

HARPER'S

A giraffe stands in a grassy field, its long neck reaching towards the top of the frame. To its right, a woman with dark hair, wearing a white long-sleeved top and shorts, stands looking towards the camera. In the background, a large stone building with a tiled roof and many windows is visible under a blue sky with some clouds. The overall scene is set in a rural or safari-like environment.

JUNE 2002

ABROAD

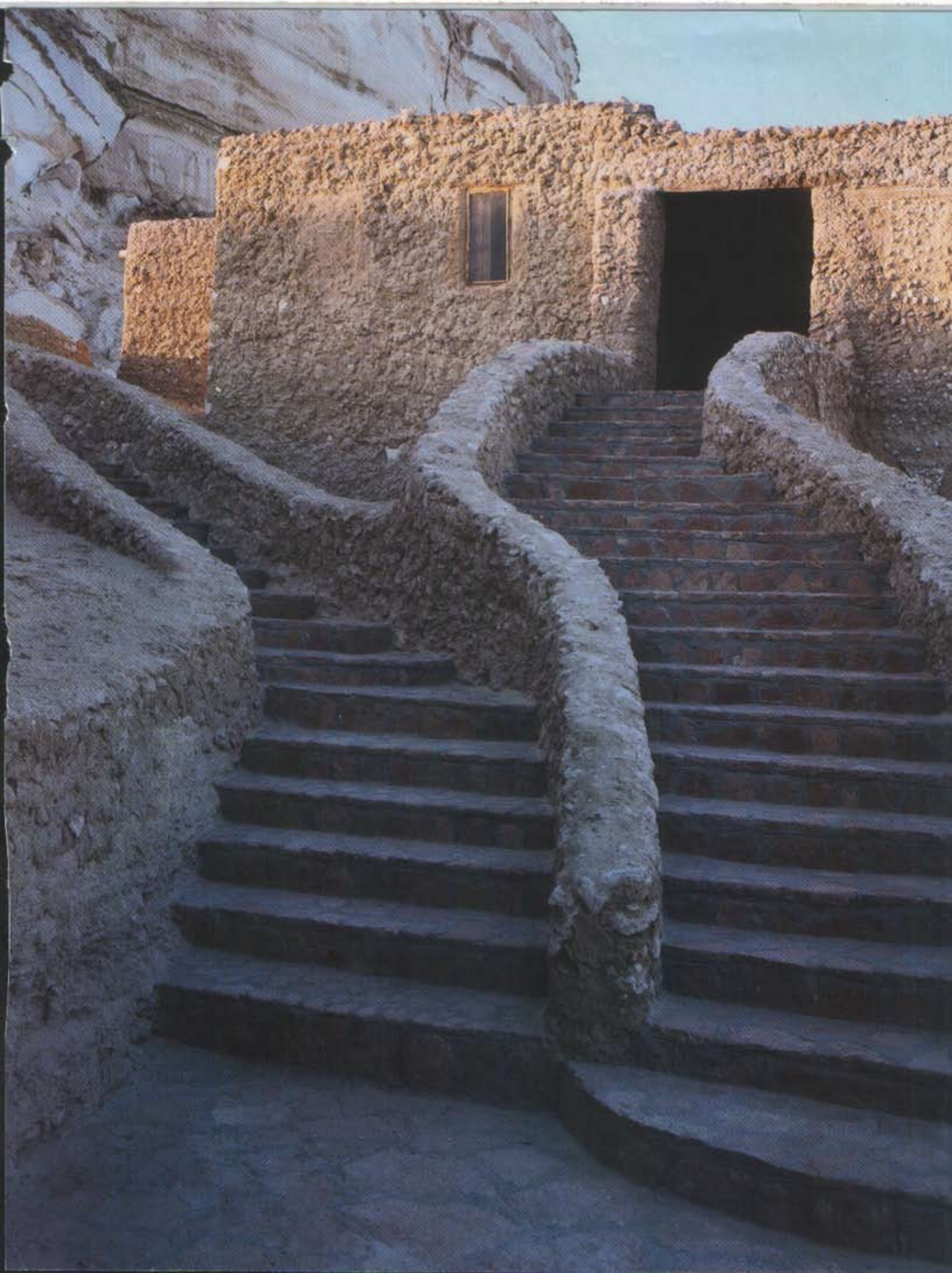
50 GREAT ESCAPES

Animal houses
Desert retreats
Eco-lodges

PLUS

Adventures
on foot and
horseback

Wild at heart



Deserts - expanses of sand and rock - seem to offer us nothing. Only a handful of species are adapted to the temperature extremes and unforgiving aridity, and we aren't one of them. Yet, with time, as civilisations have grown and nature has been fenced out, deserts have become valued. Wastelands are a retreat from the everyday, havens with no distractions. Long before John the Baptist, religious characters were plodding into the desert to live off locusts and wild honey, finding God in the emptiness. But you don't have to be a prophet to feel the desert's allure. Few modern travellers come away untouched by just one night passed under brilliant desert stars, one dawn waking to an infinity of sand. The emptiness around acts like a vacuum, and your thoughts expand to fill it. You leave changed not just by the landscape, but the experience of enjoying a rare moment with yourself. In our crammed and hectic age, the desert is more valuable a resource than ever. **BENEDICT ALLEN**

NAMIBIA

The Namib Desert

Namibia, situated on the arid southwest coast of Africa, is the only country named after a desert. Access to the southern portion of this long, thin coastal desert is restricted; diamonds lie scattered amongst the sands, brought to the sea by the Orange River, and spread north up the Namib by ocean currents. The huge red dune seas of the Namib-Naukluft Park are only really visible at close quarters from the oasis at Sossusvlei, although the tour operators Skeleton Coast Safaris (+264 61 224248) have made access easier by organising flights over the ochre wonders of the rolling sands by light aircraft. Further north up the Namib, dubbed the Skeleton Coast, access is easier in places. The rockscapes of Damaraland are compelling in their lunar starkness. Stones have been etched with images of lions and herd animals by long-gone bushmen, and the region is still home to rhino. Further north still is Kaokoland, inhabited by the Himba, resilient cattle-herding nomads who eke out an existence in one of Africa's most unforgiving environments. The desert is laced with springs and oases inhabited by rare desert elephants, ostriches and giraffes. Finding one of these gives you the feeling that you have chanced on a little piece of paradise.

