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GEOMETRIC STEEL
JUXTAPOSES
ORGANIC DESERT
ROCK IN THE
STRIKING UPGRADE
OF THIS LUXURY
LODGE IN
SOSSUSVLEI.

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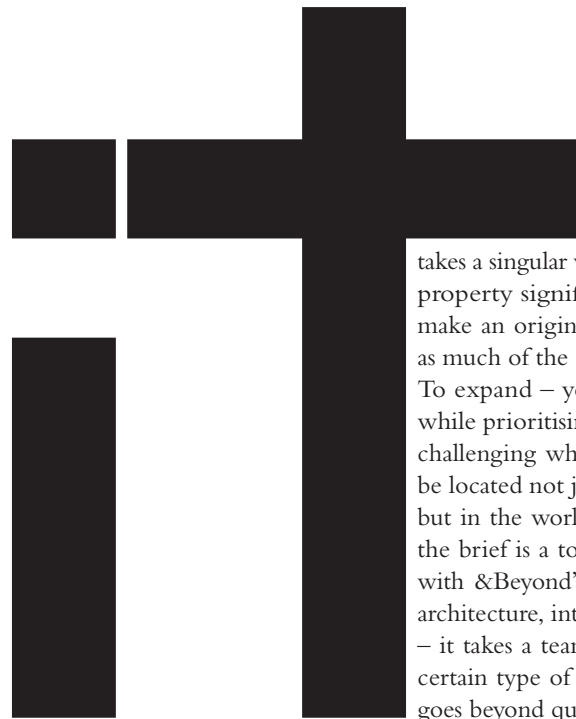
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WORDS **AMELIA BROWN**
PHOTOS **DOOK**

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Architect Jack Alexander used the lodge's east-west access to orientate a linear reflection pond at the main guest area - as well as the individual pools at the suites - to reflect the rising and setting sun.





takes a singular vision to renovate an existing property significantly yet sensitively – to make an original statement while retaining as much of the existing structure as possible. To expand – yet maintain – the footprint while prioritising sustainability is especially challenging when the property happens to be located not just in Namibia’s remoteness, but in the world’s oldest desert. And when the brief is a total overhaul, as was the case with &Beyond’s Sossusvlei Desert Lodge – architecture, interiors and guest experience – it takes a team versed in the rigours of a certain type of multilayered hospitality that goes beyond quality linen. It requires a team

that appreciates the tangible and intangible aspects of luxury; that knows how to offer guests an immersive experience.

After two decades at the helm of their award-winning multidisciplinary design agency Fox Browne Creative, Debra Fox and Chris Browne are specialists in this subtle alchemy. They collaborated with architect Jack Alexander, and worked with the existing buildings, constructed in the mid-1990s, to create something contemporary yet timeless and appropriate to the context.

The landscape was the steadfast focus in terms of inspiration, as well as minimising impact and maximising the guest experience. The lodge sits on a 215 000-hectare sprawl of desert wilderness that encompasses a variety of habitats and awe-inspiring vistas, from rocky mountains and gravel plains to vegetative, petrified and sandy dunes. The team began by researching the area’s topography on Google Earth and were struck by how, unlike many other places in the world, there are no obstructions, trees, rocks or buildings. The only shadows are cast by dunes.

