

## The Plantaholic's Hotspot Guide - Witsand Nature Reserve, Northern Cape

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The phrase 'Jewel of the Kalahari' has been used to describe Witsand, a strikingly beautiful island of white sand dunes in a sea of red Kalahari sands. Witsand is situated 70 km south-west of Postmasburg, to the west of the Langeberg mountain range, and approximately 240 km west-north-west of Kimberley. The white dunes of Witsand are the result of aeons of wind blown sand from the north becoming trapped by an isolated range of quartzite kopjes running parallel to Witsand and five kilometers west of the Langeberg. These sands, piled up against the kopjes, have been bleached white by perennial waters that seep to the surface, reducing the oxidized iron particles in the sand from a red to grey-blue hue.

The soft, flowing white dunes are surrounded by red Kalahari sand, with camel thorn *Acacia erioloba* and grey camel thorn *Acacia haematoxylon* woodlands and the shrublands of the quartzitic Langeberg mountains to the east. The vegetation on the white dunes is sparse and consists mainly of Kalahari grasses, small hardy shrubs and scattered trees, mostly *Acacia haematoxylon*, *Boscia albitrunca* and *Ziziphus mucronata*. This forms a striking contrast with the surrounding green woodlands on red sands, clear blue skies and the blue hues of the Langeberg mountain. Sunset softens the contrasting colours to shades of gold, mocha and orange, and is the cue for the numerous barking geckos to emerge from their burrows and fill the air with their clicking calls.

Not only is Witsand strikingly beautiful, it is also one of the few areas of localized biological endemism in the Northern Cape. The combination of white sands and the perennial ground water just below the surface has given rise to an ecosystem very different from the surrounding dry red Kalahari, hence the unique flora. Endemic plants include *Brachiara dura* var. *pilosa*, *Pterothrix tecta*, and *Vahlia capensis* var. nov.

After good rainfall events, the already high ground water table rises even further and fills the many seeps between the dunes. Hydrophytes cover the seeps, and vlei grasses are abundant around the edges. These include *Juncus dregeanus*, *J. oxycarpus* and *J. rigidus*, *Scirpus* and *Fuirena* species, and the leafless *Utricularia capensis*. Many of the species recorded in these seeps are not found elsewhere in the southern Kalahari.

For those plantaholics interested in the 'non-plant' aspects of the natural environment, take a moonlight walk and you might encounter the ghostly 'white lady' spider dancing on the dunes, the only locality of this arthropod outside the Namib desert. Endemic creatures are waiting to be discovered, and it is expected that future research will reveal endemic reptiles and

insects. A new butterfly species was recently found at Witsand in the camel thorn woodlands. For the bird enthusiasts there is a new bird hide, partly underground, overlooking a waterhole. The main attraction at the waterhole is the large flocks of Namaqua and Burchell's sandgrouse that arrive to briefly quench their thirst 2-3 hours after sunrise. Male sandgrouse drench their belly feathers and carry water back to their nests, up to 70 km away, to supply their chicks' daily water requirements.

The place of the roaring sands or brulsand, of the southernmost dune, is worth a visit. Running your hands through the sand or walking over these sands produces a roaring sound during the dry summer months. Closer inspection of the white sands when taking a walk reveals beautiful patterns created by the wind, such as circles drawn by stalks of Kalahari dune bushman grass *Stipagrostis amabilis*. Fulgurites, fused sand tubes that are formed when lightning strikes the sand, are strangely abundant at Witsand. Artefacts lie scattered throughout the reserve, testimony to the long history of human occupation.

A trip along the Bergenaarspad Pass over the Langeberg nearby will reveal a diversity of shrubs and trees such as the silvery lavender fever berry *Croton gratissimus*, the clinging Namaqua fig *Ficus cordata* and various *Rhus* species. Hidden underneath small shrubs and between grasses, a number of dwarf succulent plants such as *Anacampseros subnuda* and *Orbeopsis lutea* survive the arid climate and escape the attention of most hungry animals. Larger succulent species include *Euphorbia avasmontana*, the beautiful *Aloe striata* subsp. *karasbergensis* and *Pachypodium succulentum*. Growing only on top of the mountain, the shrub *Lasiosiphon burchellii*, in general appearance more like a fynbos element, is seemingly out of place in this arid shrubland.

If you would like further information about the Kalahari, a useful guide is *Hidden Splendour: a guide to the natural history of the Kalahari and surrounds* that can be purchased at Witsand, or ordered from The Secretary, Wildlife and Environment Society of SA, P.O. Box 316, Kimberley, 8300 (E-mail: se@museumsnc.co.za).

#### *References*

- Anderson, M.D. 1998. Sites of special interest. In: *Hidden Splendour: a guide to the natural history of the Kalahari and surrounds*. Anderson, T.A. (ed.). Northern Cape Region of the Wildlife and Environment Society of South Africa.
- MacDonald, I. 1981. Witsand – a mirage in the red Kalahari. *African Wildlife* vol. 35:29 -31.
- Witsand Nature Reserve brochure. Undated. Northern Cape Tourism Authority.

Bookings: Witsand Nature Reserve, P.O. Box 1474, Postmasburg 8420.  
Tel. 053 3131061, Fax. 053 3131062.

Accommodation includes self-catering luxury air-conditioned chalets, low cost basic chalets, and camping facilities under large camel thorn trees. Other facilities include two swimming pools, a quaint kiosk with curios, and a small conference room. Summers are very hot, so it is a good idea to visit during the cooler months of April/May and September/October.