PROMO CODES AVAILABLE
SEE CODES
Capital One Shopping
The Coupon-Finding Browser Extension

SAFARI

An oasis of cool in the wilds of the Kalahari Desert

In one of the most extreme environments on Earth, a luxurious desert camp is leading the charge

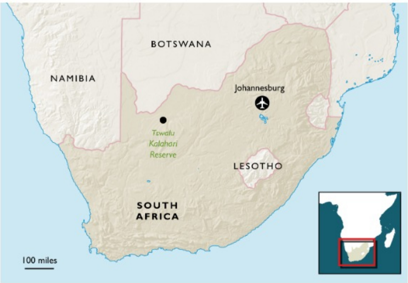
Private patio at Tswalu's Motse camp

Lisa Grainger | Saturday October 08 2022, 12.01am BST, The Times

In 300,000 acres of desert, criss-crossed with rocky mountains and tangled thornveld, tracking animals isn't easy. Unless, that is, you are being led by two men who have spent their lives in the bush and can decipher indentations in the sand as easily as you or I might read a newspaper.

My Afrikaans guide, Juan Venter, and Tswana tracker, Piet Toto, have senses almost as fine as the creatures they track. Every now and then they stop, turning their ears to pinpoint a remote cry, scrunching their eyes to recognise a dot on the horizon, flaring their nostrils to detect a scent wafting in the desert dust. “In an area this size,” Venter explains, "you have to learn to sense like the animal you're tracking. You have to get inside its head."

We've been driving a few hours through the massive expanse of Tswalu in South Africa's Northern Cape — the largest private game reserve in southern Africa, owned by the Oppenheimer family — when along the red-sand road Toto spots the fresh pawprints of a lioness. For a hundred yards or so, the prints are perfectly clear in the late-afternoon light. Then they vanish into the golden grass. "At this time of day she's probably doing one of two things," Venter surmises. "Going to hide her cubs in the hills for the night, or walking to drink water. Let's see."



The Kalahari Desert is one of the most extreme environments on Earth: 360,000 square miles of sand that blows all the way from the Equator into South Africa, via Namibia and Botswana. Venture into it on a summer's day and temperatures can top 48C, while winter nights drop to -14C. In most parts, there's no water. But at Tswalu there is, thanks to seasonal Korannaberg Mountains streams and borehole-pumped waterholes that help the reserve's protected creatures to survive.

Thrillingly, it's beside one of these little waterholes that the lioness is resting, just as Venter predicted. And even more thrillingly, she has two cute three-month-old cubs with her that want to do little else but play; nibbling their mother's tail as it flickers in annoyance, licking her nose as she growls, and jumping like little ponies over her prostrate front legs.

ADVERTISEMENT

We print that.
Personalized Note Cards
10 for $9.99
Shop now
Business Cards
100 for $18
Shop now
Flexfit® 6-Panel Baseball Cap
1 for $24.49
Shop now
VistaPrint® Large Zip Cotton Tote Bag
1 for $16.95
Shop now

At most game reserves, seeing lion cubs is special. But here it's even more so because 50 years ago any lion here would have been shot.

The Green Kalahari, as this area is known because of its slightly higher rainfall, was historically utilised for hardy cattle and game farming. Lions, and other predators such as wild dogs and leopard, were regarded as a nuisance and swiftly dispatched.

Tswalu game drive
MICKY WISWEDEL

Until, that is, Stephen Boler came along. The Lancastrian, who made his first fortune selling cut-price tyre and exhaust systems in the 1970s and at one time was the biggest shareholder of Manchester City football club, loved wildlife, and in 1995, recognising the plight of the rhino, decided to create a reserve for them by buying 35 farms. When the De Beers heir Nicholas Oppenheimer was invited to visit in 1997, Boler had removed hundreds of miles of fence, and stocked his adjoining 200,000 acres with sable and roan antelope, lion, zebra and cheetah, and finally rhino.

