

Unsung South Africa

Venture past Cape Town, the Wine Route, and Kruger's famed Big Five, and you'll find a vast country little-visited. Discover pioneering rewilding projects bringing new life to the interior and innovative entrepreneurs transforming the townships — this is the South Africa you don't know, but one that's slowly beginning to reveal itself

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The alternative safari

The green Kalahari

The little-visited Northern Cape claims a uniquely verdant swathe of the Kalahari. Welcome to South Africa’s largest private game reserve, Tswalu Kalahari, home to thrilling chases and pioneering conservation efforts

“The wild dogs are on the move!” Our guide Kosie puts down the radio and hurries towards the den where we find five three-week-old pups abandoned. The alpha female, their mother, had tried to tuck them safely away several times, but the tiny youngsters just wouldn’t stay put. Eventually, the inexperienced mother gave up and left them. Crossing our fingers for the puppies, we set off again to find her and her pack doing what wild dogs do best: hunting.

This is the Kalahari, a 360,000sq mile desert that sprawls across Botswana and Namibia. The southern section spills into South Africa’s Northern Cape, a semi-arid region that receives just enough rain to avoid being classified a desert. Instead it goes by the local name of the ‘green Kalahari’. It’s home to the largest private game reserve in the country: Tswalu Kalahari, my 440sq-mile base for the trip. It’s a long way from anywhere, but that’s why it’s so special. It’s evening and everything is golden. The rust-orange sand flashes past the windows of our car, the sinking sun burnishing the pale, bleached grass. We find the dogs trotting through the savannah, bushy white tails wagging. Among them is the new mother, lactating as she runs; it seems she’s forgotten her pups for now. The leading dog spots a warthog and sprints after it, the others in hot pursuit. In most safari destinations, when

wild dogs vanish into the bush, vehicles don’t stand a chance of following. But here, the open plains allow us to hurtle alongside the animals — a hair-raising, wildlife documentary-style perspective. The warthog eludes the dogs by backing down an aardvark burrow, its sharp tusks preventing the hungry canines from following. Then the dogs are off again, a young wildebeest in their sights. Kosie swerves around deep burrows and hardy shrubs, careful to keep a safe distance from the pack. The wildebeest calf manages to leg it back into the protection of its herd. The adults turn to stare down the pursuers, who pause, unsure, before deciding against a confrontation and moving on. Finally, as the sun sets and the sky turns a dusky pink, we lose the dogs; they disappear over a sand dune hanging off the back of a doomed red hartebeest. But we’re elated — some of us possibly more so having avoided seeing the hartebeest’s gory end. Zooming around the bush is thrilling enough, but Tswalu Kalahari isn’t just a place where you hunt with wild dogs. During my stay I find a pride of powerful, black-maned Kalahari lions — a rich reward to a chilly winter’s morning spent tracking. I also sit with the meerkats, the region’s rock stars, in one of two habituated colonies; spot the extraordinarily rare pangolin; and admire the athletic elegance of a cheetah. But Tswalu Kalahari is so much more than just

a luxury safari reserve — it’s an also area of impression conservation credentials. South African billionaire philanthropist Nicky Oppenheimer took over a hunting concession in 1998 to create the reserve. His aim was to restore the southern Kalahari; the name ‘Tswalu’ means ‘a new beginning’ in Tswana. Also passionate about scientific discovery, the Oppenheimers invite researchers to track the impact of climate change on aardvarks and ground pangolins, and to study the reserve’s impressive 75 species of butterflies (the whole of Britain has 59). In 2008, the Tswalu Foundation was set up by Nicky’s son, Jonathan, to fund such conservation projects. It also runs a local school and clinic, along with the Tracker Academy, a programme for Khomani San (bushmen), and other Northern Cape communities, to train as trackers and ambassadors for wildlife conservation. The southern Kalahari provides a different experience to so many reserves and parks in South Africa where the Big Five practically throw themselves at you. You have to work for it here, spending time tracking the animals through the wilderness. It’s a slow style of safari that encourages visitors to understand this fascinating ecosystem and the challenges of conservation. And when, or if, you do get those exhilarating wildlife experiences — like a heart-pumping wild dog hunt — it’s infinitely more rewarding. tswalu.com **HR**

IMAGES: GETTY



PREVIOUS PAGES: Eagle Rock Lookout, Samara Karoo
CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Quiver trees, Northern Cape; wild dogs standing on a termite mound, Kalahari Desert; dining at Tswalu Kalahari; cheetah, Kalahari Desert

The outback experience

Into the Karoo

Thanks to rewilding, this great inland desert is once again roamed by lions, but follow the Karoo’s gravel roads to find a scattering of atmospheric Dutch settler towns where culture and frontier country colourfully converge

It’s clear the two young lions are itching to leave. Over the past couple of weeks, they’ve started pacing the boundary of the *boma* (enclosure). They’ve had no food for four days. So, when the gate is opened and the carcass of a gemsbok — a large antelope — is left temptingly outside, we’re ready, cameras poised.

