

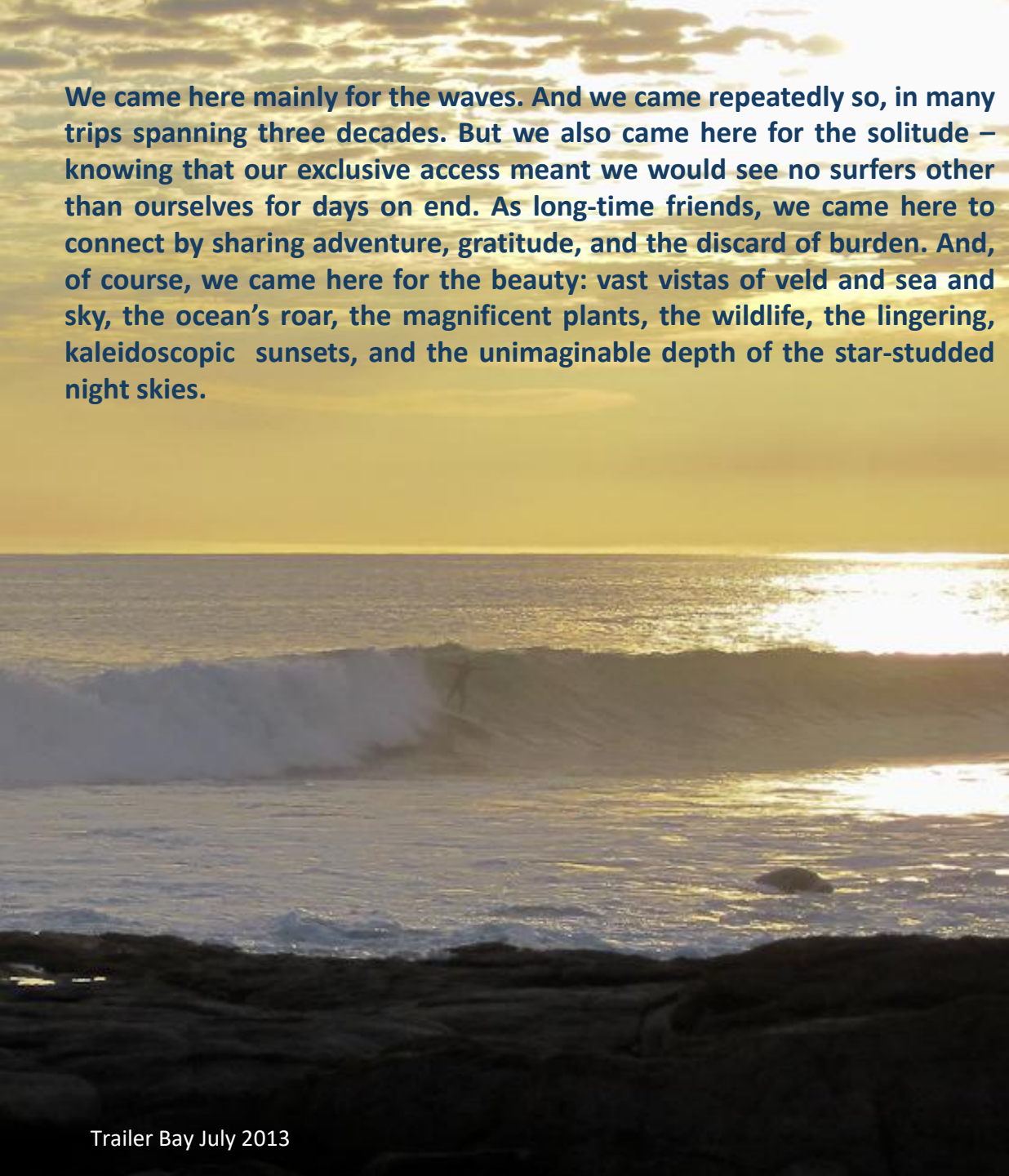


The Noup years

Seeking surf and seclusion on the Namaqualand coast

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Other photos contributed by Bruce Anderson, Chris Cowling, Nigel Espie-Hewitt, Melanie Gaylard and Colin Paterson Jones

We came here mainly for the waves. And we came repeatedly so, in many trips spanning three decades. But we also came here for the solitude – knowing that our exclusive access meant we would see no surfers other than ourselves for days on end. As long-time friends, we came here to connect by sharing adventure, gratitude, and the discard of burden. And, of course, we came here for the beauty: vast vistas of veld and sea and sky, the ocean's roar, the magnificent plants, the wildlife, the lingering, kaleidoscopic sunsets, and the unimaginable depth of the star-studded night skies.