When Boler died a year later, Oppenheimer was asked by his executor to take on Tswalu. The billionaire philanthropist recognised the opportunity not only to continue the extraordinary project — last year adding a now acclaimed restaurant into the mix — but to spend more time in a place that he, too, had fallen in love with. As he put it: “There’s a sense of contentment that comes from being surrounded by so much space. One savours its colours and textures, the myriad sounds, and the deep silences of the wilderness.”

A room at Tswalu

That the Oppenheimers savour such space and quiet makes it pretty special for guests too. There are just two places to stay in Tswalu: Tarkuni, a two-storey homestead sleeping a private group of ten, and the Motse camp, whose nine stone villas can house 18. Because each group of guests is given their own vehicle, private guide and tracker, they can do pretty much what the Oppenheimers themselves do, from horse riding and walking to star-gazing and picnicking in the dunes.

SPONSORED

Life after leadership: what these business owners wish they knew before selling up

Need a long weekend? You'll find fewer crowds, value for money and a host of attractions in Wales

Wanting to see as much rare wildlife as possible, I choose to drive out (wrapped in blankets in the nippy 4C desert air) at dawn and dusk when desert creatures are most active. While a high percentage of guests see the big black-maned lions of the Kalahari, and if they're lucky rare desert rhino, this is not Big Five country. For a start, there are no hippos or elephants — they wouldn't survive the extremes.

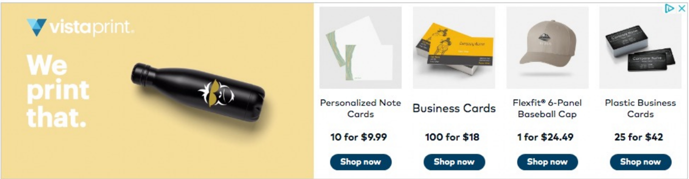
But with great guides at the wheel of your Land Cruiser, there's plenty to see. Driving around the tough camelthorn thickets of the Korannaberg, we see kudus, mountain zebras, rarely spotted little brown hyenas and baboons. On the wooded savannah — fragrant in September with the powdery sweet perfume of white blackthorn and yellow camelthorn flowerballs — we come across a pair of resting cheetahs, their stomachs full of freshly killed oryx. We are outstared by grumpy buffaloes and inquisitive giraffes, watch hundreds of eland thundering across the plains followed by a spotted hyena, and even spot three (highly endangered) wild dogs trotting along a sandy road.

A lioness and cub in Tswalu
ALAMY

And in between all this action, I have time to myself: to lie about like a gecko in the wintery sunlight by the pool, to browse natural history books, to admire Stone Age hand axes in the little museum — and just to sit, relishing the elegant, simple beauty of my room.

