

# Through the Kunene Gorge on Foot

By Garth Owen-Smith

BY JULY, 1969, I had been in the Kaokoveld Territory for a year, and my work as Agricultural Officer for this, the North-West corner of South West Africa, had already on a number of occasions taken me deep into the little known Baynes and Otjihipa mountains.

Many tales, both fact and fiction, have been told of these remote ranges. In 1911 a modest Scot named Maudslay Baynes had walked along the Kunene River from Erikson's Drift to the sea – a distance of 300 miles which had taken him 93 days. He spoke to few people of his epic trip, and a few years later was astonished to see, on a German map of their then colony, his own name across the range he had been the first European to describe.

The twentieth century has had little affect on the Baynes and Otjihipas, and to-day they are still little more than a jumble of contours on a survey map. Over the years, romantic authors and bush-happy explorers have claimed that the Cape lion, the quagga, and even the white rhinoceros still wander along the ledges and gorges deep in these mountains, but the fact remains that to this day surprisingly little is known of the fauna and flora of the area. At present the Windhoek museum is studying the "Berg" Tjimba, a scattered race of hunter-gatherer people living here, who are believed to still use stone implements. The museum has made little progress, for the wiry Watjimba are almost impossible to find in their rugged refuge.

Willem van Riet and Gordon Rowe\* travelled down the Kunene by canoe in January, 1964. Van Riet later wrote that in the gorge the cliffs rose vertically from the river for many hundreds of feet, and that crocodiles there had been particularly troublesome, showing no fear of them whatsoever and repeatedly attacking their canoes.

In July, 1969, another Scotsman arrived in the Kaokoveld, Mr. Hugh Goyns of the South African Association for the Advancement of Science in Johannesburg, who with his wife had come to do a short preliminary ecological survey of the Baynes Mountains. I accompanied him, and after spending four days east of Otjimborombonga, an Ovahimba settlement on the Kunene in the heart of the mountains, we decided to go west into the Otjihipa range. First we walked seven rugged miles along a donkey path to the

\* See "African Wild Life", Vol. 19, No. 4, p. 293.

Himba cattle post at Onyethu – a wide valley surrounded by mountains and bisected by the Kunene. The following day we pushed on for another four miles down river. Here there were no paths and the going was starting to get quite tough, but we turned back mainly because of a lack of time. The return trip of 22 miles had taken three days, with many stops for collecting specimens.

Later Hugh and I went East from the Marianfluss, and in the process climbed to the highest point in the Otjihipas. From this peak Onyethu was plainly visible and we could see the course of the Kunene, but not the river itself, as it wound through the mountains 5,000 foot below us. I here decided that at the first opportunity I would try to traverse the gorge from Otjimbombonga to Otjinungwa in the Marianfluss.

The purpose of the trip would be to get some idea of the number of crocodiles in the gorge itself; to find out what other large animals and how many lived in these mountains along the Kunene, and to find out how difficult the gorge actually was to traverse on foot. In 1911 Baynes had been forced to leave the river here, and had only joined it again at Otjinungwa. No record could be found of anyone having been through except for van Riet and Rowe by canoe.

The opportunity arose in September. A stock inspector had to go down to Otjimbombonga on September 3, and another party would be at Otjinungwa on September 7. From the map it was seen that the distance was approximately 30 miles for which I would have just over four days – an average of seven miles per day.

At 4 p.m. on the third we arrived at Otjimbombonga, and I set off immediately. As the sun slowly set, I walked along the now familiar path to Onyethu. All around dassies scampered and chattered and an occasional dassie rat (*Petromys cunealis* – Shortridge) dashed across the shale and disappeared into a crevice. For a while three klipspringers bounced along ahead of me, and a pair of black eagles soared effortlessly high overhead. The sun disappeared behind the Techicongo Mountains in Angola, and at the Onyethu stream nine black-faced impala ewes bounded gracefully out of a patch of tamarisk. To me, alone in this beautiful valley, civilization – for even the Kaokoveld is now showing the inevitable symptoms of progress – with its synthetic crust of security, seemed to lie so many miles behind. Ahead were the mountains, the river and, for a few short days, life.

Before camping I took a walk along a large pool, but although I had often on previous occasions seen crocodile here, including a couple at least twelve feet long, this evening all was tranquil. Later, during the night, I was awakened by a loud snort a few yards away. My torch flashed on and a single impala ram stared startled

at the light for a few seconds then, in two effortless leaps, disappeared into the night.

