

By Gillian McLaren

!XAUS LODGE

Safari in a thirsty wilderness

Led by a San guide, Gillian McLaren explores the sun-baked dunes of the Kgalagadi Transfrontier Park, from the comfort of !Xaus Lodge





Photo by Peter Katzenberger



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We are holding onto our hats and the seats in front of us, as the 4x4 game-vehicle rollercoasters over the dunes. There are ninety Kgalagadi dunes to traverse, before we will get to !Xaus Lodge. Our guide is an expert by now and he accelerates hard before each rise and slows on the way down. The momentum, the pure air and the extraordinary beauty of the scenery exhilarate us. I am amused to notice there seems to be a Kori Bustard presiding over the area between each of the dunes.

As we crest one of the ochre-red dunes, I see a herd of Eland galloping away from us. It is an awe-inspiring sight and for a moment- as they are running on a slope-it looks exactly like a Bushman painting on the wall of a rock. Perhaps it is the vastness of the space, perhaps the late afternoon light, but I am transfixed by the timelessness of the moment.

The staff at !Xaus- who belong to either the local San or the Mier community-welcome us warmly and lead us to the front of the lodge for tea and cake. There are gasps and exclamations from all the guests, as we see that !Xaus is set high on a dune that overlooks a shimmering saltpan.

My husband, Grant, and I are delighted with our room, which has small touches in the theme of San people. I search to find these and discover, amongst others, a carving on our headboard, a framed painting and an imaginative mobile- constructed from bits of ostrich shell, sticks of the three-thorn bush and seeds. We collapse on the chairs on our private deck, gaze at the orange-hued saltpan and take pleasure in the silence.

A lion roars at full volume and we wake to hear the reverberations. I leap out of bed and grab my torch, in the hopes of spotting this lion, which must surely be right outside our room. It roars again and I beam my light into the dune scrub, but can't spot it. The saltpan has a mysterious luminescence from the moon's rays, but I don't linger, as I wonder if the lion can see me.

In the early morning we find the tracks of what must be a large male lion, at the back of our chalet. It is exciting but sobering. We resolve to sleep with our deck door fully closed that night. In anticipation of finding the famed Kalahari lion, with their black manes, we board the game vehicle. The tracks appear on the red sand of the road and we follow them, with mounting expectancy. I am amazed at how far this beast has walked, as the paw prints continue for kilometers. Our San guide, Grukke Thys, exclaims that the spoor of another male and a lioness have joined our male. Sadly for us, their tracks turn off the road



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Grukke Thys



and we may not follow off-road, as the biome is too sensitive and takes a long time to recover. We ask to dismount the vehicle, so we may examine the tracks and take photos.

Grukke drives us to a remote spot, far from the lion spoor, where we jump off the vehicle, eager to explore the dunes. It is fascinating to see the many kinds of fresh tracks on the sand, before they are swept away by the wind. Like detectives we unravel the stories of what happened the night before. Four-striped field mice have had some sort of gathering as their tracks converge on a spot between tufts of Broom Bush. "These mice must have been relaxed," says Grukke, "you can see their tail marks dragging in the sand. When they are under pressure, they raise their tails". Clearly the mice must have been active after the jackals- whose small dog-like prints cross the dune- or we may have seen anxious mice tracks. I am intrigued to be shown spoor of a giant scorpion, of dune beetles and a baby puffadder (whose venom is as toxic as that of the adult, I hear).

A lone Oryx stands stately and tall on the dune next to ours, its horns piercing the cloudless sky. It seems amazing to me that such an arid place sustains so much life. We walk in single file, in silence; absorbing the details that one misses from a vehicle. It is a thrill to be able to walk in this parched wilderness, to see treasures like a tiny upright yellow flower, called Pretty Lady, and the Acacia Mellifera that have begun to blossom and give off a pleasant, honey fragrance. In one of these



Photo by Peter Katzenberger

bushes I spot a delicate nest, constructed from love grass by a scaly-feathered finch. It is cleverly positioned between the thorns, for protection.

Grant and I stroll from !Xaus down to the salt pan and up a dune, to where a San dwelling has been reconstructed for artists to fashion traditional crafts. To make holes in Ostrich shells and to decorate sticks or roots, thin rods of iron are heated in a fire. These rods are laid with one end in the flames and the other end in wet sand, so they stay cool at the handling end. Simple, but effective! The San craftsmen are shy, but readily laugh as we interact with them. I am pleased to buy pretty earrings made of Camelthorn seeds, as a memento of our semi-desert safari and to support this community project.

For our sunset drive, we are taken to a red dune and led up the slope. To our surprise, as we summit, we find a table decked with an array of snacks and drinks. With a glass of iced wine-from Orange River Cellars- in my hand, I sit and watch the sun slip away till the sky is

perfused with pink. We are all silent, as we marvel at the splendour and silence of this remote area. For me, it is one of those rare moments when one experiences a deep joy and feels perfectly content.

A Cape Fox crosses the road, on our way back to the lodge. We spot an African Wild Cat, which is a disconcerting sight, as it strongly resembles a tabby cat with striped legs. A Spotted Eagle owl flies past us. Nightlife in the Kgalagadi has begun!

In the morning, after a dip in the icy swimming pool on the deck, we prepare to traverse the ninety red dunes, back to the Auob River Road, where our car is parked. Grant and I agree that !Xaus is a spectacular place to visit, for a unique and memorable Safari experience. **d**

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