Trailer Bay July 2013



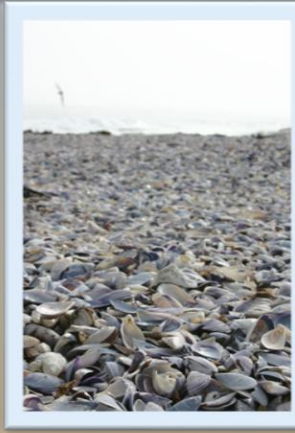
Trailer Bay June 2018



Samson's Bak May 2007



Workshops August 2016



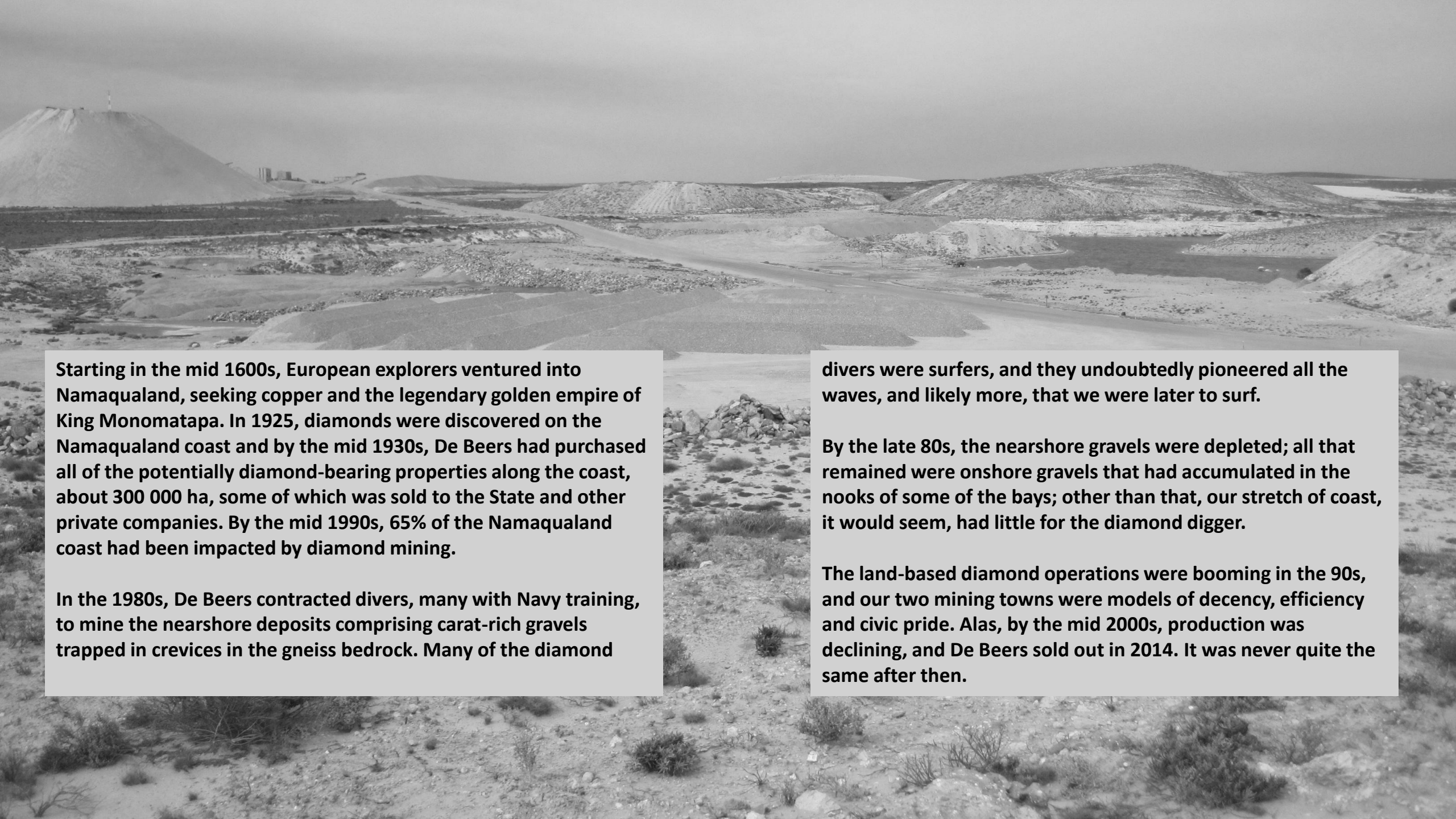
Our destination is a 60-km stretch of the Namaqualand coast, delimited by two diamond-mining villages and linked by an excellent tar road.

