



Life on earth

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LATER THAT DAY, after a truly inspiring time in this vast and glorious wilderness, I set out for Tswalu Kalahari, the Oppenheimer-family-owned reserve about 300km away, near the very small town of Vanzylsrus. I soon stopped to watch a huge Cape cobra, yellower than the one I saw earlier, crossing the road. Not many guests come by car; they are most often flown in from Johannesburg. The road was poor, potholed and sandy in places; my pick-up handled it well but still I arrived just before dark. The pick-up was taken away, ostensibly for a wash but perhaps because it was lowering the tone. This is a place of astonishing luxury and elegance, but it is run with great charm and efficiency. It is a member of Relais & Châteaux and no detail is neglected, from the hot towels on arrival to the binoculars and books in your own thatched house, which nods knowingly towards the vernacular architecture but with every possible luxury, including an indoor and outdoor hot shower, a private deck and a bed so huge you could sleep six without meeting any of the other occupants. A style has evolved in southern Africa of safari chic, which involves a fusion of African artefacts and art with very contemporary furniture, and nowhere I have seen does it as well as at Tswalu.

There is a large new swimming pool and a huge deck so that you can eat outside within sight of the waterhole, or inside the vast, cool atrium. There is also a spa and a gym. The first night we ate by lamplight in the boma, which is on such a grand scale that it looked as though it came from *Raiders of the Lost Ark*, and the food was astonishingly good. Two days passed in sublime contentment. One day I went horse riding. The stables, typically, are run by someone who really knows horses, Almeri Estsebeth, and the horses themselves are wonderful – responsive, lively and well-mannered.

Chaps are provided and – of course – hot towels. Drinks are secured on your saddle in a holster. Our ride took us close to buffalo, hartebeest, kudu and mountain zebra. I think it may have been the most interesting ride of my life.

Lunch one day was in a lookout, called Legkgaba in Tswana, a stone and thatched cottage really, with a panoramic view down to the plain below where zebra, giraffe and wildebeest were gathering to drink. Another day I went to visit Tarkuni, a thatched villa set under the Koranna Mountains with its own swimming pool and waterhole. It is wonderfully seductive and is taken in its entirety for family or friends, sleeping 10. The reserve, over 100,000 hectares, is divided by a public road; on one side there are lions and all the carnivores living naturally, but on the other lions have not been allowed, although there are cheetah, hyenas, leopard and rhinos on both sides. On the way back we entered this part of the reserve and at a waterhole we duly saw eight lions just waking for a night's hunting. Even in their repose, lions have a suggestion of raw power; oddly they never look directly at you as you watch them; if they do, it is probably time to move. Later, outside my house I saw a large herd of sable drinking at the waterhole and then lying down as if going to bed, perhaps confident that there were no serious predators about.

The chief guide, Dylan Smith, was knowledgeable and passionate, and the manager, Blessed Dlamini, was almost unnaturally helpful and cheerful. I think that this unobtrusive professionalism is the special quality of Tswalu; and while it is manifestly a wildly luxurious reserve run to the highest possible standards, it has also become a byword for conservation, backed by the resources of the Oppenheimer family.

