

Travel in Technicolor

virgin atlantic 

# vera

MARCH 2025



**OPERATOR**  
Michael Shannon's  
eternal cool

**SMOOTH**



**The best  
of what's  
onboard**

► **Desert rose**  
**NATURE  
REBORN IN  
SOUTH AFRICA**

► **Bowled over**  
**FINE DINING'S  
K-WAVE**



FOR  
CE





An aerial photograph of a green safari vehicle with an open top, driving along a dirt track in a vast, arid landscape. The ground is a deep, vibrant red-orange color, dotted with small, dark green shrubs and clumps of dry grass. The vehicle is positioned in the lower center of the frame, leaving a trail of tracks behind it. The overall scene conveys a sense of isolation and natural beauty.

# OF NATURE

**In South Africa's remote north-western corner, the Kalahari Desert blooms again thanks to a 50-year regeneration project that's seen the return of some of the continent's most endangered wildlife, finds Jessica Prupas**



## MOVING

## QUIETLY,

we make our way through the thicket, kicking up terra cotta-coloured dust with each cautious step. The bush's spindly, spiky branches scrape at my skin as we follow our guide in single file. Wordlessly, he motions at us to crouch and stay quiet as we reach a clearing. Soon I see why: just in front of us, partially obscured by more shrubbery, there is a pack of ravenous African wild dogs chowing down on a warthog carcass. If this – a rare sighting of one of the world's most endangered mammals – was the only sighting on today's game drive, I would have returned to our lodge happy. But soon we hear scampering feet to our left, and another half-dozen wild dogs loom into view. They stop just a few feet from us, ears alert, their Pollock-like spots illuminated by the golden sunrise.

"Welcome to the Kalahari," says our guide.

I'm at Tswalu, South Africa's largest private game reserve. Stretching 114,000 hectares over the country's wild north-western corner, this is the Kalahari Desert at its most untouched. Tswalu is a remarkable story of regeneration: 50 years ago, this was a patchwork of farms where the land looked drastically different to today. A black-and-white photo hanging in our lodge offers a mind-bending glimpse of Tswalu in the early 1970s – nearly barren, dotted sadly with a few scrubby bushes.

But the reserve's resident ecologist, Wendy Panaino, warns against easy narratives. "There are some stories about old farmland being degraded, and it's now being restored," she tells me after that day's game drive. "That's kind of subject to your opinions. In my opinion it gives the farming community a bad name, which is not what we want at all." She concedes that mistakes were made, but many farmers were doing their best with the information they had at the time. Still, she says, Tswalu has had major successes by taking a non-interventionist approach to conservation. "We haven't done a lot in the way of reintroducing vegetation, because nature does that for us. It's a completely intact system."

By mostly standing back and letting native flora regenerate, Panaino says they've created a "nice environment" for endangered animals to thrive. Here is where conservationists in Tswalu get a bit more hands-on: they've



*Clockwise from top left: Looking out over the Kalahari; a pack of wild dogs chases an antelope; on a game drive; Wendy Panaino at work*

reintroduced a whole gang of critically threatened species into their ecosystem – most famously pangolins, the scaly anteaters in which Panaino has her PhD, but also African wild dogs, desert black rhinos and cheetahs, all of which are now thriving in the semi-arid conditions of Tswalu. It's a remarkable success story that makes Tswalu a leading voice within the conservation sphere and an example to other reserves across Africa.

Our guide, Juan – a sunburnt, Afrikaans-speaking man with boundless enthusiasm and a garrulous tongue – describes the reserve's unique environment as a "desert with a twist". Trundling along the bumpy dirt roads on the next morning's game drive, I can see what he means: this isn't some lifeless expanse of sand – it is remarkably green. Great swathes of brandy bush and blue bush blur as we drive past, while giant camelthorns shade the animals from the gruelling sun. Juan calls these icons of Africa "mother trees" – they are the lifeblood of the desert, feeding and communicating with all other plant life via vast underground fungal networks. "Every single place in the world will have that thing that makes its heart beat. What makes this place's heart beat is the camelthorn tree."