This is a harsh, exposed coastline of gneiss bedrock sculpted into small arcuate bays, some of which deliver excellent waves.

The Namaqualand coast lies at the epicenter of upwelling of the cold Benguela Current. Thus, the ocean is frigid and mostly murky as pea soup, clogged with fests of photosynthesizing diatoms. This works in the surfer's favour: light attenuation in the immediate subtidal means less kelp, the bane of a Benguela wave rider.

Wherever we go, we find archaeological evidence of modern humans – people like us. Hunter-gatherers lived on the Namaqualand coast, feasting on its hugely abundant and nutritious shellfish, since at least 160 000 years ago, a full hundred thousand years before their descendants migrated into Eurasia.





Starting in the mid 1600s, European explorers ventured into Namaqualand, seeking copper and the legendary golden empire of King Monomatapa. In 1925, diamonds were discovered on the Namaqualand coast and by the mid 1930s, De Beers had purchased all of the potentially diamond-bearing properties along the coast, about 300 000 ha, some of which was sold to the State and other private companies. By the mid 1990s, 65% of the Namaqualand coast had been impacted by diamond mining.

In the 1980s, De Beers contracted divers, many with Navy training, to mine the nearshore deposits comprising carat-rich gravels trapped in crevices in the gneiss bedrock. Many of the diamond

divers were surfers, and they undoubtedly pioneered all the waves, and likely more, that we were later to surf.

By the late 80s, the nearshore gravels were depleted; all that remained were onshore gravels that had accumulated in the nooks of some of the bays; other than that, our stretch of coast, it would seem, had little for the diamond digger.

The land-based diamond operations were booming in the 90s, and our two mining towns were models of decency, efficiency and civic pride. Alas, by the mid 2000s, production was declining, and De Beers sold out in 2014. It was never quite the same after then.

Ever since I first visited Namaqualand in the spring of 1985, I have been intrigued by its plant life, most notably its massively diverse flora of succulents – and amongst them, the dwarf forms that stud the quartz fields in a display that surely qualifies as a Wonder of the World.