We wait. And wait. The anticipation of earlier now somewhat flat, we drive to the *boma* to investigate. True to form, the lions are sound asleep under their favourite bush. Around 14 hours later, just as we finish dinner, we hear they’ve finally moved. We race back to the *boma* and there they are, gorging on the gemsbok: the first free-roaming lions in this part of the Great Karoo for 180 years.

A vast, semi-arid region that covers around 40% of South Africa, the Karoo is little known outside the country. Divided into the Great and the southern Little Karoo, thriving herds of elephant, hippo, rhino and the now-extinct Cape lion once roamed these unforgiving plains. But colonists’ rampant hunting eradicated most of the wildlife and farmland fences put an end to the little-understood springbok migration.

Aiming to restore what was lost, Samara Karoo is a 70,000-acre private reserve, about an eight-hour drive east of Cape Town. With the lions’ reintroduction, Samara is now the Great Karoo’s only Big Five conservancy, part of a rewilding project by South African-British owners, the Tompkins family.

The wealth of wildlife encountered on these expansive plains is surprising. On foot, we spend time with a cheetah called Chilli and her five fluffy cubs, and a curious white rhino, who wanders over to get a better look at us. There are flocks of blue cranes, South Africa’s national bird, herds of wildebeest, white-faced blesbok (another type of

antelope), springbok and Cape mountain zebras. And we spot the elephants — reintroduced in 2017 — roaming the forested lower slopes of the mountain.

It’s wild safari territory but the Karoo’s arid expanses aren’t just Big Five terrain. Driving west, I arrive in Prince Albert at the foot of the Swartberg Mountains. With one central main street of Cape Dutch buildings, fringed by eucalyptus trees, the tiny town has become something of a cultural hub. There are cooking schools, yoga centres, the eclectic Fransie Pienaar Museum, and galleries showcasing local artists.

My guesthouse, Prince Albert Country Stay, is attached to an antique store. Two floor-to-ceiling bookshelves line my bedroom walls, with the antique bed frame and artworks available to purchase.

From there, I drive cautiously over the Swartberg Pass. An incredible feat of late 19th-century engineering, this series of narrow, blind switchbacks is one of the country’s most dramatic drives. On the other side, I emerge into the Little Karoo, a much greener land. I turn onto a long dusty, dirt road lined by little farms, further coating my car in a thick layer of peachy dust, and eventually join scenic Route 62 that leads to Cape Town via rolling hills of vines. En route, I stop at Ronnie’s Sex Shop. Originally a fruit and veg store, the bar was renamed as a prank, Ronnie embraced his new identity, hanging donated bras from the ceiling.

There’s something captivating about the Karoo — the space, the isolation, the starkness. Speaking to people along the way, I find a sense of escapism, too. Many move here for a fresh start, to pursue dreams or forget broken ones. From serious rewilding projects to bonkers back-country bars, it’s a place of possibility. samara.co.za princealbertcountrystay.com **HR**



FROM LEFT: Samara Karoo drive; fish dish, Wolfgat, Paternoster

The wild weekend break

Forget the Garden Route. Do as the Capetonians do and explore Paternoster and the West Coast National Park

Where
A 90-minute drive from Cape Town, the West Coast is a local favourite for a restorative weekend away.

What to do
Hike or bike trails through *fynbos* (shrubby heathland), or visit the icy waters of Langebaan Lagoon for kayaking and sailing. West Coast National Park is great for spring wildflowers (go between August and September when the blooms are at their peak) while southern right whales cruise the coast (August–November). In Paternoster, a sleepy fishing village, it’s all about unwinding with good food, good wine and reviving beach walks.

Where to eat
Wolfgat is one of South Africa’s best restaurants where chef Kobus van der Merwe’s menus celebrate ingredients foraged in Paternoster’s *Strandveld* (beach vegetation). Start with a flute of MCC fizz, then savour *tjokka* (calamari) with wild garlic marsala and *slangbessies*

(wild berry); West Coast oysters with kelp and dune celery; Strandveld lamb with succulent *brakvygie* leaves and nectarines with smoking wild sage. Garth Almazan’s new Leeto also serves a West Coast-inspired menu, while Noisy Oyster and Voorstrandt are two other popular dining spots. wolfgat.co.za

Where to stay
West Coast National Park’s dark skies allow for excellent stargazing from the six-bedroom Abrahamskraal Cottage. In Paternoster, fishing cottages double as boutique guesthouses. Sugar Shack is minutes from the beach while the four-room Oystercatchers’ Haven overlooks the shore just outside town. Central Abalone Hotel & Spa houses eclectic art and decor; next door, Gilcrest Place offers three comfortable, marine-influenced suites, two with sea views. sanparks.org sugarshackcollection.com oystercatchershaven.com abalonehouse.co.za gilcrestplace.com **HR**