WHERE TO STAY Wilderness Safaris operates comfortable camps in Sossusvlei and Damaraland, as well as on the Skeleton Coast. The latter is probably the most remote - an incredible, luxurious retreat in one of the most hauntingly beautiful but inhospitable and desolate places on earth. With only 10 guests accommodated at any one time in a park of 700,000 acres, the sense of space is incredibly liberating. Built on an island in a dry river-bed, the camp is only 12 miles inland from the rugged Atlantic coastline, with its seal colonies, shipwrecks and the most abundant fishing grounds on earth.

WILD COMFORTS Each tent in the Skeleton Coast Wilderness Camp is roomy and has an en-suite bathroom. An old gnarled leadwood tree offers shade, and provides a dining area for alfresco meals. Nature drives include visits to canyons, the 'clay castles' of Hoarasub, Rocky Point on the shoreline, shipwrecks, and lichen fields that seem to stretch for ever.

WILDERNESS FACTOR The nearest tarmac road is a non-stop eight-hour drive away, and it's a two-day journey to the nearest town. Most people come on fly-in safaris.

WOULD SUIT Adults in search of a magical wilderness adventure.

WHEN TO GO The best time is between March and November, when it is not too hot.

FACTS Book Sossusvlei Wilderness Camp, Skeleton Coast Wilderness Camp and Damaraland Camp with Cazenove & Loyd Safaris (020 7384 2332; www.caz-loyd.com). Three nights at Skeleton Coast costs £1,800 per person, full board, including all internal flights. **BENEDICT ALLEN/CATHERINE FAIRWEATHER**

KENYA

The Chalbi Desert

Tucked away in the north of Kenya, a far cry from all that familiar savannah, lies the Chalbi, a flat, unadorned pan that, at first sight, has little going for it. However, deserts are always more than they seem, and this one is laden with geographical gems, beginning with the exquisite Lake Turkana, the 'Jade Sea', out to the west. A resource of the Turkana people, who live off its fish and deftly avoid its formidable crocodiles, it is an oasis which stands in glorious contrast to its dry, dusty surroundings. But the Chalbi, too, is inhabited, and to appreciate the desert is to begin to appreciate its people, who of course see the stark landscape not as a threat but as their home. These are the little-known Gabbra, shepherds of the desert. They shift their herds of goats between water holes, outposts such as

The Namib Desert

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North Horr, and in so doing display their skills as some of the most successful and versatile of desert inhabitants. The Gabbra are a camel people. They erect little tents of cloth and sticks aboard the camels, to protect the old, the sick, and women and babies from the heat; at the end of each day they erect similar homes on the ground to act as shelters against the cold. For foreigners willing to adapt themselves a little to such desert ways, the Chalbi is that rare thing on the planet, a last frontier.