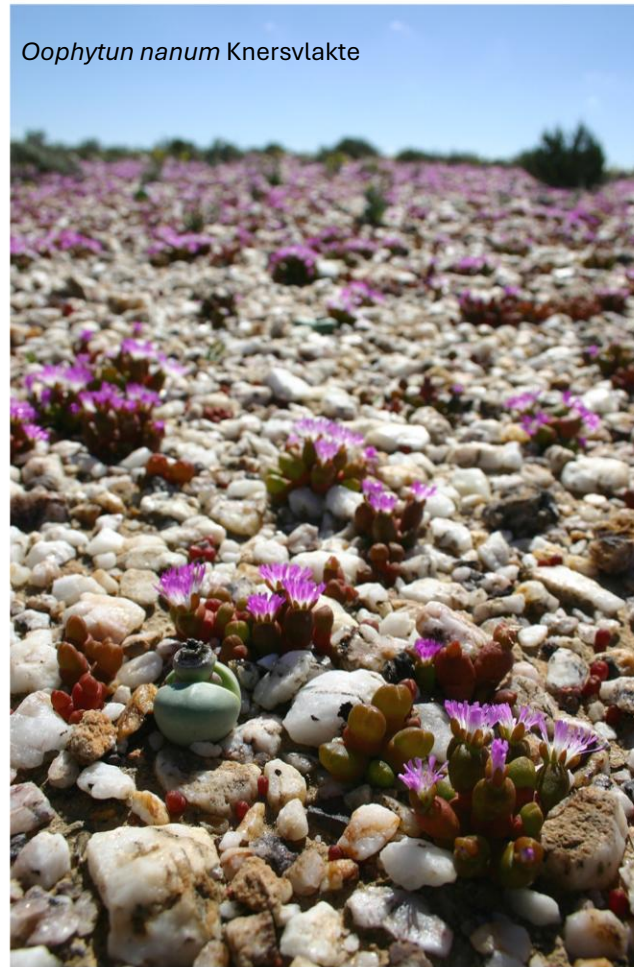
In the winter of 1993, while on a protracted adventure across southern Africa's arid lands with botanist colleagues and friends, we stopped for lunch at McDougal Bay, south of Port Nolloth. It was a beautiful day of sparkling clarity and there was a thick, low-period swell of 6-8 foot, spitting all sorts of fantasies through my mind. I vowed to come back prepared.

That same year I was appointed to a Chair that mandated me to research everything important for conserving the succulent flora of the Cape. What an opportunity!

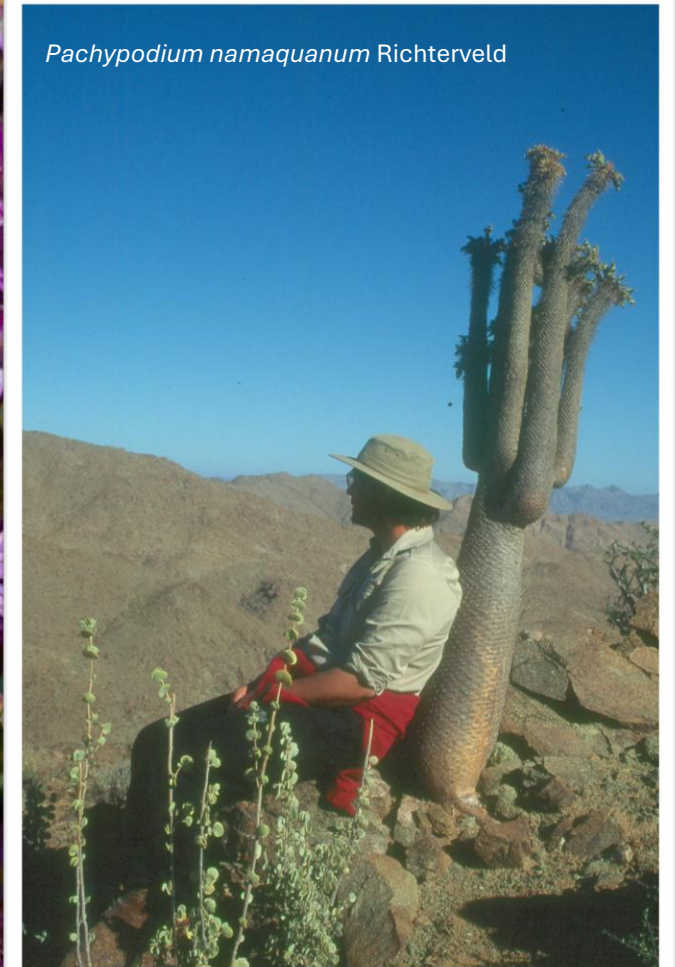
Over the next few years, I developed a good relationship with the De Beers management. This collaboration ultimately led to the proclamation of 100 000 ha of the Namaqualand coast as a national park, but it also opened the door to accessing that part of the Namaqualand coastline owned by De Beers, but largely unmined.