At sunrise the next morning I worked my way down river, and as the mountains closed in again, five mature impala rams were flushed, then a single kudu cow. About two miles into the mountains, while I was descending a steep zebra path to the river I found two separate, well scraped piles of rhino dung. This was rather unexpected for, although rhino are still plentiful at Otjipemba, about 25 miles away, the country around here was extremely rugged. As the sunshine crept down to the river, I saw a crocodile of about six feet basking on a small, sandy beach.

By eleven o'clock the furthest point Hugh and I had reached was passed and here the unmistakable tracks of a large crocodile were seen on the sand. I pushed on for about another hour then rested under a stunted anaboom, which was clutching at the few cubic feet of soil on the rocky river bank.

At 4 p.m. I set off again, hoping to make a point about two and a half miles away, where the river turns west again, by that evening. However, the banks of the Kunene soon became extremely steep, and I found myself having to climb higher and higher and was soon more than 500 feet above the river. A large ravine, 300 feet deep, with almost vertical sides, ran down the mountainside in front of me, and it was necessary to climb a further 300 feet to find a way down into it. After scrambling up the other side, I had gone only a few yards when another ravine even deeper, cut my path, and yet another could be seen further ahead. The sun was shining only on the tops of the mountains by the time I climbed out of the third ravine, and eventually I had to traverse another two - a total of five - running like parallel scars, in the space of a single mile. It was dark when I picked my way down to the beach I had hoped to reach by six that evening.

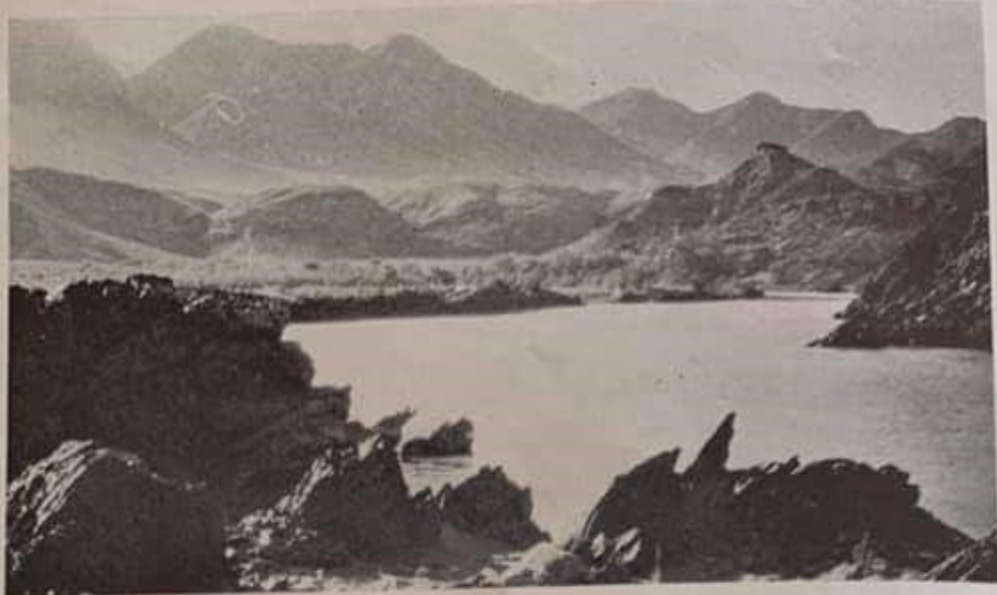
Before making camp, I played my torch over the river here, but could pick up no eyes in the beam. Fresh leopard spoor however, was seen on the sand near the river.

The following morning I boulder - hopped along the bank, determined to stay near the river, but after about half a mile, the going became very hard, and I had to make a couple of quite difficult traverses. The river here was a series of steep sided, long, narrow pools, divided every quarter of a mile or so by short rapids. There were no signs of crocodiles but below me the water was restless and deep and not at all inviting.

By eight o'clock it was impossible to continue along the river, and, not wanting to go backwards at all, I decided to try to climb

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(*Opposite page*). Looking back at the Oneyethu valley from the entrance to the main gorge — early morning of the second day.



**The Kunene River at Onyethu with the Techicongo Mountains in the background.**

vertically out. The rock was loose and crumbling and it was necessary to test all holds before putting any weight on them. Eventually, about 150 feet above the river, the slope eased, but although the sun had not yet reached as deep as into the gorge, and it was still quite cool, I found sweat trickling off my forehead.

