

LUXURY GOODS



Creature comforts

I was in the middle of planning a trip to the Western Cape wine-lands of South Africa when I ran into my friend and neighbour Will Jones. As the owner of a highly successful tour operator specialising in bespoke trips to Africa, it turned out that he, too, was off to South Africa, to check out some lodges and hotels, and to enjoy a few days' safari. We had a eureka moment and decided to travel together. Will is rather rugged and outdoorsy and, although I like to think that I'm as hard as nails, my nearest and dearest know that I couldn't be less so. I must therefore admit that I'm squeamish in the extreme, and one of the reasons I've never been on safari before is that I have an overwhelming dislike of bugs, creepy-crawlies, mites that bite and things with wings that sting. I won't sleep outdoors, I can't survive without hot and cold running water, and a mini-bar is mandatory. Oh, and a cup of Earl Grey with my wake-up call, please. 'Fret not, old chum,' said Will. 'It will be luxury all the way, and I promise I'll check your bath regularly for spiders.' What a gent.

And he wasn't kidding — Bushman's Kloof in the Cederbergs was my cup of tea all right. An oasis of manicured lawns, infinity pools and whitewashed thatched lodges and cottages in the heart of a barren, wind-sculpted landscape of sandstone rock, the place does luxury with a capital 'L'. My suite was larger than my home and boasted its own private swimming-pool.

I immediately treated myself to a terrific massage at the swanky spa. The masseuse

Jonathan Ray goes on a safari tailor-made for softies

gave me a sound pummelling, and in my all-time massage league table I placed it second only to the epic I had at Spa Caudalie in Bordeaux, where I was smeared all over, *all over*, in warm honey by a Carole Bouquet lookalike and then wrapped in clingfilm. I know, I can still scarcely believe it myself. Remind me to tell you about it sometime.

As medical officer on our trip, I prescribed the same treatment for Will, and after dining under the stars like kings (with a seven-course dinner) we both slept like babies. This was just as well, as we were woken at 6 a.m. (with a cup of Earl Grey) by one of the guides for a short trek across the desolate terrain to view some ancient rock art before it got too hot. Painted on overhanging cliffs and outcrops by San Bushmen during the Stone Age, these simple paintings of hunters, elephants, antelope and mythical animals are exquisitely executed in yellow ochre, blood and eggshell. It's astonishing how they've survived. They are so primitive that they look modern and are a remarkable reminder of South Africa's earliest inhabitants. It was well worth the early start.

A day of idleness followed, spent simply enjoying the emptiness and the silence while

not holding back on the food and drink. We signed up for the stargazing after dinner, but to be quite frank I found it hard to focus after our third bottle and gave up, leaving Will to it. 'But look at all these pretty little shooting stars,' he slurred dreamily. Bless him. I later learnt that they escorted him back to his suite after he became convinced that Orion's Belt was moving en masse across the heavens.

Next day we headed back to Cape Town and took a flight to the tiny airport of Nelspruit. We were off to the Kruger National Park — some 20,000 square kilometres of pristine Africa — and, as instructed, I had already nervously taken my anti-malaria tablet. Will started winding me up about the dangers of the tsetse fly and, as if this wasn't enough to get me anxious, the size of our next plane was. A go-kart on wheels, it somehow stayed aloft long enough to get us to the tiny grass strip that passes for an airfield deep in the scrub of the Kruger. We were then officially on safari. During our half-hour drive to Singita Sweni Lodge we saw giraffe, zebra, impala, wildebeest and countless gorgeously plumed birds. It was amazing. Will and Leonard, our driver, spotted the creatures long before I did and I became quite annoyed at having to have things pointed out to me. At one point, they both courteously looked away as an impala strolled in front of the car, allowing me to holler with delight.

We arrived at Singita Sweni Lodge to be greeted by a sign at the entrance warning of poisonous snakes and malaria. Gulp. The

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energy expert, whose name I can't quite catch but who will play a key role in my rejuvenation, arrives to escort me to the rejuvenation chamber. I shuffle after him in my white robe and a pair of paper flip-flops that are quite difficult to walk in, past huge plate-glass windows beyond which Sunday-morning Spitalfields is swarming with strung-out crowds. Immortality, here I come.