The time had come.

Oophytun nanum Knersvlakte

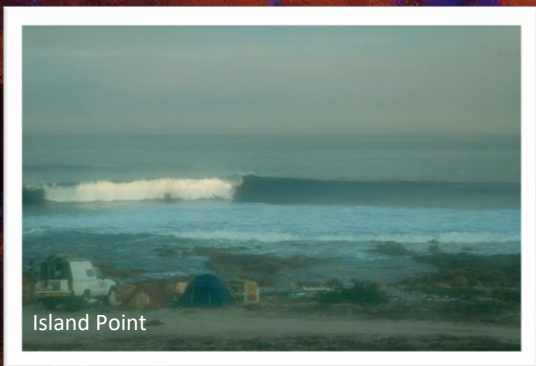


Pachypodium namaquanum Richterveld





Sewejaarsmond se Baai



Island Point

So, in April 1996, Fairbra and I headed out in the Company 4x4, ill fitted aft with a steel grid instead of glass, for the sandy tracks of the Namaqualand coast. Armed with ordinance maps, surfboards, camping gear, food and lots of water, we turned south from the Garies road, and passed through the first of many gates. Thus, began our adventure of five days of park-where-you-*smaak* along 100 km of wild and unpeopled coastline.

The weather was perfect and the swell clean and small. Our first camp was south of Vygie Point (more later) where we surfed a crisp beachbreak. The next day, after traversing the mobile dunes at the Bitter River, we explored every nook and crook of the magnificent coastline, eventually encamping at a spot we unimaginatively called "Right Hand Point". And on that small-swell day, it delivered delights.



Our next stop was Island Point, about 30 km down the track. The swell was sufficiently small for the inside to produce some decent waves. Moving south next morning, along a more steeply sloping and scenic coast, we saw lots of potential. We lingered at Severjaarsmond se Baai, which was flanked on either side by a pleasant wave; we chose the right hander.

Our last night was spent at Malkopbaai, where we set up camp in a building NW storm and a growing swell. We mindsurfed massive right handers sweeping into the bay but concluded that only someone with a *mal kop* would consider paddling out.

We exited the coast at Brand se Baai, even then a place hideously defaced by mining. That aside, we were exhilarated by the wildness, the beauty and the surf potential. We had found a new frontier for adventure.



In June 96, a student and I drove the coast from Kleinsee to Brand se Baai. At our first stop, we found a mellow right-hander, which we named after the undescribed genus of vygie, growing in the bedrock behind the beach. Next stop was Right Hand Point where more surf was to be had. That was where the bakkie battery failed. We had to walk 30 km to Groen River and, carrying a battery, back again.

Shirley and I spent several days in November of that year travelling the track from Island Point to Vygie Point. I recall surfing several waves at Vygie Point accompanied by a school of Heavyside Dolphins, a Benguela endemic.

Having cleared the way with De Beers for access to the coast between Khoingnaas and Kleinsee, Fairbra and I were back again in December, camping at Trailer Bay, Sampson's Bak and Paradise. Even at that time of the year, there were waves. Frequent coastal lows produced northerlies for the rights, and early morning southeasters groomed Trailer Bay.

Fairbra and I made several camping forays to the Khoingnaas-Kleinsee coast over the next two years, and I spent time with botanical colleagues and students at Groen River, where our research was based. I remember paddling out at huge, clean and perfect outside Island Point, and getting clobbered by a rogue set. A student and I did get some waves there on a much smaller day.



In 1999, Khoingnaas couple, Aletta and Dudley Wessels, opened Noup for self-catering accommodation. In granting public access to this erstwhile prohibited zone (a security clearance was still required), De Beers did something we applauded: all access gates were locked but keys were given to Noup visitors.

The infrastructure at Noup, built of locally harvested granite and gneiss boulders, was inherited from the diamond divers, who had left these now diamond-depleted in-shores. The cottages were basic but atmospheric, creatively decorated with Aletta's gifted eye. A bunch of us spent 10 days at Noup in May 1999. That decided us – no more camping. We came again, staying at least 10 days at a time, on 25 adventures over the next 23 years.

