

AFRICA

SIT BACK
AND RELAX

Guests picnic
on the dunes,
below; Motse
lodge, below



The Kalahari shows how to up your game

Brian Jackman salutes the great progress being made in the Tswalu Reserve in South Africa, where ever more space is being freed up for wildlife

He was an old lion past his prime with a dove-grey coat and a broken canine tooth, but he was still an impressive beast, his grizzled features framed by a lustrous black mane that fell like a rug around his shoulders. All day we had followed the tracks he and his brother had left in the red sands of South Africa's Tswalu Kalahari Reserve, each four-toed pad as wide as my outstretched hand. Now he lay in all his majesty, just a few yards in front of us, staring into the thorny thickets where his brother had just departed after an extraordinary demonstration of mutual grooming and affectionate head rubbing.

This was my reward for a masterclass in the arcane skills of bushcraft, demonstrated by Rudi Venter, my safari guide, and Ari

Leeow, his tracker. In the Kalahari you have to work hard for your lions, but the experience is worth every spiningling second. For hour after hour, perched on the bonnet of our four-wheel-drive Land Cruiser, Ari had picked out the lion's unmistakable spoor as we drove through the bush.

"He's following what we call the silver line," said Venter as we had



drawn closer. "That's when a tracker can almost think his way into the mind of the animal he's following, anticipating its every twist and turn." Then, having found him, the lion began to roar. On and on he went, each rhythmic deep-throated bellow reverberating among the surrounding hills and out into the deep emptiness of the Kalahari until at last his brother responded, like the echo of his own voice returning.

Everyone who comes to Tswalu wants to see the famous black-maned lions of the Kalahari, but this is not a Big Five reserve. True, there are Cape buffalo and rare desert-adapted black rhino hidden deep in the tangled seas of thornveld; but the real attraction is the heady sense of freedom engendered by a wilderness twice the size of Norfolk.

Tswalu began life as a hunting preserve owned by Stephen Boler, a Lancastrian entrepreneur who made his fortune selling cut-price car tyres in the Seventies. In 1995 he bought up 35 clapped-out farms in the southern Kalahari and turned them into his own vast private fiefdom. When Boler died three years later the ownership passed to Nicky Oppenheimer, the former chairman of De Beers and a lifelong conservationist filled with a burning desire to re-create a place where people could re-connect with nature in a malaria-free environment. Within a month he had put an end to hunting and begun the colossal task of re-wilding the Kalahari, introducing breeding programmes for rare antelopes such as roan and sable, reversing decades of overgrazing and providing a haven for cheetahs and other predators.

Since then, more farms have been acquired and returned to the wild, sweeping away fences and buildings to enlarge what was already the biggest private wildlife reserve in South Africa with the lofty summits of the Korannaberg running through it from end to end.

Oppenheimer is also a great believer in the importance of ecotourism. "Without it, cheetahs, lions, black rhinos – all of Africa's emblematic animals will disappear," he says, hence the presence of two luxury lodges; the Motse, which can accommodate up to 20 guests, and the smaller Tarkuni. Both are five-star oases of food and comfort with blissful outdoor pools and the most sweet-

natured staff you'll find anywhere. But the real luxury of staying here is having your own exclusive vehicle, guide and tracker to explore one of the world's last wild places with nobody else in sight.

Besides its famous Kalahari lions, Tswalu's checklist of mammals includes giraffe, two species of zebra and a whole bestiary of antelopes such as eland, kudu and drought-proof gemsbok with swishing tails and black-and-white tribal masks. Yet what most visitors want to see are the smaller animals that are hard to find elsewhere: armadillos, meerkats, caracals and pangolins.

To these can be added more than 240 kinds of birds including standout species such as the crimson-breasted bush shrike and pygmy falcons – fierce raptors no bigger than a thrush that make their nests in the haystack citadels of sociable weavers. It was still dark when we set out each morning under a vast dome of stars. The night air echoed to the chatter of barking geckos and the keening cries of black-backed jackals, and as the sky grew lighter in the east we spotted an armadillo trundling home through the gum grass to its burrow. Then we watched the dawn come up and sensed the earth rolling in space to face the rising sun.

These endless thirlands are part of the greater Kalahari that covers an area 10 times the size of Britain. Racked by ice-cold winter dawns and summer days of furnace heat, it is one of the harshest places on earth. Yet it can also be unimaginably beautiful, especially after the rains when the sandveld becomes a sea of greenery in which gnarled camelthorns and shepherd's trees cast welcome pools of shade for the wandering gemsbok and wildebeest herds.

By chance I had arrived after a year's rain had fallen in a week, bringing about a miraculous transformation. Overnight Tswalu had



SHY CAT
Lions, main, can be tricky to find in the Kalahari, but smaller animals, such as meerkats, left, draw crowds; Tswalu at sunset, below



become an emerald desert, lit with the crimson flowers of poison bulb lilies. Rainwater pools still lay across the game trails and flurries of brown-veined white butterflies flew up at every step. We drove for miles across the dunes where the land rose and fell like an ocean swell, and every time we climbed a crest a fresh sight awaited us in the valley below. Black-as-midnight sable bulls rose from the grass to stare at us as we passed by. Red hartebeest bounced away with their jaunty rocking-

horse gait, and large herds of eland – the shyest of all antelopes – cantered off into the dissolving distance.

On we travelled for hour after hour, following sandy roads that unfurled like red ribbons across a landscape so indescribably wild and lovely that I wanted it to go on forever, until at last we came to a vast amphitheatre of verdant thornveld surrounded by the Korannaberg massif whose bare knuckles stood out sharply against a sky of burning blue.

Evidence of rhinos was everywhere in the form of fresh middens and footprints the size of dinner plates, but the animals themselves kept a low