During the morning ravines were again encountered, but fortunately were not as numerous as on the previous afternoon. Sometimes I would scramble down a ravine to the Kunene for a drink and a quick swim, but by that afternoon the river had gone into a steep gorge. Smooth cliffs now rose for 200 feet or more straight out of the water, and even ravines were ending above the river and dropping vertically for the last hundred feet or so – no doubt forming waterfalls during rain. In one place a number of huge boulders had fallen into the river, causing a large pool to form above them. Between the boulders the water gushed out as if through sluice gates.

At 3 p.m. I got down to the Kunene for the last time and that night was forced to camp on the slopes. After a cup of soup I drained the rest of my waterbottle and settled down to sleep, with my foot against a stump to stop me from sliding. But here, 500 feet above the river the mosquitoes were much worse than they had been near the water.

Long before dawn I started walking again. The only animals seen now were dassies and the occasional pair of klipspringers, but leopard spoor was found in nearly all the ravines. No crocodiles were seen, but now there was no place for them to leave the water. It was still impossible to get to the Kunene, but fortunately near

the end of a couple of large ravines small overgrown springs were found. The slimy water was far from hygienic, but as the sun climbed higher this worried me less. These ravines were still the main problem, and at times it would take an hour or more to reach a point, which directly across, was merely a few hundred yards away.

At eleven o'clock I came to a really big ravine. Just above the Kunene it was its shallowest, being only about 200 feet deep, but with very steep sides. I decided to try to climb down here, but had only descended a few feet, when a slip caused me to fall about ten feet. Although unhurt, I had enough of a fright to make me climb back and try to get through higher up. But as I went higher up the ravine, it only got deeper and steeper, and one o'clock found me at least 2,000 feet above the river with still no chance of getting through. It appeared that to get through this time, I would have to climb almost to the highest point of the Otjhipas. So I decided to descend and try again near the river. By 3.30 p.m. I was back where I had slipped, and managed to get down to the river without further mishap. This was the first time I had reached water since three o'clock the previous afternoon and I rewarded myself with a quick, but most enjoyable swim.

After a rather difficult climb out of the ravine, it was necessary again to climb high above the river to get over a ridge which dropped almost vertically for at least a 1,000 feet to the Kunene below. At 7 p.m. I climbed over this ridge and was greeted by a gust of cool wind blowing from the Atlantic 50 miles away. In the distance through a gap in the mountains, the Hartman range was plainly visible.

In the fading light I scrambled and slid down to the Kunene, now shining so invitingly in the evening sun. The river was reached in twilight, and on the sandy shore was the spoor of a leopard so fresh that I could not believe it had been made more than an hour ago. My enthusiasm somewhat dampened, I moved cautiously between the clumps of bushes, and, coming over the last sandy ridge, nearly stood on a 10 foot crocodile. Our surprise was equal, but his reflexes, inherited from an age when times were better for his prehistoric ancestors - when they and other greater reptilian monsters ruled the earth - were far superior, and with a mighty scurry and splash he plunged back into the river, while a human, puny without his machines, could only stand and gape. A few minutes later he returned and, with his head and shoulders out of the shallow water, he eyed me hungrily, or possibly unbelievably, until darkness finally settled.

The last five miles the next morning were quite easy although at the final exit from the gorge it was again necessary to climb a few hundred feet above the river. One crocodile was seen cruising in

a pool near the exit, and a troop of about twenty baboons were seen on the Angolan bank. Otjinungwa was reached at twelve o'clock - three days and twenty hours after leaving Otjimbombonga.

**CROCODILE:** On the entire trip only three crocodiles were seen, although in the gorge itself there were very few places where they could leave the water. However, all sand banks were searched, often with binoculars, but seldom was spoor seen. It must be concluded that there are not many crocodiles in the gorge itself, which is probably due to the lack of food in the deep rocky pools there. The one crocodile disturbed in the gorge certainly did not show much fear of me - after his initial surprise, that is.

**HIPPO:** No signs of hippo were seen, and it is most unlikely that they have ever lived anywhere in the gorge.

**ELEPHANT:** When climbing the highest peak in the Otjihipas, Hugh Goyns and I had followed in the tracks of eight to ten elephants for all but the final 2,000 foot of the ascent. The elephant then appeared to go along a ridge into an adjacent valley, deeper in the mountains. No signs of elephants were seen while I was walking through the gorge.

**RHINO (HOOK LIPPED):** As rhinoceros droppings were found on only one occasion in the gorge, it must be presumed that this was a single wandering individual, probably from Otjipemba. Occasional rhino are encountered on the southern edge of the Otjihipas around Orukatua spring, and a couple also appear to live around the Okapupa fountains, from where they often range into the Marianfluss.

