



## Escape

### What's the attraction?...

Deserts are some of the best landscapes on Earth for adventure. Whether you're trekking on foot, hitching a ride on a camel or driving through on a 4x4, the rugged beauty of the desert rarely fails to impress.

They're also hot (in the daytime anyway), and in the middle of a cold British winter, heat is definitely an attractive proposition. Add in the opportunity to experience inspiring desert cultures and stargaze beneath some of the clearest skies on the planet and all that sand in your shoes starts to seem worth it. Here are some of the best new trips for the year ahead.

### Dune bashing

Drive your own 4x4 – complete with rooftop camping – across the Kalahari Desert in Botswana. Travel at your own pace from Livingstone, on the banks of the Zambezi River in Zambia, through the salty desert pans of the Makgadikgadi, and into the Central Kalahari Game Reserve. It's a spectacular desert filled with wildlife and strong local cultures, where you can mix camping with stays in luxurious lodges. Safari Drive (01488 71140; safaridrive.com) offers a 16-day trip in Botswana from £2,718pp, including camping equipment, as well as accommodation in campsites and luxury lodges. Flights extra.

### On foot

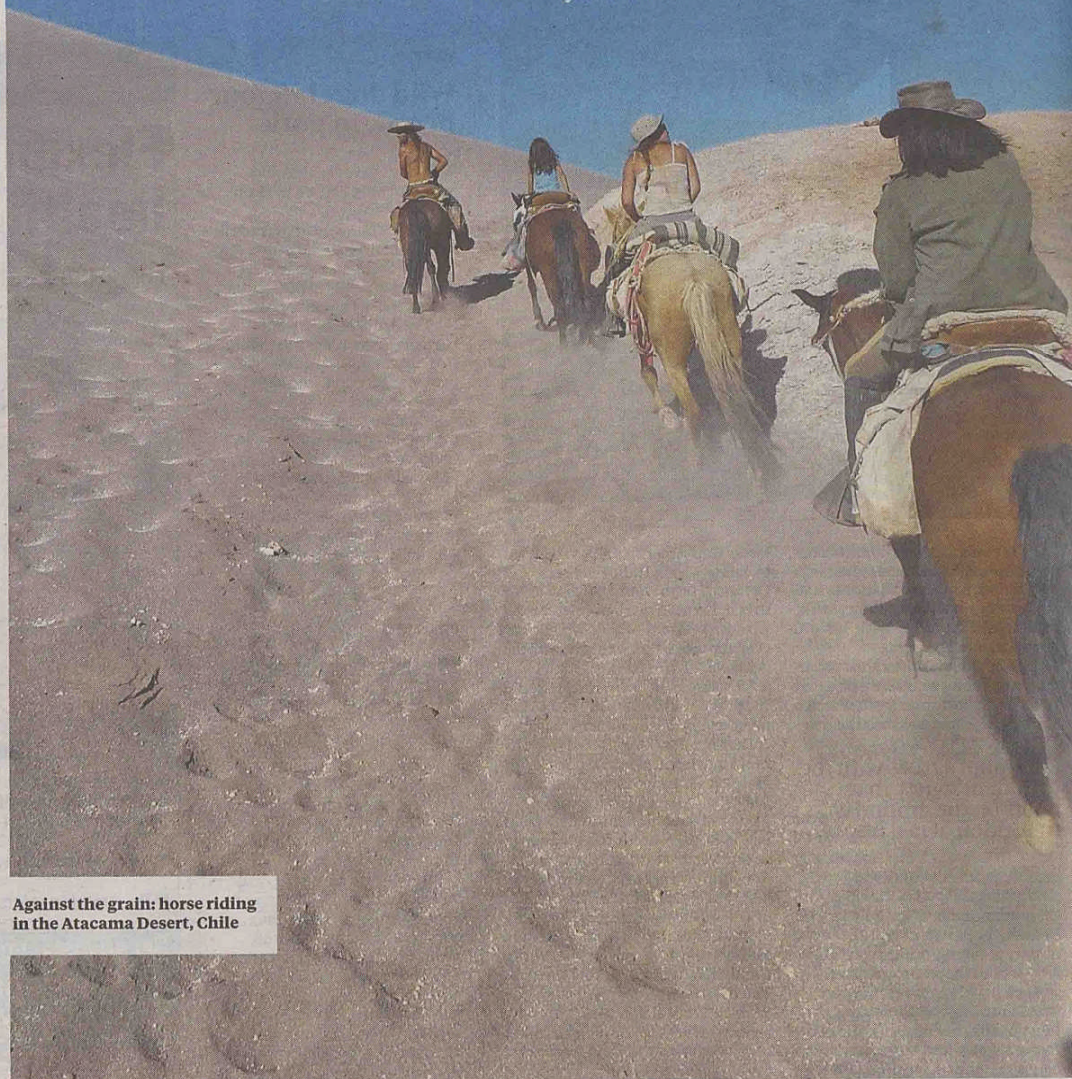
Trekking in Egypt's White Desert presents the opportunity to witness what look like snow drifts among sand dunes. Thousands of years of intense weathering have chiselled giant surrealist rock sculptures from an otherwise barren sea of sand. Take in this otherworldly region on foot, sleeping under the stars and visiting sites of ancient archeology, local villages and lush green oases along the way. Original Travel (020-7978 7333; originaltravel.co.uk) has a seven-day Walking in the White Desert trip for £1,000 per person, which includes accommodation, transport, guides and all meals, but not flights. Recommended departures are between October and February.