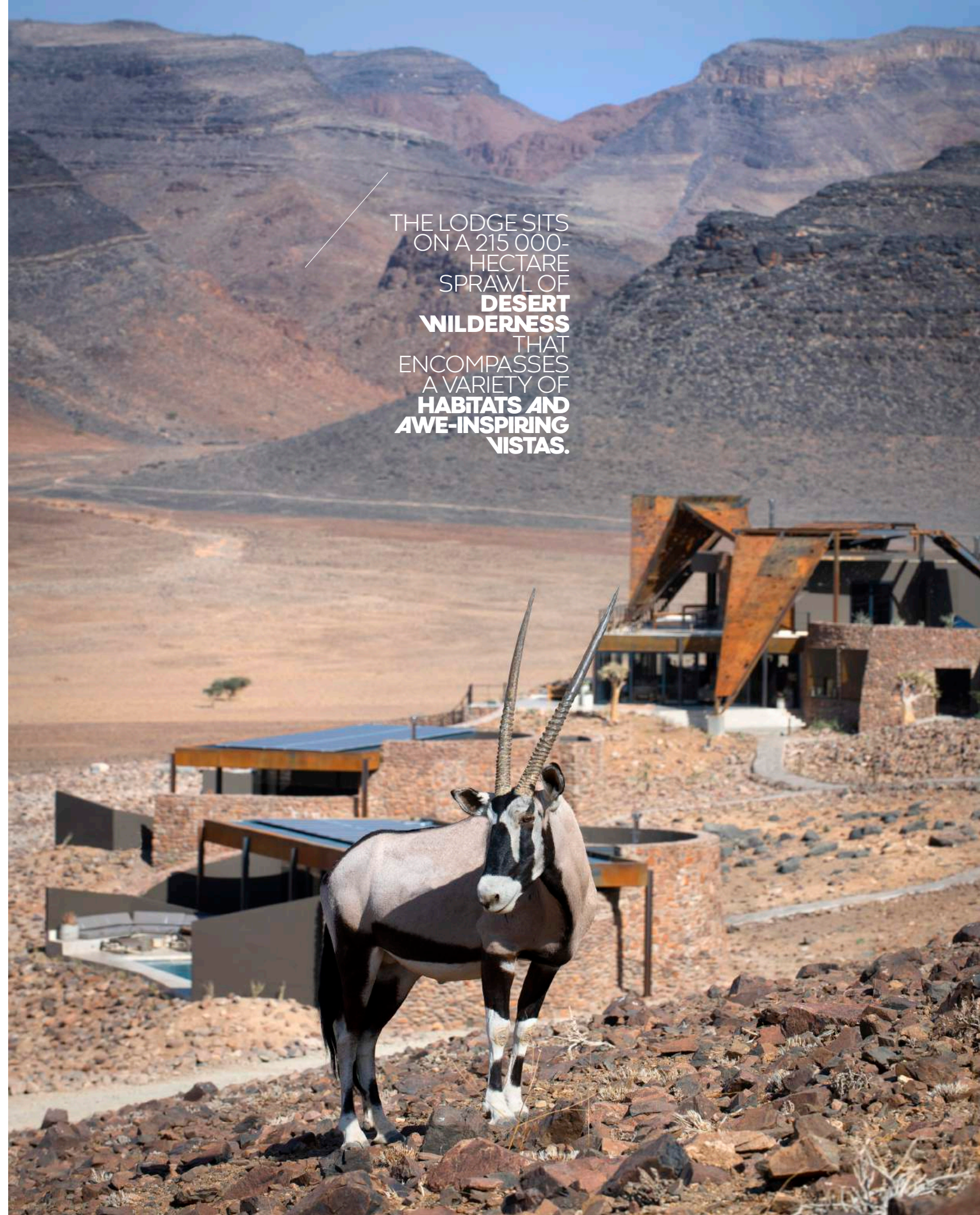
The lodge’s most defining feature – and a counterpoint to its burrow-like rock-wall curves – are the striking steel shades. “We tried to imitate nature in the architecture, and mirror the way in which the enormous dunes rise from the flat desert landscape,” Jack explains. The similarity is best illustrated at dawn and dusk, when the angular steel sails are in silhouette. “Much like life in the desert, I wanted the buildings to have different day- and night-time personalities,” he adds. At night, they’re illuminated from below by red light, chosen not for dramatic effect, but rather to avoid light pollution – the property borders the NamibRand Nature Reserve, Africa’s only International Dark Sky Reserve. The night sky, so densely packed with stars here, was the reference for the laser-cut pattern in the shades. Working with an astronomer and studying astrological charts from the area resulted in a two-dimensional celestial design. The shades made it possible to use floor-to-ceiling glass on three of the walls to maximise the magnificent views. They work throughout the day, providing a shield from the harsh sun and filtering light into the main area. In the evening, they prevent light from the lodge disrupting stargazing from the observatory.