**HARTMAN'S MOUNTAIN ZEBRA:** Zebra paths were a regular feature of all but the most rugged sections of the gorge. On the walk, however, no zebra were actually seen, but fresh droppings and tracks were found. By September most rainwater pools should have dried and I should think that at this time they would have been concentrated along the river. But Hartman's zebra are notoriously difficult to see in broken and mountain country. They are certainly plentiful around Onyethu, Orukatua and Okapupa.

**KUDU:** A single cow was seen near the eastern entrance to the main gorge (below Onyethu). Spoor is quite often seen around Onyethu, Orukatua and Okapupa and they are probably not uncommon in these areas.

**IMPALA (BLACK FACED):** Around Onyethu there appear to be about fifty impala permanently resident, but it is doubtful whether they occur further west than a few miles into the gorge proper.

**KLIPSPRINGER:** A total of 14 were seen in the four days. They appear to be fairly common the whole length of the gorge

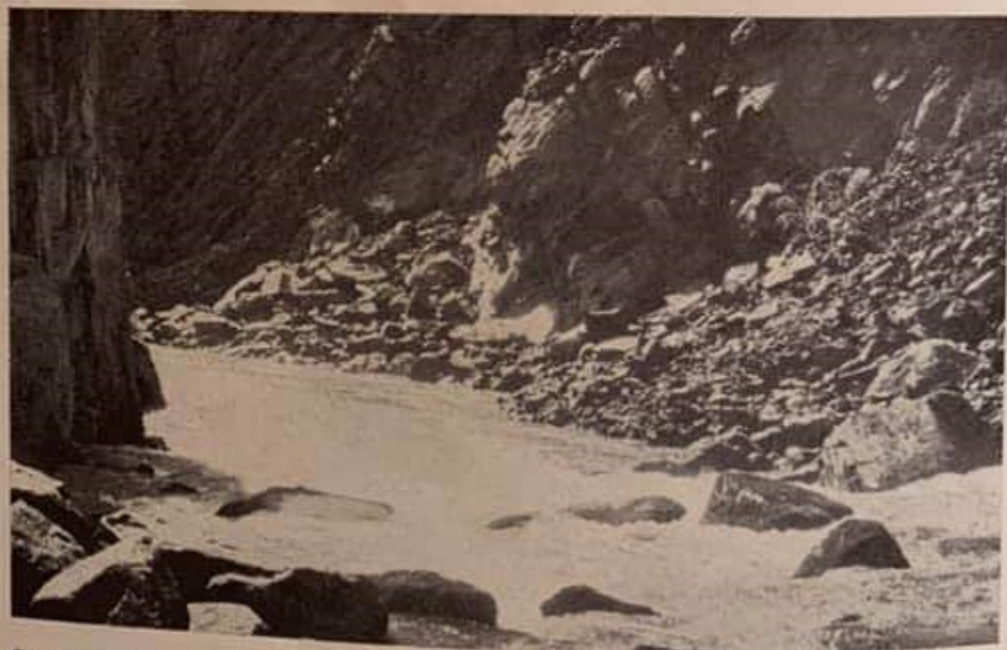
and in fact throughout the Otjihipa range.

**DAMARA DIKDIK:** Although no dik-dik were seen along the gorge, they have been seen around Orukatua and in the Okapupa valley. A few are possibly found in many of the less rugged areas of the mountains.

**LION:** There appear no longer to be any lions resident in the Otjihipas, but Ovahimba herdsmen at Onyethu say that occasionally, when the Kunene is low, a couple may swim across and kill a few head of cattle before returning to Angola.

**LEOPARD:** Leopard spoor was seen in many ravines throughout the length of the gorge, and it appears that they are still plentiful here and in the Otjihipas as a whole. Baboons, klipspringer dik-dik and dassies probably form their staple diet, with an occasional young kudu or zebra foal. Impala are no doubt eaten around Onyethu. While we were climbing high in the Otjihipas a large male leopard padded past less than 20 yards from Hugh and me, and, as this was at 11 a.m. in bright sunshine, it is possible that here, because they are seldom molested, they are more diurnal than in other areas.

**BABOONS:** Baboons were seen on the Angolan bank both at Onyethu and near the western exit from the gorge. Although none was actually seen on the S.W.A. bank, there is no reason to believe they are not just as common there. There is at least one large troop near Orukatua.



Cliffs rising straight out of the river. Picture taken on the afternoon of the fourth day. This was the first time the author had been able to get down to the river for over 24 hours.