall with 60-70% of rain occurring as thunderstorms between October and March. It is extremely hot and humid during the rains and is too hot for the 5-day hike, which is closed for safety reasons. **Rain is very unpredictable** and varies between 50-100mm per year. Daytime temperatures are in the high 30°C to over 40°C (104°F).

## Geology of the Fish River Canyon:

The 161km (100 miles) long canyon is up to 27km (11 miles) wide in places and half a kilometre deep. Formation started about 1.8 million years ago with **sandstone, shale and lava deposits** which compressed and heated up to over 600°C. The metamorphosed rock re-crystallised and changed appearance. Dolorite lava, which never reached the surface, cut through in dark black lines about 900 million years ago, and the first major period of erosion started soon after, exposing and levelling the rocks.

This became the floor of a shallow sea that covered the southern part of Namibia, upon which sediments were deposited. The **base of the Nama sediments** is only a few metres thick and consists of small pebble conglomerate. Above this are 150-200m (487-650 ft) of black limestone, grit and sandstones. These are capped by 10 metres (32 ft) of shale and sandstone.

Fracturing of the crust about 500 million years ago formed a north-south valley and slow erosion removed the upper layers. Then about 300 million years ago **glaciers of the Dwyka Ice Age** and another period of fractures deepened the valley. Through these faults emerged ground water, bubbling up as hot springs.

Most of the striking features of the canyon developed over the past 50 million years, and today it is one of the most scenic and impressive canyons in the world.