When guests are not out exploring the magnificent surroundings, there is much to be seen at the lodge. You’d be forgiven for not leaving your room, with a pool positioned to reflect the sunrise and sunset, an ample, stylishly appointed lounge area, a butler hatch to deliver an early-morning cappuccino, and a retractable skylight for in-bed stargazing.

“Solitude, silence and space are a rare commodity. This destination offers those qualities in abundance,” says Debra. “We hope guests feel instantly at peace as they arrive, that time slows down for them, and that our design allows them to connect with the landscape and reconnect with themselves.”

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OPPOSITE
The prematurely rusted steel of the shades references the vivid orange hues of the sand at the nearby Sossusvlei dunes. It would have taken decades for the steel to rust naturally, so pool acid was used to speed up the process.



THE LODGE SITS ON A 215 000-HECTARE SPRAWL OF DESERT WILDERNESS THAT ENCOMPASSES A VARIETY OF HABITATS AND AWE-INSPIRING VISTAS.



ABOVE & BELOW Chris Browne admits it was tempting to use warm dune tones for the interiors, but they opted for the darker, more muted end of the spectrum instead in reference to the stone and rocks. **OPPOSITE** Rock used in the walls, both existing and new, was harvested from a nearby quarry, helping the buildings blend into and coexist within the natural surroundings.



THE LODGE'S MOST DEFINING FEATURE - AND A COUNTERPOINT TO ITS EXISTING BURROW-LIKE ROCK-WALL CURVES - ARE THE STRIKING STEEL SHADES.



The sitting room is divided into "summer" and "winter" spaces. The winter zone, with its fireplace and soft linen curtains, provides an escape from the harsh elements of the desert. The custom stained-glass tables emit a warm glow in the evenings; the hanging light is inspired by the sociable weavers' nests; and the standing lamp imitates desert tumbleweed.

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THE DESIGN TEAM
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ABOVE The star-studded night sky was the inspiration for the laser-cut pattern in the shades, which filter light and provide peepholes to the sky. In the absence of trees and vegetation, the shades also offer privacy for the new gym and spa, which were built on top of the existing main guest areas to avoid disturbing the ground with new foundations. **BELOW** A layer of sophisticated environmental technology means each guest suite is almost completely self-powered. The new roofs - made from a composite, high-density insulation - were designed for optimal internal shading and to maximise the number of solar panels per room.

ABOVE Clean lines, natural textures, muted tones and pared-back simplicity ensure that the vast desertscape takes centre stage. **BELOW** The layout of each guest suite and villa reflects a chic desert minimalism with a clear focus on guest comfort, while the floor-to-ceiling windows create a fully immersive experience.





ABOVE The shared sitting room in the Family Villa features handwoven woolen carpets, repurposed from the original lodge. Originally purchased from Karakulia Weavers in Swakopmund, their design is inspired by the cracked mud of the Deadvlei in the Sesriem Canyon. **BELOW** The custom sandstone vanity and faucet were conceptualised by lead designer Ashley van der Walt. Inverted his-and-hers basins take their cue from the landscape. **OPPOSITE** The skylight above the bed allows for comfortable nighttime stargazing.



**"SOLITUDE, SILENCE
AND SPACE
ARE A RARE COMMODITY.
THIS DESTINATION
OFFERS THOSE QUALITIES
IN ABUNDANCE."
- DEBRA FOX**



PHOTOS DOOK

WORDS BIDDLE RORKE

T R E E ' S C O M P A N Y

A ROMANTIC, OFF-THE-GRID PLATFORM HOUSE OFFERS THE ULTIMATE BUSH ADVENTURE - A LUXURIOUS YET EXPOSED NIGHT IN THE WILDERNESS.



It's a new way to experience the drama and majesty of the bushveld: enclosed by enormous marula trees in the Timbavati private concession in the Kruger National Park, a night in the &Beyond Ngala Tree House is designed to tickle the senses. As architect Jack Alexander for Fox Browne Creative explains, "We wanted the structure to have a light footprint, with as little impact on the natural landscape and local wildlife as possible."

The result is a unique hideaway consisting of five vertically linked platforms, wrapped in an Escher-like series of staircases and landings that connect to a prefabricated 12-metre-tall steel core frame.

