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Clockwise from top left: The century-old farmhouse at Klein Jan in Northern Cape, South Africa; the spiral staircase in Klein Jan's water tank; the shepherd's hut of Le Crot Alpage in Le Miroir, France; one of Chef Philippe Paillargue's dishes.



Taste of Adventure

From a culinary safari in South Africa to a haute cuisine trek in the Andes, fine dining is taking an experiential spin in wonderfully wild destinations.

BY BRUCE WALLIN

If you stop at a popular watering hole on the way to dinner at Klein Jan, don't get out for a drink. The happy-hour crowd at this particular joint in South Africa's Tswalu Kalahari reserve can get a bit wild. Your driver, a seasoned safari guide, might pause at the water to point out zebras and black-maned lions before continuing the journey to your final destination: a remote restaurant unlike anything else on Earth.

Klein Jan is the creation of Michelin-starred chef Jan Hendrik van der Westhuizen, who was raised on a farm in South Africa's Mpumalanga province. For those enthralled with his concept, the thrill has only begun. From the Arctic Circle in Norway to the high Andes in Peru, a growing number of adventurous, out-of-the-way culinary experiences are cropping up around the globe. More than just meals, these sensory journeys are expanding the notion of what a restaurant can be—and bringing world-class dining to some of the planet's most wildly beautiful environments. →



Courtesy Images. Clockwise From Top Left: Klein Jan/Adrian Louw (2); Eleven/Yann Alligé (2)



Klein Jan

Northern Cape, South Africa

Nothing about the safari experience at Tswalu Kalahari is typical. Adventures through the reserve entail everything from walking with wild dogs on the hunt to studying baby cheetahs with a big-cat biologist. Game drives reveal brown hyenas, pangolins, and other elusive creatures—all in a setting so vast and vividly beautiful that it seems you've stumbled upon an Africa from another time. And yet, perhaps no experience at Tswalu is as unexpected as a meal at Klein Jan.

Chef Jan Hendrik's restaurant is set in and around a century-old farmhouse, one of only a handful of structures in the 281,700-acre reserve (larger than the city of Dallas). Guests staying at one of Tswalu's three luxury lodges go by safari vehicle to the farmhouse, where their "culinary safari" begins. "The Kalahari is a journey," says Jan Hendrik. "And that's exactly what Klein Jan is."

Diners begin with small bites and cocktails on the farmhouse's front porch or around an antique wooden dining table

inside. Then, they proceed to the backyard, where a nondescript water tank becomes a portal, opening to a spiral staircase that leads some 15 feet below the Kalahari sands. At the base, an intricately arranged root cellar stretches out with vaulted ceilings, stone floors, and wooden shelves brimming with fresh produce, cheeses, and bottled preserves.

Sampling the seasonally driven delicacies in the cellar is followed by a walk to the cheese-tasting room, anchored by a vintage stove formerly owned by Jan Hendrik's grandmother. From here, the group enters a sleek dining space that would be right at home in Cape Town or Manhattan. Windows open to the Kalahari outside, and the remainder of the feast unfolds as the Southern sky fills with stars.

The trajectory of the meal reflects the journey of Jan Hendrik, who received his Michelin star—the first by a South African chef—for his Restaurant Jan in Nice, France. He and his executive chef at Klein Jan, Marnus Scholly, spent two years researching the ingredients and culinary traditions of

the Kalahari before opening in 2021. "The Northern Cape surprised us tremendously with pistachios, saffron, camel milk, dried fruits," Jan Hendrik says.

Klein Jan's menu focuses on the region's plant-based bounty, from dates and Kalahari truffles to branches and leaves. Throughout the meal, local staff members—most of whom had never worked in a restaurant before, and many of whom had never eaten in a restaurant before—walk guests through what they are about to experience and why. The elaborate orchestration seems implausible in such a remote setting, but it all comes together in a meal that is memorable both for its multifaceted experience and for the quality and creativity of the cuisine.

"To tick those senses of eating and tasting things that you would never have thought even existed," Jan Hendrik says, "that's pretty spectacular."

The drive back to your lodge—in an open-side vehicle, with the stars above and the sounds of the nighttime bush all around—is no less remarkable. tswalu.com



Courtesy Klein Jan/Adrian Lovel (2). Opposite Page: Courtesy Eleven/Yann Allègre (2)

Le Crot Alpage

Le Miroir, France

The Le Crot Alpage experience begins with a hike by headlamp up a snow-covered trail, through a high alpine forest known to be populated by wolves. Any feelings of discomfort—numb fingers, shortness of breath, fright at the sound of a snapping branch—are a small price to pay for what awaits you at this century-old sheepherder's hut.

Set in the backcountry outside the French village of Le Miroir, Le Crot Alpage is open to guests staying at one of two chalets operated by the extreme luxury adventure company Eleven. The chalets' guides, gourmet chefs, and other staff cater to visitors who, in winter, can ski at nearby resorts like Val d'Isère and Tignes. Summers mean electric mountain biking, canyoneering, river rafting, and hiking through the Tarentaise Valley and beyond.

No matter the season, a dinner at the *alpage*—about 45 minutes by foot, snowshoe, or ski from the chalets—is in

order. Entering the hut (which has no electricity), guests will likely find a crackling blaze in the fireplace and a smaller flame smoldering beneath a fondue pot. This being France, the cheese is fresh from a farmer who lives just down the road and is paired with precisely the right local wine.

The evening will include surprises (parlor games, a costume party perhaps) and a progressive dining experience that involves descending into a candlelit cellar for a multicourse feast courtesy of Chef Philippe Paillargue. In an impressive display of strength and efficiency, Paillargue makes the trek to the hut a few hours in advance of the group, hauling all the evening's ingredients on his back.

One thing Chef Paillargue does not carry, but will inevitably coax you to sample, is the hut's resident jeroboam of *génépi*. A local staple, the herbal liqueur is sure to warm you up for the long walk back to your chalet. elevenexperience.com →