- Best safaris in South Africa
- 19 amazing tours of South Africa

ADVERTISEMENT



Personalized Note Cards
10 for $9.99
Shop now

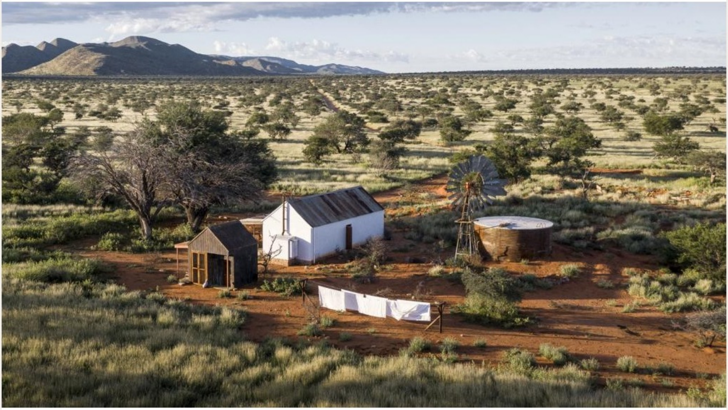
Business Cards
100 for $18
Shop now

Flexfit® 6-Panel Baseball Cap
1 for $24.49
Shop now

Plastic Business Cards
25 for $42
Shop now

Unlike many contemporary African lodges that emblazon their interiors with bright colours and designs, Tswalu’s Johannesburg-based designers, Savile Row, have focused on muted calming shades, natural materials and clean Scandinavian shapes. On curvaceous stone walls hangs local art from the Oppenheimers’ private collection. Beside wood-fired stoves and large windows sit rattan chairs and linen chaises longues. (Oddly, much of the furniture was sourced from Bali; I’m told Tswalu’s new six-bedroom tented camp, Luape, opening in next year, will feature designs that are made locally.)

The food is undoubtedly local thanks to Tswalu's chef, Jan Hendrik van der Westhuizen, host of a food magazine, TV show and Michelin-starred restaurant in Nice. The Oppenheimers' proudly South African approach marries perfectly with his. Not only are the plates designed by van der Westhuizen and the wooden food-boards hewn by local craftsmen, but the local staff have been trained by him. The ingredients have been sourced from farming communities nearby — from the Kalahari lamb sizzled on starlit barbecues and the pistachios in the ice cream served by the pool, to the creamy butter churned in the aptly named desert outpost Hotazel an hour away.



Klein Jan restaurant
ADRIAAN LOUW

There is certainly no restaurant that looks more South African than Klein Jan. Situated at the heart of Tswalu, close enough to the airstrip for foodies with private jets to flit in, the restaurant's main building looks much as it did when it was built over a century ago. When I arrive at the little white cottage, fronted with a *stoep* (veranda) and roofed in corrugated iron, linen hangs on a washing line and an old windmill creaks in the hot breeze. On a table under a tree, there is a jug of warm water and herbs to wash my hands, before cocktails in a cosy, farm-style room hung with copper pans.

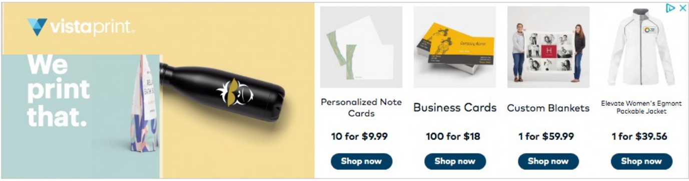
The location of the restaurant itself is a surprise for every guest, and I don't want to blow that revelation here. But the culinary journey to it was one of the most inventive I've been on, featuring secret drawers holding amuse-bouches, a cellar lined with bottles of preserves, and even a cheese room lined with a thousand South African cookbooks. I took my 78-year-old mother with me, and watching her eyes widen and her grin get bigger as surprise after surprise unfolded was the highlight of my trip.

Inside Klein Jan
ADRIAAN LOUW

Until, that is, the next day, when we sat in the sand watching a troop of habituated meerkats scurrying in and out of their burrows, hunting for scorpions and digging for insects. Then we saw endangered black rhinos protected, behind the scenes, by an army of conservationists and technology. And finally, as twinkling planets started to glisten in the skies, we got a radio call to report that an anti-poaching scout had spotted a pangolin.

The creature I've spent my life dreaming of seeing was curled up in a bush, trying to disguise itself — little wonder, given all eight species are now classed as vulnerable to extinction, thanks to Chinese demand for "traditional medicine". I spent just five minutes watching it, and my photograph of it is terrible. But seeing the creature with my own eyes was an incredibly moving experience, as was the realisation that it wouldn't exist if it weren't for the will and funding of conservation-minded philanthropists in places like Tswalu.

To discover, on my return, that every room in the reserve is almost always fully booked, with a waiting list of three years for Tarkuni, should have come as no surprise. The experiences here are like nowhere else on Earth.



ADVERTISEMENT

vistaprint.
We print that.

