

Kalahari dreams

Tswalu reserve is a conservation effort that is giving the ravaged South Africa desert a fresh start



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NICKY Oppenheimer, the billionaire South African philanthropist and former chairman of De Beers, believes some things happen for a reason – including his acquisition of South Africa's largest private game reserve, Tswalu.

It happened like this, he says over the telephone from his office in Marshalltown, Johannesburg. He was holidaying at a private game reserve when he happened to meet the owner, Stephen Boler. They struck up a rapport, bonding over their mutual love of the Kalahari. That was the first and last time they met, as tragically, the British entrepreneur died of a heart attack soon after.

A month after Mr Boler's death, Mr Oppenheimer received a call from his trustee. Mr Boler had stated in his will that Mr Oppenheimer should be offered first refusal on Tswalu. "It was like fate. I had no concept that Tswalu would end up in our hands but I had no choice but to buy it," he says. "And it has been an unbelievable pleasure and satisfaction."

When he took on the reserve in 1998, Mr Oppenheimer changed it overnight from a hunting ground to a conservation area.

"What Stephen Boler created was absolutely extraordinary, but it was a reserve on one hand and shooting lodge on the other," says Mr Oppen-

heimer. "The whole thing now is for conservation. What we're attempting to do is recreate the Kalahari of yesteryear," he explains. "And it's been very successful. We've been lucky with having a number of years of good rain. Now if you come to Tswalu, you'll see the true Kalahari."

Since Mr Oppenheimer bought the property he has expanded it by more than 20,000 hectares to 110,000 hectares, making it the largest privately owned conservation area in South Africa. By tearing down farm buildings and fences, the region's unique biodiversity has been allowed to thrive. And it is not likely to stop there. "The Oppenheimer family suffers from a deadly disease we call 'rounding off the property,'" he jokes. "So we've added bits and pieces on the edge and no doubt we will continue to do so."

Tswalu means "new beginning" in the Tswana language of the Northern Cape. It's a fitting name for a project that has seen the ravaged Kalahari given a fresh start, now bursting with more than 70 species of mammal and more than 240 types of bird. Animals previously hunted out by stock farmers – leopards, hyenas and raptors – have moved back in, along with the rare desert black rhino, cheetah and the Kalahari lion.

The reserve is funded by two luxury accommodation offerings – The Motse and Tarkuni, sleeping a maximum of 28 adults. Rates start from around US\$950 a night, which include full board, private vehicle, guide and tracker, and walking or horseback safaris. There's an option to spend a night at the Malori Starbed, where you can sleep in safety under the light of the moon. "You don't come to Tswalu to see the 'big five', which you might be able to at another lodge in the north of South Africa," says the 71-year-old billionaire. "You come here to look at the immense horizons, insects and grass, and, at the end of

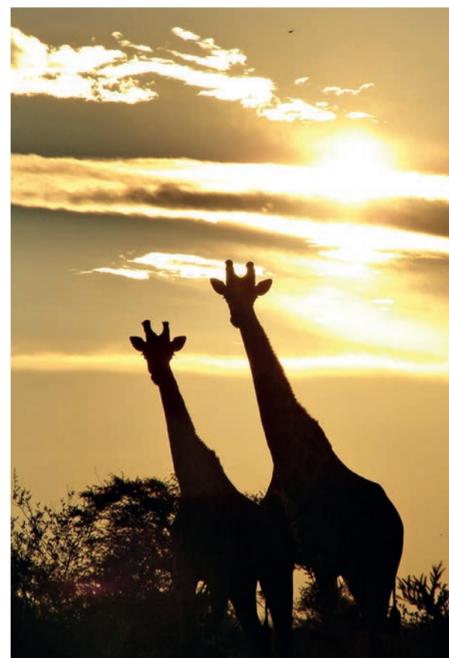


NEW BEGINNING

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ALL PHOTOS: TSWALU RESERVE



BIG AND BEAUTIFUL

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your time here, we hope you feel better in yourself. The Kalahari is a very special place, it's spiritual."

So large a project is not without its challenges. And not even the shrewdest human resources executive could solve the issue of poaching, which is troubling Mr Oppenheimer. He is not alone. Right now, environmental crime is one of Africa's biggest concerns. Changing the local attitude towards poaching will take many years, admits Mr Oppenheimer, and it may never be entirely eradicated. "Historically in South Africa, poaching was thought of as a right for farmers, not a crime."

The way to change this attitude is better education, says Mr Oppenheimer, and showing the local farmers that there is another way. "One hopes that our employees and the local farmers see what we're doing and buy into the concept of making money for the region by looking after the animals, rather than hunting them," he adds. Tswalu encourages its wealthy guests to donate money to local clinics and schools during their stay. "The revenue from tourism is what funds our ability to do what we do. We have to work continually on relationships with the farmers and explain that tourism will help everyone."

But throwing money at a problem will not help to solve it, he cautions. South Africa, he says, is suffering from donation fatigue. "Rich governments just giving money to Africa is not the most productive way of trying to help, because it creates an environment where those countries come to rely on that money, and to get the money they have to remain poor. If they are successful, they are not going to get it," he explains.

"What I've encouraged people to do is get involved in projects, and actually stay involved. All too often governments have given large sums of money, and they think they have absolved their conscience and they don't need to do anything else. And that's absolutely wrong."

But Mr Oppenheimer is a self-confessed optimist, and indeed *spero optima* is the family motto. "You go through bumpy patches but, at the end of the day, Africa is a place that will flourish." **W**

Visits to Tswalu can be arranged through travel partner A2A Safaris: www.a2asafaris.com

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