WHERE TO STAY The Kalacha oasis provides water for nomads and their livestock, including donkeys and camels, many of which travel as far as 70 miles every couple of days to drink at the artesian wells and natural springs that never dry up. Kalacha Lodge, Kenya's northernmost camp, is accessible by light aircraft. From the air, as you fly low over the acacias, *dhom* palms and camel trains, the lodge blends seamlessly into its surroundings. The staff greet you on the dirt runway and transport your luggage by wheelbarrow to the small lodge run by Gabbra women. It is they who prepare meals, put on fine shows of traditional dancing and keep the place running smoothly.

WILD COMFORTS Simplicity and rusticity have never been more alluring; the four self-contained thatched *bandas* (cottages), with adjoining cold-shower bathrooms, are built with local materials, *dhom* palm trunks hold the structures up, and leaves are woven into mats which make up the roofs and walls. Each has a terrace overlooking the oasis. The eating area has a kidney-shaped swimming pool filled with spring water. There's no electricity, just kerosene lamps: the brilliance

of the desert night sky and the sparkle of the glow-worms add to the magical, otherworldly atmosphere of the camp.

WOULD SUIT This is a place to unwind and relax, following the simple rhythms of oasis life. The more active come to shoot sand grouse or to explore and fish the remote region of Lake Turkana. The sybaritic can enjoy sundowners and views of the broadest horizons from the summits of desert kopies, right at the edge of a lava flow.

WILDERNESS FACTOR Kalacha is 40 miles from the Ethiopian border, and an hour's flight by light aircraft from Nairobi.

WHEN TO GO The season for sand-grouse shooting lasts from mid-September to the end of October and from mid-December

You reach the oasis by the same road that Alexander the Great took in 331 BC

to the end of January. Otherwise, Kalacha is best visited between July and February.

FACTS From £140 per person per night full board. Tropic Air (www.tropicair-travel.com) organises bookings and charters. For a wider itinerary, including international flights, ring Journeys by Design on 01273 623790.

BENEDICT ALLEN/CATHERINE FAIRWEATHER

EGYPT

Siwa Oasis

Apart from its outstanding beauty, the three most startling things about Siwa in Egypt, an oasis in the desert near the Libyan border, are that the women don't shop, the taxi drivers are all about seven years old and

that Alexander the Great is said to be buried here.

You reach the oasis by the same road that Alexander himself took in 331 BC, when, exhausted by both the duplicity and slow pace of his architects and builders in constructing his great new city, Alexandria, he marched to Siwa to consult the oracle of Amun-Ra. This was one of the seven great oracles of the ancient world, on a par with that at Delphi. The priest of the temple shrewdly declared that Alexander was, indeed, the son of Amun-Ra and, therefore, a living god. Alexander was 25 at the time; at the age of 33 he was poisoned in Babylon. Siwans believe that Alexander's tomb is in their city, the place where he

was first named pharaoh. The exact location of his grave remains a mystery, although the flat-topped white-stone mountains in and around Siwa are riddled with tombs.