Personalized Note Cards
10 for $9.99
Shop now

Business Cards
100 for $18
Shop now

Custom Blankets
1 for $59.99
Shop now

Elevate Women's Egmont Packable Jacket
1 for $39.56
Shop now

Lisa Grainger was a guest of Tswalu (tswalu.com) and Cazenove+loyd, which offers six nights in South Africa, with two nights' B&B at the Saxon in Johannesburg and four nights' all-inclusive at Tswalu, with airport transfers and return private-jet flights to the Kalahari, from £7,080pp (cazloyd.com). Fly to Johannesburg

The Saxon

Pre-safari pit stop: Three cool Johannesburg hotels

1. The Saxon

This luxurious boutique hotel in which Nelson Mandela wrote his autobiography is renowned for its indigenous garden and enormous infinity pool. Architecturally, the brutalist building isn't a thing of beauty, but its 53 rooms are soothing and comfortable — particularly the villa suites, opening on to leafy foliage. The spa's excellent therapists, who work alongside a 24-hour gym, offer treatments from Tibetan sound therapy to African herb-scented wellness journeys. The poolside terrace is the place to enjoy lunches featuring local specialities; Qunu restaurant's dishes are more appealing than its austere decor.

Details B&B doubles from £517 (saxon.co.za)

2. Fairlawns

Once part of the Oppenheimer Estate, Fairlawn's European-style stables and stone double-storey house were transformed into a hotel in 1997, and expanded into a 41-room spa property for the football World Cup in 2010. Characterised by theatrical, slightly kitsch decor (gilded Louis XIV-style chairs and oversized African art alongside Italianate black-and-white tiled floors), a Balinese-themed spa and formal English gardens, it's a colourful hotchpotch, whose suites range from dark and tribal to French and feminine. An airy bistro, watched over by friendly young staff, features delicious home-style food, from inventive salads to brown bread ice cream.

Details B&B doubles from £383 (fairlawns.co.za)

The Peech

DOOKPHOTO

3. The Peech

Originally a family home in the smart suburb of Melrose, near shopping centres and the cricket stadium, this is the most contemporary of Johannesburg's boutique hotels. Opened in 2004 by James Peech, it has 14 bedrooms that are modern and African, with wooden floors, leather and metal accessories, and colourful printed fabrics. A two-acre garden has a little pool with loungers; the two-bedroom villa has its own. A pair of restaurants offer casual dishes beside a garden, as well as fresh, light tasting menus created by Candice Philip, one of the country's top 50 chefs.

Details B&B doubles from £174 (thepeech.co.za)

Sign up for our [Times Travel newsletter] and follow us on [Instagram] and [Twitter]

T TIMES Travel

INSPIRATION

Best hotels for a summer staycation

From Cumbria to Cardiff, Jersey to Llandudno, these places to stay make the perfect springboard for exploring the British Isles

Read the article ›

Related articles

AFRICA

Botswana's 'safari rock stars' open a new camp

September 05 2022, 12.01am BST

Sarah Marshall

AFRICA

Africa's most romantic safari suite

December 30 2017, 12.01am GMT

Jane Knight

BACK TO TOP

THE TIMES
THE SUNDAY TIMES

GET IN TOUCH

About us
Help
The Sunday Times Editorial Complaints
Display advertising
The Sunday Times corrections
Contact us
The Times Editorial Complaints
Place an announcement
Classified advertising
The Times corrections
Careers

MORE FROM THE TIMES AND THE SUNDAY TIMES

The Times e-paper
Times Print Gallery
Times+
Schools Guide
Sportswomen of the Year Awards
The Sunday Times e-paper
The Times Archive
The Sunday Times Rich List
Newsletters
Times Appointments
Times Currency Services
Times Crossword Club
Times Expert Traveller
Best Places to Live
Podcasts
The Sunday Times Wine Club
Sunday Times Driving
Good University Guide
Best Places to Stay
Times Money Mentor

© Times Newspapers
Registered in England

Privacy & cookie policy

Limited 2022.
No. 894646. Registered office: 1 London

Terms and conditions

ipso. Regulated