### Hot to trot

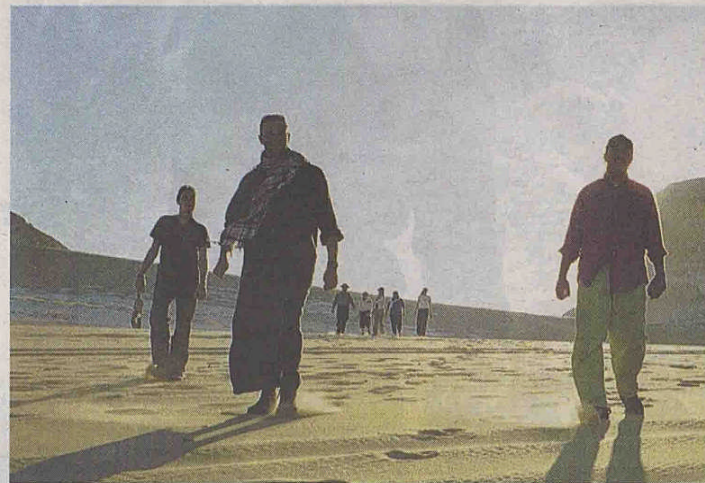
Follow in the tradition of Chile's proud *huasos* (cowboys) on a horseback trail from Calama, in the centre of the Atacama Desert, to the oasis town of San Pedro de Atacama. Gallop along an ancient Inca trail, visit traditional settlements and farms, and sleep beneath one of the clearest night skies on Earth, marvelling at the constellations above you. Unicorn Trails (01767 600606; unicorntrails.com) offers a 13-day Atacama Desert Trail group trip from £1,939 per person. The price includes accommodation, transport, guides, horses and all meals, but not flights. Departs 5 October and 16 November.

# DUNE ROAMING

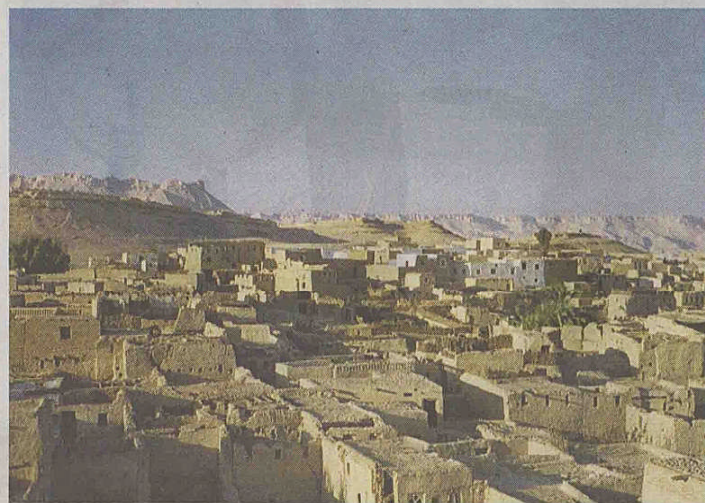
Beat the January blues by hitting the sand. The epic landscapes of the world's deserts offer a blast of sunshine and endless opportunities for adventure, says **Aaron Millar**



Against the grain: horse riding in the Atacama Desert, Chile



Sands of time: (clockwise from above) Egypt's White Desert; camel trekking in the Gobi Desert; lion in the Kalahari; city in the White Desert, Egypt MONGOLIA.CO.UK; CHARLES NORWOOD



### Desert Express

Take a train across the Moroccan Sahara, travelling 190 miles between Oujda and Bouarfa on the *Oriental Desert Express*, stopping off at nomadic camps and isolated desert villages along the way. Along the route there's also the opportunity to explore small oasis towns in this remote desert region and take in the UNESCO-protected imperial city of Fez and the Mediterranean port city of Nador. Adventure Worldwide (0845 304 8679; [adventureworldwide.co.uk](http://adventureworldwide.co.uk)) offers an eight-day trip on the *Oriental Desert Express* for £1,285 per person. The price includes accommodation, transport, guides and most meals. Flights not included. Departs 21 April and 15 September.

