

RL MAGAZINI



Hot-air ballooning is a great way to take in the stunning natural landscape of Wolwedans NamibRand Reserve

The longest plane rides often lead to more crowds and advertisements, and the most expensive trips are usually complex and overwrought. So what truly constitutes an escape from routine—a real vacation?

Maybe it's waking up to the sun rising over the dunes of the Namibian desert, as crisp fresh air and pure, absolute silence pour into your own open lodge. From beneath a canopy of billowing sheer drapes, you are surrounded by miles of vast wilderness. Already, the day is an intimate encounter with a pristine natural environment. Never have simplicity and solitude seemed so exotic and refreshing.

Savvy travelers are increasingly seeking a more meaningful travel experience that focuses on privacy, simplicity, and a connection with the natural world. Seclusion is now the ultimate luxury when it comes to travel. In lieu of the "more is more" mantra of the past, the latest travel buzz is being monopolized by smaller, less flashy hotels in remote locations. It's a shift Anthony Lassman has noticed among the international clientele of his members-only travel consultancy, Nota Bene, based in London. "People tend to want more seclusion," he says. When it comes to his clients' idea of the perfect vacation, "more than ever before, the more discerning, the more affluent, the simpler [it is] in many respects," he observes. And Travel + Leisure's Top Travel Trends for 2010 reports that "the desire among travelers for authentic experiences is stronger than ever."

This luxurious brand of simplicity is a lot harder than it looks. Grand marble bathrooms and 1,000-thread-count sheets are fine amenities, but according to Lassman, high-end travel today is all about "transcending conventional luxuries." As Travel + Leisure put it, with this homogenous brand of "luxury," travelers "are losing touch with the magic and mystery of travel." But a resort that allows the beauty of the natural world to take center stage will induce a "Wow!" from even the most jaded jet-setter. And without all the pomp and circumstance of a megaresort, these remote destinations cannot afford to skimp on details. As Lassman analogizes, "When you cover food with lots of sauces you can get away with a lot more than when you're taking a great piece of fish and just grilling it."



Accommodations at the Wolwedans NamibRand Reserve have a pared-down elegance that emphasizes the beauty of the surroundings

By this standard, Namibia's Wolwedans NamibRand Reserve is a sushi-grade hotel experience. Stephan Brückner, the managing director and son of the Reserve's founder, says that at Wolwedans, "We don't want to attract the guys that want marble bathrooms." Instead, he explains, the Reserve offers a "very honest, down-to-earth nature experience."

Nevertheless, with 16 years to refine its stripped-down aesthetic, Wolwedans defines the unconventional luxury of the moment. The Reserve can only accommodate up to 44 people at a time in tents that are clustered into separate, isolated camps. The hotel even has a self-imposed stipulation that for every bed at Wolwedans they would preserve another 10 million square meters of open land. But even more striking is how the accommodations, of Brückner's own design, efface themselves in front of the land both physically and aesthetically. For one thing, the architecture is "soft on nature," says Brückner: "Every camp or lodge we built, we can take away without leaving any traces." He specifically chose colors like rust and sandstone and textures like natural wood that render them almost camouflaged against the landscape. From the inside, the camps frame the desert around it so that the wilderness extends indoors. And while there is no marble in sight, the lodgings are hardly your common tent, comfortably furnished with everything from buttery leather couches to full kitchens and elegant dining tables. Activities at Wolwedans are pleasantly low-key. There are walking tours, scenic drives and flights, hot-air ballooning, a smattering of spa services, and the resort also partners with nearby safari camps. Additionally, the Reserve has entered into a partnership with the Namibian Institute of Culinary Education to provide bush-inspired gourmet cuisine for guests.

Wolwedans NamibRand Reserve

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Among the Beach House Manafaru's 68 contemporary thatched villas, the Water Villa perched over the Indian Ocean has glass-paneled floors that reveal marine life below

If Namibia is not far enough for you, consider the Beach House at Manafaru Maldives, which evokes the Swiss Family Robinson with its native-timber, thatch-roofed architectural style and location on a 35-acre private island in the northernmost atoll, Haa Alifu. After it opened in 2008, the hotel nabbed spots on Condé Nast Traveller's Hot List, and the Telegraph's Best New Hotels in the World. As of March 2010, the hotel will officially be a part of the Waldorf Astoria Collection, which means this stunning natural setting will now offer the full range of the hotel group's signature services and three gourmet dining options. Guests will be able to unwind with traditional Maldivian treatments at the Spa, where each of the ten private rooms have a backdrop of dense tropical foliage. To take in the native splendor, try an indigenous sand massage followed by a feast of Indian Ocean king scallops terrine or fresh local lobster. Among the resort's 83 private villas, the Grand Beach and Water Pavilions offer the most seclusion. While the former features two open-air bathrooms, a swimming pool and sauna, and its very own massage treatment room, the latter feels the most luxurious. With 1,150 square feet of private over-water living space, its best feature is its endless, unobstructed view of the glittering Indian Ocean.

Beach House at Manafaru Maldives

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www.beachhousecollection.com



Ackergill Castle is an exclusive-use property that dates back to the fifteenth century

A private island is all well and good, but it must be acknowledged that a man's home is his castle. Perched on 380 acres along the rocky coastal edge of northeastern Scotland, Ackergill Tower is an historic private castle about five hours north of Edinburgh with 25 bedrooms and a professional staff on call. The castle's pristine natural setting is an

inextricable part of this authentic Scottish experience. Ackergill's chefs prepare meals featuring local produce, fish, and meats, and the castle offers activities ranging from horseback riding, archery, fishing, and falconry to highland games on the front lawn. And according to Roger Masterson, the castle's rental agent and expert in the U.K., what the oft-returning guests rave about is the "seclusion of the property, the peace and quiet." When it comes down to it, he says, the experience is about the simple pleasures of "exceptional service" and resplendent seclusion. With nary another party in sight, guests can fully appreciate being surrounded by "people that are special to them in a special place." Now that sounds like the ultimate luxury.

Ackergill Tower

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1. *Courtesy Wolwedans NamibRand Reserve(3)*
2. *Beach House Maldives, Waldorf Astoria Collection(2)*
3. *Celtic Castles*