



Bush flights can zip you to your next camp, though travelling by car comes highly recommended



ley (mostly using the dry riverbed as our road) with Boetie in search of elusive desert elephants.

Though as elusive as the elephants are reputed to be, it was only an hour into our game drive when we found them: first a solo bull and then a mother with her offspring. They didn't seem the slightest bit skittish. Indeed, the bull let it be known we were on his turf with a false charge. The rather more relaxed mother sidled up within inches of our vehicle.

SKELETON COAST

Ditching my hired car for a couple of nights, the next stop on my itinerary was Hoanib Skeleton Coast Camp, accessible by 45-minute bush flight over an expanse of desert where hardly a bush can be seen.

As formidably named as it was, the Skeleton Coast was a serene and gentle place to be – at least while in the shade and in the company of competent guides.

The camp was a stylish canvas paradise of haute design set within one of the world's most desolate and pristine wildernesses. Less than two years in operation, this fully solar powered joint venture between public and private enterprise is the very model for cutting edge, and sustain-

able, luxury.

The highlights and memories from this leg of my trip were many. My guides were ace at tracking down and identifying wildlife – including elephants, giraffes, and even weeks old lion cubs.

Off-roading up, down and across giant sand dunes was an absolute blast. Checking out shipwrecks and colonies of seals at Mowe Bay had me connected with the wonder-seeking little boy I once was.

SOSSUSVLEI

Last stop on my tour was Sossusvlei. With its giant sand dunes (the world's highest in fact), Sossusvlei was not just the ultimate destination of my itinerary but also the ultimate choice for any desert break. Although the area didn't teem with nearly as much big game as other parts of the county, the desert expanses were a landscape photographer's dream.

I stayed at Little Kulala, an otherworldly and eco-sensitive luxury lodge. During the day Little Kulala looked to be the very definition of a desert outpost. By night, it was a fairyland cluster of twinkling lights melding as much with the sparkling firmament above as with the sandy terra firma below.

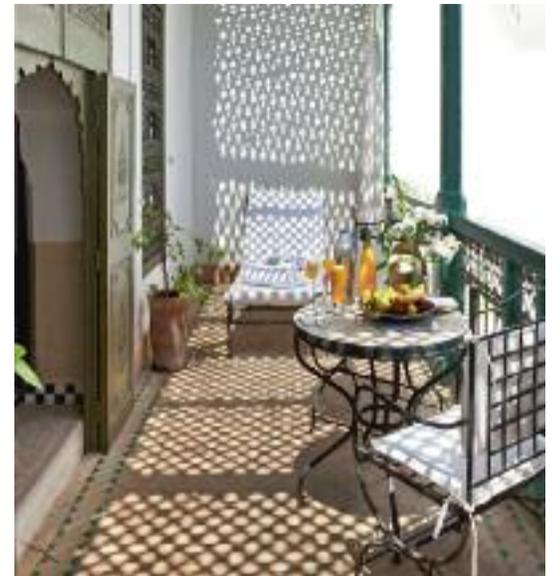
My thatched roof kulala (a traditional, if modified for upscale comfort, Namibian house) featured a rooftop skybed for stargazing, a private plunge pool, indoor/outdoor shower and gorgeous unobstructed views of the desert, which seemed to change in colour every other time I looked at it.

My guide took pride in sharing his love and knowledge of the area with me and the other tourists I had tagged along with in his Land Cruiser, pointing out animals – including newborn Cape foxes and a slithering sidewinder – and unique geographic formations.

The long and achingly scenic drive from the north of Namibia along the coast and down to Sossusvlei as well as the relatively short jaunt from Little Kulala to Hosea Kutako International Airport in Windhoek was a fitting way to end my trip, serving as memorable chances to whisk through some of the most stunning stretches of countryside I have ever seen.



Mowe Bay houses many a ghostly shipwreck



RIAD FARNATCHI MARRAKECH, MOROCCO

Alex Dudok de Wit loses himself in Marrakech's maze-like medina district

THE WEEKEND: Even Google Maps struggles to chart the spaghetti-like network of alleys that make up Marrakech's medieval town, the medina. Losing yourself in them is an infinite pleasure: one minute, you're navigating between fragrant food stalls, one of the world's busiest squares; the next, you stumble into the cool cloisters of an old Islamic school. If you find your way out, the shimmering Sahara sands and snow-capped peaks of the High Atlas beckon.

THE HOTEL: Tucked behind an anonymous black door in the heart of the city, Riad Farnatchi is above all a topographical marvel. As I wander through its interlinked courtyards, I wonder at how those winding alleys of the medina can conceal so much space. Historically, riads were built to ensure the comfort and privacy of the merchants and courtiers who inhabited them. These benefits are passed on to the guests at Farnatchi: our suite, spacious and serenely quiet, opens onto a private terrace that looks down on the shaded central courtyard. We take our breakfast here every morning, with only the occasional call of the muezzin in the distance to remind us of the world beyond.

ASK ABOUT: Simply exploring the medina is the defining experience of Marrakech: a delightful combination of cultural discovery and logic puzzle. Once you have your bearings, pay a visit to the Ben Youssef Madrasa, a splendid 16th-century Koranic school, and the Maison de la Photographie, an excellent gallery of evocative images from the city's past. (Both are conveniently situated an olive stone's throw from Riad

Farnatchi.) Then empty your wallet in the souks, where traders hawk everything from spices to slippers. When you're tired out, head back to the riad for a hammam treatment in the brand new spa.

TOP TIP
Remember that local custom means alcohol is difficult to find outside of hotels and upmarket restaurants

AND AFTER THAT? Look out from the roofs of the medina and you'll see the High Atlas mountains standing astride the horizon like proud sentinels. Intrepid trekkers can get lost in them for weeks, but a day trip at least is recommended. We went with Nouri, who guided us through forests and sleepy hamlets while regaling us with anecdotes of his karaoke skills. Every time we paused for breath, I was struck anew by the beauty of the landscape: icy peaks gave way to cedar-studded slopes, which gradually shaded into verdant foothills where Berber shepherds grazed their flocks.

THE FOOD: Presented with a decent choice of eateries in our area, we plumped for Le Foundouk, a classy establishment with a mixed menu of European and Moroccan dishes. My lamb tagine with prunes was delectable. For a cheaper and more convivial meal, head to the food stalls of the bustling Jemaa el Fna square, which offer tasty variations on the theme of stewed and grilled meats.

NEED TO KNOW: Riad Farnatchi has ten luxury suites starting at £225. During spring, there's an offer of four nights for £515, as well as a 10 per cent spa discount. Book at riadfarnatchi.com or call +212 5 24 38 49 10. BA flies daily from Gatwick to Marrakech, starting at £110 return. Book at ba.com/marrakech or call 0844 493 0787