

INTRODUCTION

Desert escapes



I feel at home in the natural world but will always lean towards extreme landscapes, those places where nature makes you sit up and notice and that feel just a little bit more intense. And so I prefer my sand in a raw red desert than on a pristine white beach. A sunny beach is eager to please, but the desert challenges you to take it on. It's a forbidding landscape but one that is sublime in its solitude, starry skies, stillness and space.

My first taste of the desert was intoxicating. I was in Australia's Northern Territory where the hot air felt like a slap and the red earth looked like a firestorm. Having spent most of my life up until that moment on the northeast coast of Scotland, it was a sensation that felt utterly out of my then-small world. That sensation, and the desert, have tugged at me ever since.

The desert can be brutal, and without suitable shelter it will devour you. Building a shelter in an extreme landscape with limited resources is demanding, and yet, there's something about the challenge of a desert that inspires creativity. In the following pages you'll journey round deserts from the Gobi in Mongolia

to the Atacama in Chile and discover accommodation as diverse as the landscapes. Some take their cues from their cultural environment, such as terracotta domes inspired by the traditional homes of the indigenous Himba of Namibia. Others take their inspiration from the surrounding flora-the exterior of a contemporary cabin that utilises the design of a tough endemic plant, for example. Many are concerned with making as gentle a footprint on the earth as is possible-such as light-touch tented villas that can be removed without a trace. And then there are those that evoke nostalgia for the past or the hope for a bright future, from renovated mid-century Airstreams to glass pods that look as if they've just touched down on a new planet.

While these escapes are far from simply places to lay your head and each is worth the trip alone, all are in locations that demand to be explored. In each of the following escapes, curious travellers will find opportunities to forge a deeper connection with their surroundings, whether by camel trekking over dunes, observing desert-adapted wildlife, or simply watching the sun dip below a sandstone arch.



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AFRICA



ZANNIER

*Old-world opulence
in the middle of nowhere*

HOTELS SONOP

Namib Desert

Sonop Farm, Road D707, Hardap Region

Namibia

+264 81 125 4930

zannierhotels.com/sonop



Deserts don't get much more desolate than the Namib in southwestern Africa. Believed to be the world's oldest desert, it's been arid or semi-arid for 55 to 80 million years. Stretching some 1,200 miles (2,000 kilometres) along Namibia's Atlantic coast and home to the highest sand dunes and some of the driest regions in the world, the Namib takes its name from the Nama word for 'immense', and it's easy to understand why. The landscape here is like nowhere else on earth and Zannier Hotels Sonop, at the southern end of the Namib, puts you right in the heart of it, with little as far as the eye can see but wide, open space and perhaps some desert wildlife such as oryx, leopards, hyenas, meerkats and jackals.

Approaching Zannier Hotels Sonop (by chartered flight or 4x4 vehicle) can make you feel like an intrepid ex-

plorer landing upon an undiscovered land. Indeed that's the intention: the property, set within 13,800 acres (5,600 hectares) of private, unspoiled desert, was designed to resemble a 20th-century tented camp and it wistfully evokes a bygone era of exploration and derring-do.

Constructed on top of granite boulders, amid soaring sand dunes, the hotel's ten spacious tented suites are elevated above the rocky desert floor by wooden stilts and decks and are covered with canvases that seem to melt into their surroundings. Each suite has several roll-up canvas openings so you can enjoy the surrounding scenery from multiple angles, including your four-poster bed and vintage soaking bath. Furnished with antiques and colourful rugs, the decor convincingly evokes the early decades of the last

century but modern touches such as air conditioning, Wi-Fi and rain showers keep things comfortable.

Beyond the rooms, the outdoor infinity pool offers superb views over the desert. The pool deck turns into an open-air cinema after dark and, after the film, guided stargazing sessions reveal the mysteries of the night sky -you can extend the evening with a cocktail or two at the gentlemen's club-style Cocktail & Cigar Lounge. Dinners in the main tent's candelabra-lit dining area are communal and you have five courses over which to swap tales with your fellow adventurers. Of course true explorers rarely sit still, so venture beyond the property in one of Sonop's guided excursions, from hiking and horseback riding (the lodge has its own stables) to taking to the skies in a hot-air balloon.











DESERT WHISPER

*A place to embrace the solitude
of the Namib Desert sands*

Namib Desert

Gondwana Namib Park

Namibia	+264 61 427 200
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gondwana-collection.com



There's seclusion and then there's Desert Whisper, an intimate, one-of-a-kind desert hideaway for two. Resembling a spaceship that has touched down onto a rocky outcrop in one of the driest places on earth, this pod-shaped villa is one of just a handful of accommodation options in the private Gondwana Namib Park in the Namib Desert. Part of the sustainability-focused Gondwana Collection Namibia, it is perched above the desert sands in stark terrain about an hour's drive from Sossusvlei.

As otherworldly as Desert Whisper may appear, its eye-catching design was inspired by nature. Architect Sven Staby drew inspiration from the Namib's hardy endemic nara plant, which has a tough, leafless outer skin that can survive the

harsh desert climate. This quality is reflected in the hard, curved metal exterior of Desert Whisper, which protects the soft, smooth interior where natural colours, materials and shapes similarly reflect the surrounding environment. Views from the enormous floor-to-ceiling windows take in the golden expanse of the Namib all the way to the horizon, fringed by the Naukluft Mountains in the distance.

Designed as a luxuriously intimate desert escape, Desert Whisper can only be booked for two people. You and your partner have exclusive use of the open-plan kitchen, dining and lounge area and plunge pool, which are connected to the villa by a snaking wooden walkway. Meals are prepared in advance according to guests' preferences

and staff stay away as much as possible to ensure privacy (but are always within contact by radio). It's quite possible to spend days here encountering no other life but the passing oryx, jackal and ostrich, the only sound the soft whispers of the desert wind.

You could easily spend those days bouncing between the pool and terrace, refilling glasses of South African wines and gins from the fully stocked bar, but if you do feel like emerging from your desert hideaway, outdoor adventures abound. You can embark on a guided drive through the awe-inspiring Namib-Naukluft National Park, home to towering red sand dunes and the pans of Deadvlei and Sossusvlei, or rent an e-bike, grab a map and pedal your way towards the Naukluft Mountains.