From Noup, we would shoot 15 km north on the fine mine highway, to the Trailer Bay gate; or another 25 km to the Samson Bak gate. Where we parked depended on the swell size, period and direction – and, of course, the ever-fickle wind.

After two, sometimes three (in the earlier years) surfs, and a dose of sunset worship, we piled ourselves and our gear into the vehicles, locked the gates behind us, and headed home down the highway, transported by Van Morrison, Grateful Dead or Joni Mitchell.

Fires were made, food was cooked and, exhausted, we slept deeply in our warm beds and quaint lodgings. Next morning we woke rested but sore and stiff, ready to do it all again.



Fairbra May 2005



Rog May 2007

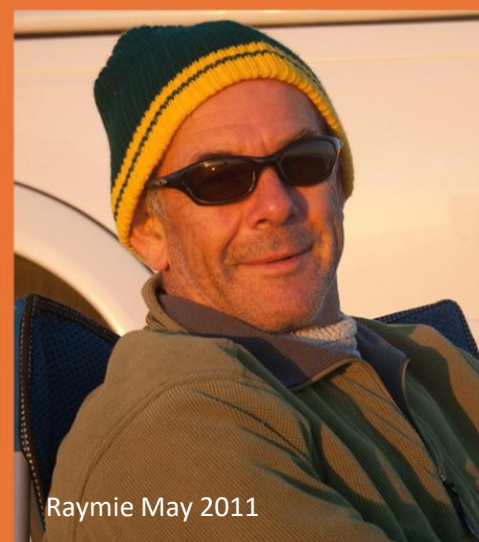
The core crew, those who have been on most of the Noup adventures, are all my closest friends. I have known Fairbra, Rob and Rog since the late 70s. Raymie I befriended after I left Scarborough for Cape St Francis in 2000. Chris, my dear brother came to Noup often with his wife Laura; he was a champion cook and regaler of yarns. Sadly, both he and Rog have passed on. I'm so grateful for the good times we spent together at Noup with both of them.



Tich June 2005



Chris & Laura July 2011



Raymie May 2011



Rob April 2004

Getting to Noup from Scarborough was relatively painless. An early morning start got you to Noup by early afternoon: a dash up the N7 and then 80 km of grueling dirt road from Garies to Noup.

Getting there from Cape St Francis, where I have lived since 2000, was another matter. We had 1200 km, three mountain passes, and seven different types of Karoo to traverse. Departure was in the wee hours so we could get to Noup in time for an evening surf. The return schedule was pretty much the same. More recently, as we got older, we broke the trip with overnight stays in Vanrhynsdorp (inbound) and Prince Albert (outbound).

As you can imagine, these trips were not without event. Wheels lost in the wilderness of the Upper Karoo; vehicles sliding wildly in a cloudburst in Meirings Poort, narrowly missing a deluge of debris flodded onto the road; an unfortunate encounter with a large kudu near De Rust, and so on.

The last-mentioned persuaded us to change the route, sticking to the N2 and thence to the N7 via Worcester. We once tried the Tanqua Karoo route, a gravel road and the longest road in South Africa without services. We incurred three punctures, mandating a maximum of 5-km stints in order to keep the tires reasonably inflated. Never again.





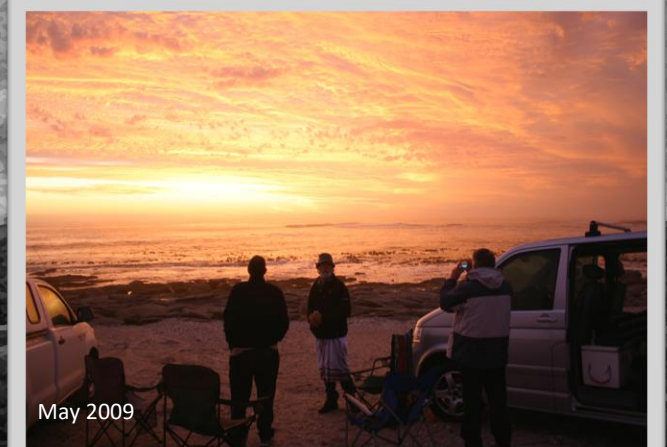
Being based at Noup was a delight. We benefited from Aletta's professional touch for 14 years. Then, when De Beers bailed in 2014, Noup was closed and our hosts were unkindly evicted. In 2016, a glamping outfit was contracted to run Noup, but with no access key to Trailer Bay or Samsons Bak. Raymie and I went in June that year and concluded that the deprivation fatally compromised the experience. In 2018 Noup was taken on by a local lady with excellent mine contacts. We got the keys again! We returned every year since then, until the Noup cottages were appropriated to accommodate miners in June 2022, immediately after our last trip.