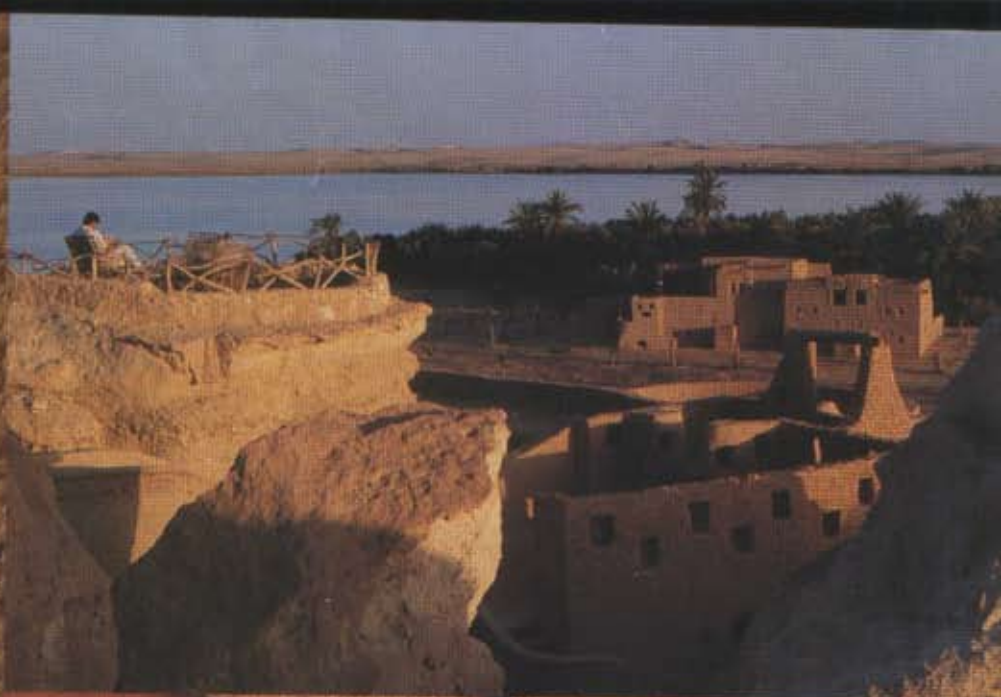
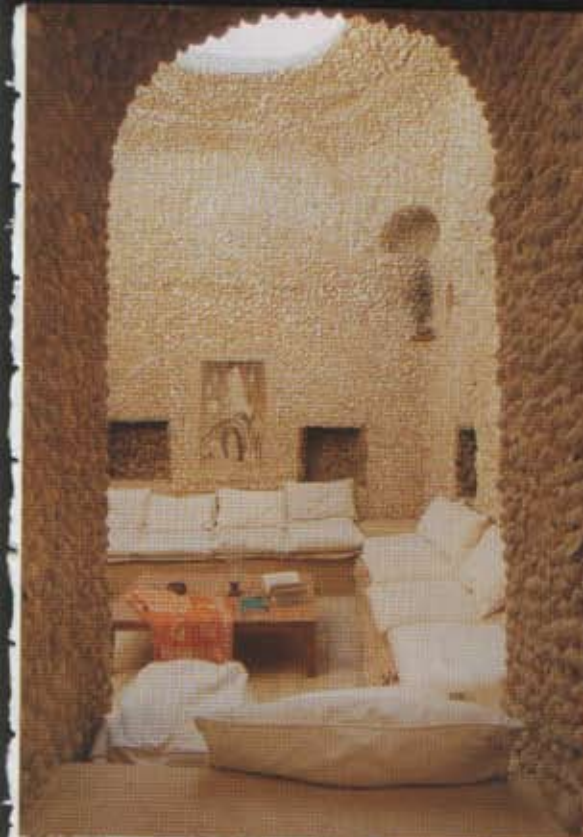
The settlement dates back to the 12th century, when Berber and Bedouin tribes decided to build a fortified town made of mud, straw and salt rocks. On adjoining hills, they built not one but two tiny fortified towns with a small lane between them. Unfortunately, they couldn't resist inter-tribal wrangling. Once started, the fighting continued until the 19th century, when the towns surrendered to Egyptian rule. This capitulation has proved deceptive. The townsmen speak Siwan and regard the Egyptian authorities as intruders. They live life according to their own rules – which brings us to the women and shopping.

Until they marry at 16, Siwa girls are uncovered. After marriage, they can no longer be seen or touched by any man who is not a relative. This means that they cannot shop and are only seen as shrouded figures, often travelling around in tiny donkey carts driven by their seven-year-old sons. These boys also operate the carts as taxis until they reach the age of nine, when a boy is considered fit for more serious work in the palm gardens. Siwans are Sufis, and their festivals involve much singing and dancing; they are devout but joyful. Siwa is the safest, most courteous place I have visited.