The chamber is Hammer Horror red and like the changing area it has low ceilings. I lower myself into one of three black leather *Mastermind*-style chairs. The other two are occupied: an expectant-looking man in one, his white-robed wife in the other. Seated opposite all three of us, flanked by flickering tea lights, is Matt, our black-silk-suited 'life consultant', who reminds me of the magician David Copperfield. He will provide a running commentary on the session, and let us in on some of the ancient Chinese secrets of rejuvenation. I half expect to be presented with a vial containing the elixir of life, but instead there is a choice of three rejuvenating teas — jasmine, to detox; chrysanthemum for calm; rose for inner beauty. I could do with all three but opt for jasmine. On a small side table sits a rejuvenating meal of strawberries, mango and succulent black grapes.

Matt gives a brief introduction. In 2003, it seems, the Energy Clinic was given an

award by *Vogue* magazine for the best massage in the world. Wow! Not content with this accolade, though, it has been striving ever since to come up with something even better, and the rejuvenation session that we are about to enjoy is the result. Drawing on the theories of TCM, it is designed to boost life energy (qi).

On cue, our trio of personal energy experts files in. These young, vital, qi-boosting men and women with middle or northern European accents exude health and wellbeing. They invite us to move on to the small black leather footstool opposite each of our chairs before taking up their positions behind us for the 'meridian treatment', which involves tapping our spines firmly with long-handled wooden Chinese hammers, up and down and across the shoulders, as though we were glockenspiels. The three are perfectly synchronised, which apparently creates a powerful energy field. These are not, we are told, indiscriminate blows but precisely calibrated to stimulate our energy points and release blockages.

Matt compares us to cars, a disappointingly mundane analogy. Energy is our fuel, he says. We need to keep it topped up to maintain efficient functioning. The image of a clapped-out Ford Cortina spluttering up the M1 floats into my mind. By now,

the hammering seems to have been going on for quite a while and my back is beginning to ache. My expert did ask me to let him know if it got uncomfortable but, mesmerised by the master of ceremonies' low, accented tones, I can't summon up the energy to speak. The drummers turn their collective attention to our lower bodies as Matt gives us a crash course in the principles of Chinese medicine. It's quite hard to concentrate on what he's saying. The hammers beat a relentless path to the soles of the feet, prompting a lesson in the basics of reflexology. 'Your whole body is contained in your foot,' Matt explains.

At last the drumming stops. My energy expert slips on a pair of latex gloves and embarks on a foot and lower leg massage using a special Chinese red-flower oil designed to boost the circulation. This bit could go on for ever, for all I care, but all too soon it's over.

I can't believe we're only halfway through; I feel as though we've been here for hours. I don't know if it's because it was such a welcome respite from the hammers, but the massage was glorious and I'm ready to surrender myself completely to the black leather chair, to Matt's broken English and to the slightly suffocating hot towel that has been draped over my face to prepare the way for a Tibetan herbal facial mask containing 20 rejuvenating herbs. Now that I'm enjoying myself so much, time starts to speed up and the rest of the treatment zips by in a deeply pleasurable blur. As the rigid muscles of my upper body soften under my expert's skilled fingers, the disembodied voice becomes slower and more hypnotic. 'Your energy expert is here to make you feel safe and relaxed,' it says. And I do.

It is with great reluctance, then, that I heave myself out of the leather chair at the end of the session and bid farewell to this Feng Shui'd haven. And as I elbow my way through the bustle of grey, rainy E1, hanging on for dear life to my newly found sense of tranquillity, I ask myself whether I'm worth it: would I again shell out nearly 200 quid for 90 minutes' worth of undivided pampering? There is a touch of the Stepfords about the preternaturally calm staff of the Energy Clinic, and, as they explain to you on your way out that the true benefits come only with repeated treatments, you sense that not far beneath the veneer of concern for your wellbeing is a ruthless selling machine. But I'd go along with Dawn, one of my fellow-rejuvenatees and a veteran of luxury spas, who said to me enthusiastically as we were getting dressed afterwards, 'Well, I've never experienced anything quite like *that*.' And, let's face it, it's not everywhere you get the best massage in the world.

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