And now to the surf spots.

Some context is required. These are not relaxing waves; when sizeable, they are terrifying. What you get in terms of size is exactly what the ocean buoy gets. So, anything over 3 m becomes challenging. My comfort zone was 2 to 2.5 m and the less period the better. The water is always cold (ca. 10-12°C).

First up is Trailer Bay, our staple break. This “train freight” left hander gets some wrap and can hold a big swell but is best at 4-6 foot with a south-easterly wind.

As is the case for all waves on this coast, the take off is tricky and vertical. If you make this, there is an opportunity for a turn before the wave flies into a slab section and then, after that, you can cut back and cruise into an Elands Bay-like inside section. The wave passes in pulses of adrenalin, unmeasurable in time but experienced in space by the long paddle back to the lineup.





Raymie June 2008



Tich July 2011



Fairbra May 2011



Rog June 2005

Rog June 2006



Rob May 2007



Raymie May 2007



Fairbra May 2011



Rog May 2006



Tich June 2008



Rob June 2005



Thanks to Steers for his evocative painting of a big, pea-soup and cold-water day at Trailer Bay. Raymie is considering (foolishly, I think) paddling out higher up the point than is customary on days like this.

In gratitude here is a sequence of Steers' barrel at Trailer Bay: he made it!



For me, there were the plants: in this regard, Namaqualand is paradise. A winter-flowering desert with 3 000 species, half of which grow nowhere else, and the richest concentration of succulent plants anywhere in the world. What more could you want?

In 1999 Shirley and I published an illustrated guide to the plant life of Namaqualand. We can say with some authority that this desert is in a class of its own.



Aloe areticola



Gazania splendidissima



Conophytum sp



Babiana hirsuta



Jordaniella spongiosum



Crassosiphon cylindrica



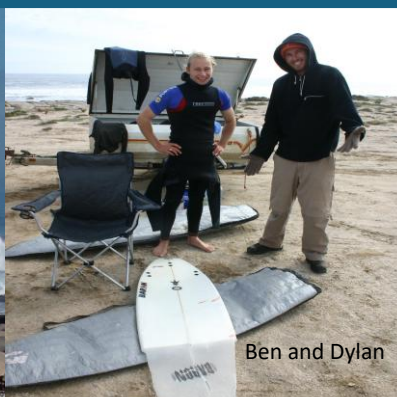
Wooleya farinosa



Next up is Samson's Bak, a south-facing bay that boasts a long, fast right hander needing light north-east to north-west winds – a morning spot. For that reason, it is less consistent than Traylor Bay but equally exhilarating. When its over 6 foot and the swell is thick, the steep take-off is followed by a rush down a face that unfolds with unimaginable speed, ending in a slab where the intrepid can seek a barrel. It is not an easy wave, but it is a hugely rewarding one