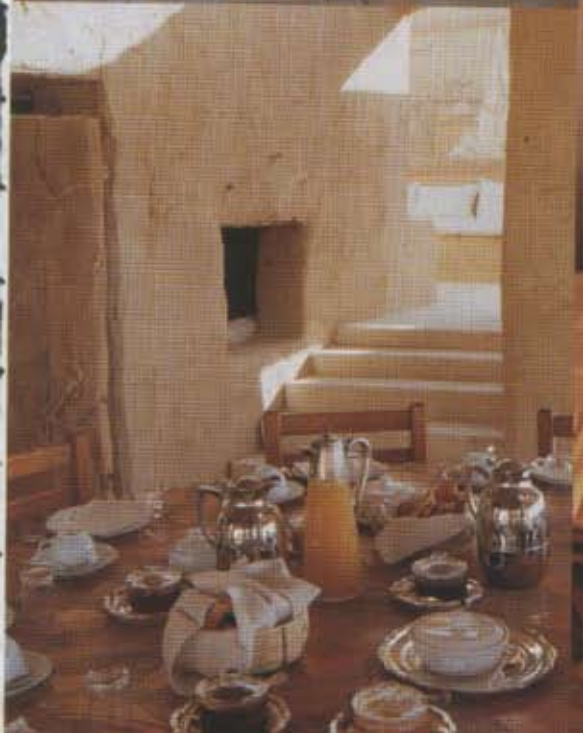
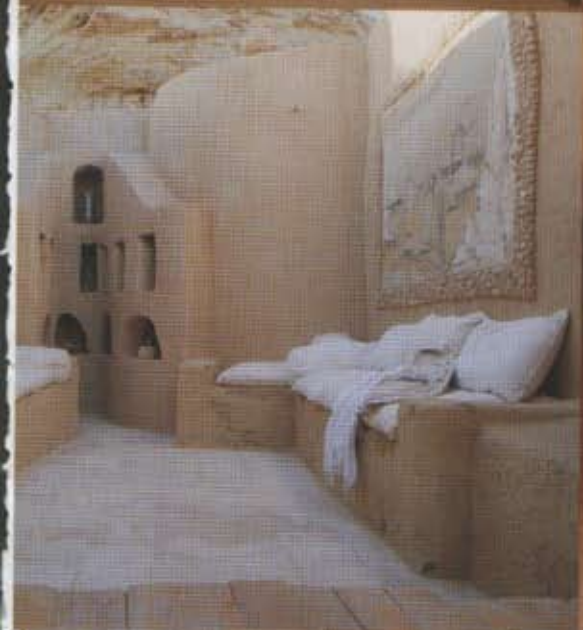
WHERE TO STAY There is a very beautiful hotel in the town called Shali Lodge. Traditional in style, it has the best food and at night it is the meeting place for foreigners. Ali, the manager, speaks good English and will help unobtrusively with anything: renting bicycles, advice as to which of the springs has the warmest water, visits to the tombs, or where to go for the famous hot-sand baths that are



Kalacha Lodge in the Chalbi Desert, Kenya



Adrere Amellal Eco-Lodge,
Siwa Oasis, Egypt



DESERT RETREATS

taken as a treatment for rheumatism. But the jewel in the crown of Siwa is the Adrere Amellal Eco-Lodge. Built from mud with chunks of salt and palm-trees in the old tradition, it lies beneath the magical White Mountain, 11 miles from Shali. Surrounded on three sides by Siwa Oasis, it was created by Dr Neamatalla Mounir, a Cairo ecologist, who is also responsible for the Shali Lodge.

WILD COMFORTS The food, prepared to a standard to rival Gordon Ramsay, is all grown in the grounds of the property, with loving care and no pesticides. Each meal is laid out in a different setting, allowing you to experience the views to the full. The swimming pool is shaded by a large palm grove and flows out of a natural spring. The rooms, with their soft white sheets and duvets and Siwan striped rugs on the floor, are cosy. There is no electricity or telephone. Lanterns light your room, which is warmed by the local wonder, a large earthenware bowl filled with hot coals. There is also a well-stocked bar – a distinct rarity in Egypt. At night it is so quiet that you begin to hear the stars.

WILDERNESS FACTOR Seven hours from Alexandria by car, the oasis is what you would expect: palm-trees close to the water, surrounded by scrub, with sand-dunes stretching as far as the eye can see.

WOULD SUIT This poetic place is ideal for honeymooners, couples and anyone mad about a pure and organic environment, but not for people who expect air-conditioning and like to be on the end of a phone.

WHEN TO GO November to March.