Indeed, it's under a camelthorn tree that we see our first herd of lions later







that day. Our tracker, Sibongiseni (or Sibbo for short), spots some fresh markings and guides our Toyota Land Cruiser into the bush; an acrid smell tells us that the cats are close by and they've bagged themselves some breakfast. We stop so close I could reach my hand out and pet them, which Sibbo explicitly warns me against. They surround a mangled kudu carcass, its intestines deposited a few inches away and swarming with flies. The cats – all lionesses of varying ages, the males having long ago departed the herd – growl and bare their teeth as they jostle for the meatiest bits, pulling muscles and gristle from cavernous ribs and chewing greedily.

"There's no prize for second place in the Kalahari," is a refrain Juan frequently comes back to. There certainly were no prizes for that kudu, and any other predator or prey who fails to weather the Kalahari's punishing conditions. It's tough going out here: not a drop of rain falls for three quarters of the year, and competition for food is fierce. Those rare species of predators that have rebounded



## SOUTH AFRICAN SAFARI



thanks to Tswalu's conservation efforts are sometimes numerous enough to cause other problems.

"We started the Cheetah Project because cheetahs were eating us out of house and home," Panaino tells me, referring to a programme they launched to track and manage their cheetah population, led by expert Elizabeth Overton and facilitated by Nelson Mandela University. "We needed to figure out, 'How many cheetahs is sustainable for us?' We pride ourselves on having strong research focus and moving more into that place where research informs management.

*From top: A cheetah and her cub; running into a desert black rhino*

There's a strong research focus on the property."

On the next morning's drive, we pursue a pack of cheetahs through the reserve's far north-western corner, where rolling, dune-dotted plains scorch in the early morning sun. As the cats skulk deeper into the bush, we hop out of the vehicle and follow them on foot. For a moment, it seems as though we've lost them – until we round a corner, and there they are, mere feet away. My heart thumps as I watch these slender animals – whose sinewy bodies are built like spotted race cars – take a much-needed break from their (so far unsuccessful) hunt, panting heavily as they loll about on the patchy grass. Each one of the elegantly speckled cats sports a collar, indicating that their movements and behaviours are being tracked as part of the programme. Tswalu's cheetah and desert black rhino numbers have rebounded so well, the reserve has recently started

distributing some of their population to neighbouring reserves. "It's a huge feather in Tswalu's cap," Panaino says of this particular success. "And I'm not just saying that because I'm wearing the cap."

But the rarest encounter you'll have at Tswalu is with other people. In our three days at the reserve, we only encountered two other safari vans. This is by design: Tswalu's massive land and tightly controlled visitor numbers (a maximum of 40 adults can stay at the reserve at any given time) mean that you really do feel like you're out in some vast, untamed wilderness. Juan calls it "the closest

## CLOSE ENCOUNTERS

FOUR OF THE MOST ENDANGERED SPECIES YOU'LL FIND ON TSWALU



### PANGOLIN

One of the most trafficked mammals in the world, these scaly, insect-loving animals are highly prized in Chinese medicine. They are the subject of much of Tswalu's research, and have made a remarkable comeback on the reserve.



### AFRICAN WILD DOG

There are only around 6,600 of these canines left. Threatened by habitat fragmentation, which has put them into conflict with humans, they're thriving on Tswalu, with plenty of prey for them to hunt and the vast habitat they require.



### CHEETAH

Africa's cheetah population is in sharp decline due to drought and other climate change-related effects on their habitat. In recent years these fast cats – reaching speeds of up to 120km/h – have made the reserve their permanent home.



### DESERT BLACK RHINO

With only around 6,400 in their ranks, these critically endangered mammals have long been poached for their horns, which are used in traditional medicine and as a status symbol in Asia. On Tswalu, they are meticulously tracked and studied.