Hardwood timber shiplap cladding inside and out counters the "urban" feel of the glass and steel, and lends the tree house a natural, more handcrafted feel. "We also clad the structure in a series of timber latte which, like the mopani poles of the 'boma' fence around the whole structure, were responsibly harvested from the surrounding area," says Jack.

The pattern for the latte is not dissimilar from that of branches that have fallen naturally to the forest floor over time. They form a series of web-like layers over the entire structure, which have the additional important function of working as a balustrade for the five staircases that wind their way around the tree house.

This low-impact, high-drama wilderness retreat features a choice of two sleeping areas: an enclosed bedroom with a king-sized bed, mosquito net and bathroom on the third level, or an elevated sleep-out platform set beneath a retractable awning on the roof.

Stepping up from the shade of the trees, guests climb 52 steps up through the leafy canopy to reach the rooftop – and breathtaking views of the Ngala Private Game Reserve. "Reminiscent of the effect of climbing a tree as a child, the density of these 'branches' decreases as you ascend level by level – so as you

climb the stairs, the views become more open, and the experience of being in touch (almost literally) with your natural surroundings intensifies, until it reaches a crescendo at the very top," says Jack. "The tree house puts guests quite literally within touching distance of the spectacular diversity of wildlife that moves through the surrounding wilderness, including white lion, wild dog, elephant and buffalo herds, leopard and white rhino."

"At less than 25 square metres, each level offers a different aspect of the sleep-out experience," adds Fox Browne Creative co-owner Chris Browne, who directed the interiors. "The ground floor comprises a personal bar and kitchenette, and there's a 'loo with a view' at mezzanine level. One level up sees an indoor/outdoor shower and vanity, while the third floor houses a fully glazed bedroom (with a pull-out bed for kids)."

The uppermost rooftop viewing deck is the hero of the experience, and includes an embroidered daybed that easily converts into a bed for sleeping under the stars in maximum safety and comfort. If rain and thunder threaten, guests can retreat to the weatherproof lower level and a king-sized bed enclosed with a permanent mosquito net.

The interiors are intentionally pared down so as not to complicate the simplicity and serenity of this natural location. And, as is to be expected, the entire structure is self-sustained with off-grid technologies, including its own solar power supply, grey-water collection system and "bio-rock" sanitation system. Best of all, once you've climbed all the way up, you'll find snacks, drinks and a celebratory bottle of Champagne waiting for you in the custom dumbwaiter that is hoisted up to the rooftop.

The four-storey tree house provides uninterrupted views across the Timbavati riverine forest canopy and the Kruger National Park towards the Lowveld escarpment. **PREVIOUS PAGE** The latte form a series of web-like layers over the entire structure, and function as a balustrade for the five staircases that wind around the tree house.

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GUESTS CLIMB 52 STEPS UP THROUGH THE LEAFY CANOPY TO REACH THE ROOFTOP.





ABOVE The lower level of Ngala Tree House features a compact galley kitchen, stocked with all the provisions guests might need during a sleep-out adventure. **BELOW** Winding up the stairs, the rope balustrade guides guests to the mezzanine level - and the loo with a view.



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ABOVE The daybed on the sleep-out viewing deck is covered in fabric embroidered with the 10 distinctive birds of the region. The original illustrations were done by Duncan Butchart. **BELOW** Shielded only by the basket weave of latte, the bathroom truly connects guests to nature. The raw-edge, organic vanity is complemented by rich copper fixtures and accessories.





ABOVE "We created a romantic sanctuary for two," says Chris. "Enclosed by a mosquito net, the king-sized bed features crisp, 100%-cotton sheets, and a hand-embroidered Mungo throw by Kaross Weavers. It creates a sense of luxury with only the things you need - nothing more, nothing less." **BELOW** The copper basin in the private loo with a view is wall-mounted, and matches the other fixtures in the tree house. **OPPOSITE** An overnight romantic adventure lets guests take in the dramatic night skies and wild sights and sounds of the Lowveld in comfort and luxury.



THERE'S A CHOICE
OF TWO
SLEEPING AREAS:
**AN ENCLOSED AND
WEATHERPROOF
BEDROOM**
OR AN
**ELEVATED
SLEEP-OUT PLATFORM.**

