

BOOKING IT TO AFRICA

A few years ago,

➥ **GIDEON LEWIS-KRAUS**

went to the Central Kalahari Game Reserve to visit the setting of a Norman Rush novel, and learned a thing or two about literary pilgrimages. The Brooklyn-based critic and journalist's travel memoir, *A Sense of Direction: Pilgrimage for the Restless and the Hopeful*, is out via Riverhead Books this spring.

➥ photographs courtesy of Gideon Lewis-Kraus

"The Kalahari," I said to Peter, "is one of the world's great deserts."

"And the Atlantic," Peter said, "is one of the world's great oceans."

"If we don't do this, we're going to regret it."

"By which you mean you're going to regret it."

"Yeah, that seems right."

"Well, I'm out," Allison said. "It could be the greatest desert in the solar system, the top-rated desert in the entire galaxy, and I wouldn't have the faintest interest in seeing it." Peter and Allison had been living in northern Tanzania for two years, in which time they'd cultivated an air of the dissipated postcolonial, and Africa no longer impressed them. We'd started on Zanzibar and were headed overland to Cape Town, where Peter and Allison looked forward to eating sushi. Now we were in a dusty, half-assed attempt at an eco-lodge in Maun, in the empty northeast corner of empty Botswana. We'd taken a train across southern Tanzania and into northern Zambia, then come down by bus past Victoria Falls and hitchhiked on the open back of a flatbed truck on northern Botswana's only east-west road, to Maun.

Which is where I'd activated a secret plan I'd come up with months before, just as we were beginning to plan this trip. I'd noticed, poring over a map of southern Africa, that if we went from Lusaka to Windhoek via Maun we'd skirt the northern edge of the Central Kalahari Game Reserve, a mere two hundred kilometers north of Tsau, the location of Nelson Denoon's matriarchal utopia in Norman Rush's *Mating*. It's the sort of book that seems to contain an entire universe, but it held a particular allure for me as the best representation I'd ever come across of a romantic relationship as cerebral as it was animal. I'd given copies over the years to all the smartest women I'd ever fallen in love with.

Allison went to book herself on Air Namibia's prop plane to Windhoek, Namibia's capital and the next real city we'd have to pass through. She asked Peter if she should reserve a seat for him, too. He looked over at me.

"World's greatest desert," I wheedled.

"Eh," he said.

"Tsau!" I said. Since he'd moved to Africa he'd also become a Norman Rush fan, though he preferred *Mortals*. He thought the sex was better.

"Eh," he said, "fine."

The Kalahari, as it turns out, is not only not one of the world's greatest deserts, it's not a desert at all. It is, in fact, a "semi-arid sandy savannah," which is to say that it looks like nothing so much as the interminable stretches of Botswana we'd already pointlessly hitchhiked across. The Central Kalahari Game Reserve is a profoundly arbitrary trapezoid of undeveloped bush that is, in every possible way, exactly like the entirety of non-Kalahari Botswana, except, of course, for its massive inconvenience. This fact, that the Kalahari was perfectly indistinguishable from the knottily featureless bush we'd seen for some days, was something that only dawned on us gradually, as the scenery—at which we peered, eyes narrowed against the blades of wind, held fast in horse-blanket sarcophagi in the dented bed of the shockless pickup truck speeding us toward the Kalahari, desperately trying to avoid the desultory conversation of the German who'd appeared from nowhere to worm his way into our excursion—continued to refuse to change in even the subtlest ways.

At last we reached the gate to the Central Kalahari Game Reserve to discover that the park was simply a patch of regular old Botswana that happened to sit behind a large fence, a fence that happened to be a six-hour, unheated steel-bouncy-castle ride away from Maun, which itself was noteworthy largely for being nowhere near anywhere. The Kalahari was an unvarying landscape of survivalist shrubbery, low trees and unornamented bushes in a palette that runs all the way from

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