Ben Godfrey June 2005



Ben and Dylan





Raymie May 2007



Tich July 2011



Fairbra Aug 2018



Rog June 2009



Raymie June 2009



Tich June 2009



Fairbra Aug 2018



Ben Godfrey June 2005



Raymie June 2009

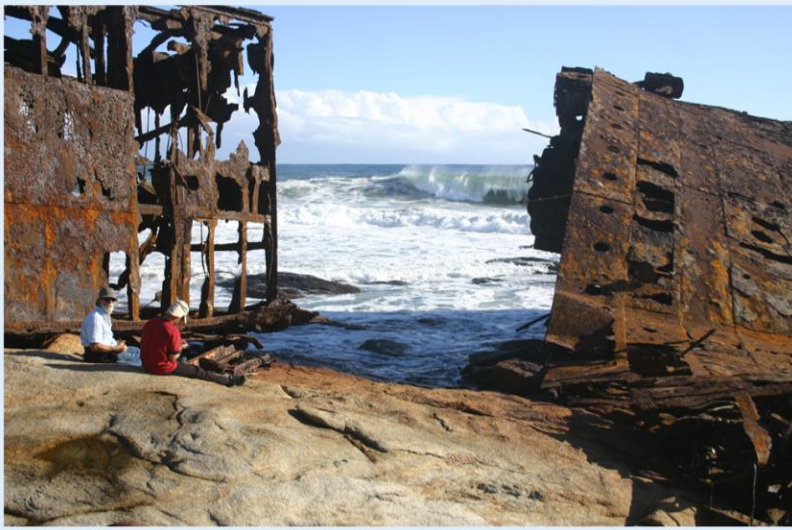


Tich Aug 2018



Dylan Anderson May 2007

On down days we would go walking – exploring the coast and marveling at the seascapes, sediments, plants and animals, and human history. Our surf strike rate averaged about 60%. After a few days of relentless surf, a down day provide relief from the tyranny of surf and rest for a aching body.





Eddy Godfrey



Aletta and Dudley hosted a braai for us To celebrate our tenth year of visiting Noup



Fairbra with son Mark



Harry Lake

We shared Noup with lots of others. In the early days, Harry and Bruce (sadly deceased) came a few times. Eddy Godfrey came thrice, once with batman Gumby and son Ben. Fairbra bought his boys, Mark and Paul; Dylan – Rob's son – was a regular in the 2000s; and Raymie's family have been here. Shirley came a few times as did her niece Mel and husband Steers. Jenny Mac has graced Noup. Thanks to Jan de Vynck, the last two trips had a strong archaeological flavour on the down days. And on the very last trip in 2022, we had Hayley to uncover the geology.



Steers, Mel and Rog



Rob with son Dylan



Shirley



Jan and Hayley



Noup beach



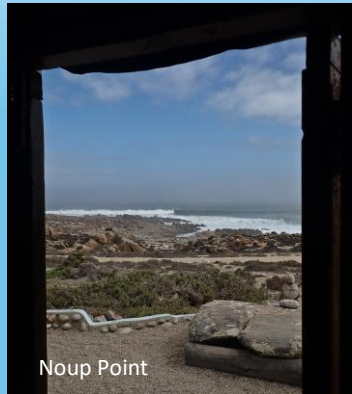
Brazil Slab



Schulfontein Slab



Fairbra at Workshops May 2011



Noup Point



North of Noup



Paradise



North of Workshops

There are many other surf breaks along the 40-km stretch of coast that we surfed. If this coast was exposed to, say, the throng of surfers from the Cape Peninsula's deep south, there would likely be dozens of breaks. We only surfed a few of these when the pickings were slim at Trailer Bay or Samson's Bak.

During our last trip to Noup in June 2022, the bulldozers were busy on the shoreline at Samson's Bak, ripping up topsoil dense with the ultra-fine and shallow roots of coastal plants, designed to suck up all the moisture provided by the light but reliable winter rains, and store it in their succulent leaves. Boulders colonized by button plants - the real diamonds of Namaqualand - will be ripped away in search of shiny pieces of rock. It is a crying shame.



We have warm memories of this special place and are grateful for the privilege to experience it wild and untrammelled. There are few places in today's world, as convenient logistically as Noup, that have good surf and no crowds. We were lucky to have had our Namaqualand refuge for so many years.

Noup will open again. When the last patch of diamondiferous gravel is rudely extracted from the ground, the miners will pack up, leaving behind their disfigurements. Surfers will return, we hope under the conditions of our trips: one group at a time, so that they too can enjoy the seclusion that we so cherished.

