



## &Beyond Sossusvlei Desert Lodge

NAMIBIA

South African design firm Fox Browne Creative teams up with emerging architect Jack Alexander to revamp a luxury retreat in the Namib Desert.

Words: Emma Love • Photography: Courtesy of &Beyond

With an otherworldly landscape of constantly shifting rust-red sand dunes, gravel plains, and jagged granite and limestone hills, the coastal Namib Desert – which dates back 50–88 million years – is staggering in its vastness and stunning in its beauty. It is for this reason, that when emerging Johannesburg-based architect Jack Alexander and long-established design agency Fox Browne Creative were tasked with revamping &Beyond Sossusvlei Desert Lodge, they didn't even try to compete.

"The overriding principle was to connect guests with the natural environment; the experience of being immersed in the desert informed all the decisions that came afterwards," explains Alexander of the two-decades-old property, which is flanked by the Nubib Mountains and sits on a private 15-hectare concession neighbouring the NamibRand Nature Reserve, Africa's only International Dark Sky Reserve.

After a nine-month refresh, the lodge reopened at the end of last year. The low-rise main space housing the restaurant, bar and social living zones has been extended outwards, with a new terrace at the front, and a spa treatment room and gym upstairs. Floor-to-ceiling glass walls on three sides bring the outside in and, at the rear, a curving stone wall is reminiscent of Roman ruins. "It was incredibly simple in many respects: it's an open-plan pavilion with a modernist glass front juxtaposed with beautiful rocks. We've refined the building but there was no need for architectural gymnastics,"



Suites feature super king-sized beds with a skylight directly above for stargazing

Alexander says. Deliberately rusted steel triangular shading devices sit on top of the flat roof with a laser cut configuration that mirrors the constellations of the Milky Way. "The thought behind those was predominantly the silhouettes of the mountains around the lodge; the peaks and valleys that you see when looking out," he adds. "The idea is that during the day you still get that reflected pattern of stars."

Inside, the neutral palette and natural materials – linen sofas and cushions with accents of hand-embroidered welwitschia plants, tree-trunk tables with raffia-backed chairs, oversized ceramic urns and a straw floor light based on the nests of sociable weaver birds – were also determined by the surroundings. "The inspiration for the interiors was the desert – that vista, the light, the dunes – it couldn't be anything else," says Chris Browne, co-founder of Fox Browne Creative. The shapes of the grey-brown rocks also influenced the design of the central faceted timber-clad bar with a marble counter, while silver geometric lights hanging from the mirrored ceiling above reference desert cacti. Elsewhere, low hexagonal tables with backlit glass panels that appear to softly

glow at night conjure up the notion of star bursts, and an installation of handmade ceramic plates on the back wall from Pret-a-Pot in South Africa represent the cracked mud of nearby Deadvlei.

One of the most significant changes is that the 10 sleek, standalone 85m<sup>2</sup> suites and new two-bedroom Star Dune suite are now all designed to be entirely solar powered. "Sustainability was a key driver," confirms Debra Fox, fellow co-founder of Fox Browne Creative. "Each suite has its own solar plant to generate power and a system to recycle water, which is then used for the waterhole at the front of the lodge and to flush the loo." Much like the architecture of the main space, each suite combines stone and glass, with sliding doors at the front that open onto the pool terrace. The hero piece of the room is a super king-sized bed with a skylight above for stargazing, but there are other considered design details too, from the globe bedside lighting that nods to the planets, to the floor light – by South Africa's Mud Studio – that imitates a bird's wing, with each individual feather a separate piece of clay. In the bathroom, lighting is intuitively labelled while the double vanity takes on an





angular form. “If you look at the shape of each basin, the geometry is integral to the design,” Fox continues. “We spent a lot of time tracing the lines and forms of the environment and bringing them into the interior in miniscule.”

There are plenty of cocooning touches too: a steel and rope chair, perfectly angled for an afternoon snooze; a grey cotton-linen curtain with an embroidered Quiver Tree – similar to the one at the entrance to the lodge – that can be pulled across to hide the wardrobe, and a wooden hatch, from which a butler can deliver a morning cappuccino without disturbing guests.

“The intention is that guests will check-in and never want to leave. Jack has opened up the panorama, so you’re not sure if you’re looking at it or you’re in it. The desert can be harsh and out of people’s comfort zone, so the suites are almost like an oasis that you can retreat to while still feeling part of the environment,” says Fox, citing the in-suite paint set and mini-bar, the latter stocked with African-made spirits and another enticing reason for staying put.

When guests do want to explore, high-adrenaline activities include quad biking on a designated circuit across the dunes, e-biking to caves to glimpse markings made by San Bushmen, taking a helicopter ride over the Namib-Naukluft National Park, and hiking up Big Daddy – the tallest dune in the area – at sunrise. Yet one of the most fascinating ways to connect to the surroundings is by spending evenings at the circular stone observatory located at the back of the property, where it’s possible to peer through a telescope and zoom in on the craters of the moon and the rings of Saturn. Thanks to a lack of light pollution – even the lamps that illuminate the paths to the suites at night are red to minimise the glow – the inky sky is dense with constellations. It’s just another way that this lodge puts its surroundings first. “The design was conceived to link guests to the landscape in every respect; we wanted to keep the buildings subtle and let the desert speak,” concludes Alexander. And there’s no doubt they’ve succeeded.



#### EXPRESS CHECK-OUT

Owner / Operator: &Beyond Travel  
Architecture: Jack Alexander  
Interior Design: Fox Browne Creative  
Landscaping: Gordon W. Kershaw  
Main Contractor: OJ Construction  
Engineering: De Villiers Sheard  
Lighting Design: Fox Browne Creative,  
Streamlight Lighting  
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