

50 South Africa

!Xaus Lodge



[STORY BY] Alexis Buxton-Collins

01 Floating in an endless sea of wave-like sandhills the colour of baked clay, close to where the borders of South Africa, Namibia and Botswana meet, !Xaus Lodge (xauslodge.co.za) is a long way from everywhere at Dune 91 off the Auob River Road in Kgalagadi Transfrontier Park.

From the closest airport at Upington, it's a three-hour drive to the park entry, followed by another 60 kilometres along a dry watercourse crowded with shaggy wildebeest, stately giraffes and half a dozen types of antelope seeking refuge from the parched landscape. Then a guide from the lodge takes the wheel for the last leg, an undulating 4WD track over 91 dunes – count them – that leads to 12 rammed-earth, thatched-roof chalets arranged democratically along a ridgeline so that each has a deck overlooking a vast salt pan and waterhole.

There's no phone coverage or daily newspaper here, each night's drama instead recorded in the maze of tracks scattered through the sand, where scorpions and lions prowl restlessly as their celestial counterparts track across a glittering night sky completely free of light pollution.

!Xaus (the exclamation mark represents one of four distinctive clicks in the Khoisan languages) is owned and majority staffed by the ǀKhomani San and Mier communities so there are plenty of chances to see the landscape through their eyes. Guides read the lines of dunes like a street map and give each animal a personality, from the sacred eland antelope to the “bush doctor” porcupine, while the on-site cultural village echoes with laughter as the resident family shares traditional stories, crafts and games.

Looking out at the endless ranks of dunes crowned with tufts of golden grass, guide Andre Valbooi smiles as he considers his relationship with land that doesn't just support life but defines a rich culture. “It is like we're married to the park,” he says. “And when you're with us, you get to meet the bride.”

London

The Standard

[STORY BY] Eliza Compton

02 The performer in the bar's DJ booth is resplendent in a scarlet sequined catsuit while her drag bingo co-host calls the numbers to the tune of *Baby One More Time*. Next door, the literati launch the next bestseller in The Library Lounge. Meanwhile, in the 10th-floor Mexican-Spanish fine-diner, Decimo, helmed by top chef Peter Sanchez-Iglesias, urbanites share woodfired leek and romesco, and Iberico pork. And above them all, The Rooftop terrace hosts tête-à-têtes over stewed chicken tacos with Rum Punch as the city's landmarks twinkle all around. It's a Tuesday night and The Standard, London (hotel.qantas.com.au/standard-london) is abuzz from top to bottom.

In the heart of King's Cross, the design-driven hotel group's first address outside the United States takes inspiration from its surroundings – think punk and politics – as well as its Los Angeles origins. With its exterior lift that looks like a red medicine capsule and its organic-futurist interiors, the property is as vivid as a Kubrick or Fellini film set.

None of it comes at the expense of comfort, though. The 266 rooms add texture, tech and calm to the former Camden Town Hall Annex's Brutalist curves. Whether you go with a cocoon-like Cosy Core room or splash out on a corner suite with a terrace or outside bathtub, all the rooms have silky linen, down pillows and bespoke Craig Green robes. Thoughtfully stocked mini-bars offer beers from Camden Town Brewery and views include the Gothic Revival façade of the St Pancras International train station over the road, a reminder that London and Europe are at your doorstep.

The staff are helpful, friendly and no question is too obscure – they'll offer local tips (don't skip cool shopping destination Coal Drops Yard), explain the phallic sculpture in Sweeties decadent cocktail bar on the 10th floor or try to find out why the cult tequila bottles behind the bar have a bell on top. Like the neighbourhood itself, the Standard, London is a little bit extra in the best possible way.