FACTS Double room at Adrere Amellal Eco-Lodge (+20 273 81327), from £280 per night full board, including all trips into the desert. Alternatively, packages can be booked through Abercrombie & Kent (0845 070 0617). **MELISSA NORTH**

TUNISIA

Ksar Ghilane

Desert comes in many forms, but the wilderness surrounding the small oasis of Ksar Ghilane in southern Tunisia is the desert of dreams: beautiful rose-pink dunes roll away in all directions, their sand the consistency of soft powder. These gently curving dunes seem to stretch for ever, the barrenness only broken by the occasional passing caravan of camels.

WHERE TO STAY Within the oasis, under the palm-trees, is the Pansea Hotel, a collection of 60 luxury tents designed in the low, spreading Berber style. The piazza is shaded by palm-trees and is further cooled by water that meanders through the white-stone square in a ceramic-lined channel.

A bubbling hot spring lies close to the camp, and is protected by the striking ruins of an old Roman fort, which was constructed to protect this vital water hole. Camel trips can be arranged to visit these locations and, with the water temperature in the spring reaching as high as 34°C, the pool is warmly welcoming at nightfall, when temperatures plummet.

WILD COMFORTS With soft linen on the beds, kilims on the floors, air-conditioning, heating and minibars to boot, this is certainly not your average Boy Scout's tent. Behind each are immaculate en-suite loos and showers in a separate block, providing comfort without destroying the romance of camping in the desert.

WILDERNESS FACTOR The hotel complex is situated in the middle of the desert, and is accessible only by four-wheel-drive vehicles. Jerba is the nearest town, three hours'



Pansea Hotel, Tunisia



Longitude 131, Australia

drive away. You can fly from Tunis to Jerba, which takes less than an hour.

WOULD SUIT People who want nothing more than to just snooze by the pool and raid the mini-bar. Be warned that younger children may well get bored.

WHEN TO GO The temperatures are most bearable in March, April and May. Avoid the summer months, when temperatures soar to over 50°C.

FACTS From £45 per person per night, including breakfast and dinner. For trips to Ksar Ghilane and the Tunisian Sahara, ring Wigmore Holidays & Travel on 020 7836 4999, or visit www.aspectsoftunisia.co.uk. **FRASER HARRISON**

AUSTRALIA

Ayers Rock

A place of living cultural significance, Ayers Rock is steeped in ancient rites and customs, having been a spiritual site for the Aboriginal people for over 40,000 years. No matter how many pictures you've seen, nothing will prepare you for your first view of Ayers Rock (Uluru). Renowned for the way it changes colour during the day, the rock is particularly spectacular at sunrise and sunset, when the sky's brilliant blues change to dramatic reds and oranges before the dazzling stars light it up. The surrounding plains are home to a variety of birds and wildlife: groups of bright-green budgerigars gather at the pools at the foot of the rock, and honey-eaters and cockatoos feast on shrubs.

WHERE TO STAY Set close to Ayers Rock, the brand-new Longitude 131 provides guests with the chance to experience the outback in luxury. The luxury safari-style tents are set in sand-dunes in a stunning location on the very edge of Uluru-Kata Tjuta National Park, which gives the site magical uninterrupted views of Ayers Rock. The surrounding plains are dotted with desert oak-trees, mulga bushes and spinifex grasses, which support the local population of red kangaroos and dingoes. Longitude 131 also organises an impressive tour programme: special walks provide you with the chance to learn about local ecology and Aboriginal culture.

WILD COMFORTS Each of the 15 individual tents is a self-contained enclave, offering guests five-star luxury. Inside each, the atmosphere is lavish, with woollen rugs on the stone floors, air-conditioning and a telephone. The attention to detail is impeccable. In addition, every room has floor-to-ceiling glass doors so that guests are able to enjoy breathtaking views of Ayers Rock without leaving their beds. Similar views can be enjoyed from the outdoor dining room and swimming pool.

WILDERNESS FACTOR The site is two miles from the Ayers Rock Resort, and 20 minutes by car from the Ayers Rock airstrip.

WOULD SUIT The secluded setting makes Longitude 131 perfect for couples, and the abundant wildlife will appeal to nature-lovers. Ideal for 'soft adventurers'.

WHEN TO GO The wild desert flowers are particularly impressive in August and September. Temperatures range from 45°C in summer to below freezing on winter nights.

FACTS From £260 per person for two nights, based on two people sharing. Book Longitude 131 through Wilderness Australia (+61 2 9231 2113). **ELEANOR SOUTHALL** □