### Who said that?

"The harder the life, the finer the person. In the desert I found a freedom unattainable in civilisation; a life unhampered by possession."  
– **Sir Wilfred Thesiger**, British explorer and writer  
"This creed of the desert seemed inexpressible in words, and indeed in thought."  
– **T.E. Lawrence** (Lawrence of Arabia)  
"One sits down on a desert sand dune, sees nothing, hears nothing. Yet through the silence something throbs, and gleams."  
– **Antoine de Saint-Exupéry**, French writer, from his novel *The Little Prince*

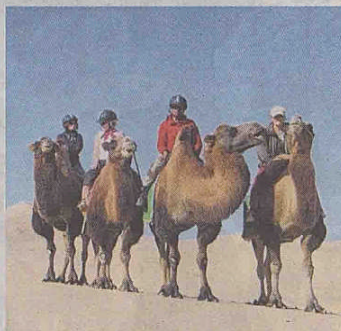


### Careful conservation

Although some of the most hostile terrains on the planet, deserts also support impressive ecosystems. From a field camp in the Dubai Desert Conservation Reserve, there's the opportunity to assist a team of scientists, studying the behaviour of the Arabian oryx and other threatened desert animals. Learn how to set a camera trap, track a herd of oryx and drive over undulating sand dunes. Biosphere Expeditions (0870 446 0801; [biosphere-expeditions.org](http://biosphere-expeditions.org)) offers the six-day Ways of the Desert trip; the contribution of £980 includes transport, accommodation, training and meals but not flights. Departs 20 January.

### Get the hump

The Gobi, a cold desert, was home to significant cities on the Silk Road. Travel like a local through a remote region of the Mongolian portion of the desert on a 125-mile camel-back trek, from the eastern end of the Gurvansaikhan mountain range to Khongoriin Els at the edge of the Gobi Altai mountains. Accommodation is in traditional gers (yurts). Off The Map Tours (0116 240 2625; [mongolia.co.uk](http://mongolia.co.uk)) has a 12-day group camel trek in the Gobi Desert which costs from £2,045pp, including accommodation, transport, guides, all meals and local flights. International flights not included. Departs 27 August.



### Insider Information

"The desert is a purifying experience: comforting and challenging at the same time. It can get freezing at night, so as well as the usual hot weather gear, take thermals. Most importantly though, learn from the locals you travel with – how they move, dress, make a fire. And don't miss sleeping under the stars, it's simply one of the best things you can ever experience."



Amelia Stewart, *Original Travel*

### Clear skies

Desert skies are almost always clear and have very low levels of light pollution, making them ideal territory for stargazing. Spend two days camel trekking across the Moroccan Sahara in the company of a professional astronomer, who can identify constellations. Explorers Astronomy Tours (0845 004 4593; [astronomytours.co.uk](http://astronomytours.co.uk)) offers the eight-day trip there from £999 per person, including flights, accommodation and most meals. Departs 4 May.

For wow factor, time your trip with a celestial event. The Perseids meteor shower is one of the best annual displays of shooting stars and there's the potential to witness them from the Wadi Rum desert in Jordan. On The Go Tours (020 7371 1113; [onthegotours.com](http://onthegotours.com)) has an eight-day trip to coincide with the event, from £779pp including accommodation and most meals. Flights not included. Departs 10 August.

For an indulgent desert experience look no further than the Alto Atacama Desert Lodge and Spa (00 56 2 2957 0303; [altoatacama.com](http://altoatacama.com)): a luxury hotel in the heart of the Atacama desert with its own observation deck, telescope and nightly astronomy sessions. Doubles start at £750, all inclusive. The Atacama Desert in northern Chile is regarded as one of the driest places on the planet, bordered by the Andes that prevent clouds from passing over it. It's therefore also one of the best places on the planet for stargazing, with two major international observatories.

## O&A TRAVEL UNRAVELLED



### This week: Visas – an expensive and time-consuming necessity for a trip to Moscow

**Q** On a whim I booked two cheap flights to Moscow in June for me and my 11-year-old daughter. It seemed like a good idea at the time, but since booking I have looked into obtaining visas and it seems like a minefield of red tape. Can you help?  
Matt Denby, West Yorkshire

**A** You are two of the first people to take advantage of the Russian capital joining the no-frills network from Britain, with easyJet flying in the spring from Gatwick and Manchester to the city's best airport, Domodedovo. After decades when it has been difficult or impossible to find a flight below £200 return, there are at last tickets at less than £100. (Usual rules for finding these apply: book well ahead, and avoid Friday/Sunday school holiday peaks.)

Moscow is the largest city in the biggest country in the world. With eight million inhabitants, it tops anything in Western Europe, including London. The attractions, too, are immense: stand in the middle of the vast Red Square, and the domes of St Basil's Cathedral, the walls of the Kremlin, the Lenin Mausoleum and the nation's foremost shopping venue – GUM – stretch beyond your field of vision. That is just the start of the repertoire of fascination that awaits you. But before you reach the fine art, grandiose architecture and gastronomic adventures, you need to jump through some bureaucratic hoops.

Obtaining a visa is an expensive and time-consuming business that has not changed dramatically since Soviet days. First, you need to get your ground arrangements sorted out – which for your trip presumably means just booking a hotel. But don't imagine that an email by way of confirming your plans will suffice; you need an officially stamped and signed "tourist voucher/confirmation" from the "inviting organisation" – usually, the hotel.

Having acquired this precious document, you can start applying for a visa through the outsourced visa provider, [ru.vfsglobal.co.uk](http://ru.vfsglobal.co.uk). The normal tourist price is £27.60 per person, and you need to allow plenty of time for the process.

A daunting process, and one that you might want to place in the hands of a long-established expert, such as Regent Holidays ([regentholidays.co.uk](http://regentholidays.co.uk)), to guide you through the bureaucracy.