“Look, over here, the leopard is sleeping in the tree,” says Hans-Peter, our guide. It takes our urban eyes a moment to adjust but yes, we finally spot the graceful beast. Staring endlessly at majestic animals is one of the many magical experiences you will take home with you during a trip in the Kalahari Desert, says Emily Goldstein.
The Kubbe Transfrontier Park is the largest wildlife area in the world, covering more than 26,000 square kilometers. It is located in South Africa and is home to some of the most majestic wildlife on the planet, including lions, elephants, and rhinos. The park is known for its diverse landscapes and abundant wildlife, making it a popular destination for tourists and nature lovers.

To reach the Kubbe Transfrontier Park, visitors can take a flight from Johannesburg or Cape Town to Kruger National Park, which is the main gate for the park. From there, visitors can hire a guide or tour company to take them on a guided game drive into the park.

Once inside the park, visitors can explore the different habitats and wildlife. The park is home to a variety of predators, including lions, cheetahs, and hyenas, as well as an abundance of herbivores such as giraffes, zebras, and wildebeest.

Visitors can also take part in various activities such as bird watching, photography, and hiking. The park has several camps and lodges within its boundaries, offering accommodation options for visitors.

The Kubbe Transfrontier Park is a truly unique and special destination for those looking to experience the beauty and diversity of South African wildlife.
Kgalagadi is a bird-watcher’s paradise, with 264 species of birds (including many raptores) recorded in the park. I never thought I was a ‘bird person’, after all, where I’m from (Paris), all I ever saw outside my windows were pigeons. Laying eyes on so many beautiful birds, including the Bateleur, the Kori Bustard, the Tawny Eagle, the red-headed Finch, the Southern Yellow Hornbill, the Spotted Eagle Owl, the Namaqua Sandgrouse, to name a few, readily converted me into a fan. We were especially lucky to see Botswana’s national bird, the magnificent Lilac-Breasted Roller.

Although only two of the big five can be found in the park – lion and leopard – sighting a big cat is always a treat, especially the powerful Black-Maned Lion. We’re lucky, on our first day, barely an hour into our game drive; we catch sight of a Black-Maned Lion, lazing around in the bush, looking for some shade. What a great start!

After a full day driving along the riverbed, Hans-Peter stops at Polentswa wilderness camp for the night (by wild I mean there is nothing there apart from a tree under which you can pitch your tent and a long drop toilet with the seat chewed by a hyena). There are only three camps here. The view opens onto the dunveld and we witness a fantastic gathering of herds of Springbok, Gemsbok, and Eland. Tonight we are alone with the sounds of the bush (and nocturnal creatures) for company. After a long day’s ride, I’m looking forward to a home-cooked meal. As night descends upon us Hans-Peter prepares lamb chops with Späetzle, a delightful Swiss specialty, thank heavens Hans-Peter was a chef in a past life, everything he makes is homemade. We finish the evening stargazing millions of stars canvassing the night skies. Tonight is extra-special, it’s a full moon; never have I seen it so clearly, brightly, closely, so imposing.

It’s five o’clock in the morning and I hear a cry outside my tent. In addition to being frozen to the bone (yes, camping in the wilderness is a beautiful and peaceful experience, but doing so during the winter months was not my brightest idea), I’m now awake, listening for the jackal and other animals roaming around the camp. Seven o’clock; time to get up. This morning the air is bitterly cold; the temperature went down to minus seven Celsius during the night, but as the sun rises, the air quickly warms up. After a much-needed cup of tea, muesli and yoghurt, we take the tents down, pack up the equipment, and are on our way for a full-day game drive.

The day is full of promise. Entering deeper into the Kaa (meaning ‘nothing’ in Seswana, a San language) wilderness trail, the change of scenery is dramatic. Gone are the trees, replaced by arid land speckled with bushes. There’s not a soul, human that is, in sight. Driving slowly on the bumpy, beaten roads, we stop frequently to linger over the numerous mammals that inhabit these dry plains, including Blue Wildebeest, Eland, Springbok, Red Hartebeest, Gemsbok, Steenbok, Jackal, and even an African Wildcat.

While we set up camp, the sun is fading in the horizon streaking the sky pink, orange and blue; the air is cool and dry; we are completely enveloped in silence; what could have felt oppressive for someone unaccustomed to such stillness actually felt perfect.

And then nothing. For several hours we drive, searching for a sign of excitement, and just as I think that this is it, around the bend we spot two Black Maned lions and three lionsesses! After our last encounter, with a Brown Hyena, we finally stop in Thupapedi, in the middle of nowhere, literally. The view into the barren, yet vital, saltpan is breathtaking. While we set up camp, the sun is fading in the horizon, streaking the sky pink, orange and blue; the air is cool and dry; we are completely enveloped in silence; what could have felt oppressive for someone unaccustomed to such stillness actually felt perfect.

After five days in Botswana we head back. For the first time in five days we come across another vehicle and it dawns on me we’ve not met a single soul in all that time. But South Africa holds surprises of its own. Crepuscule is upon us and the day’s been pretty quiet. Stopping to stretch the legs, we find a leopard relaxing in the trees. Stretching will have to wait.

Later, we stumble upon a Sunicate (commonly known as a Meerkat), only found in the Kalahari. It’s the icing on the cake, another pops up and another one; soon there are half a dozen Meerkats frantically spinning their heads about.

It’s over; seven days, six nights in Kgalagadi Transfrontier Park. Words can’t express how inspiring the journey was, and photos can do no justice to the beauty of the animals, birds, plants and landscape. I came back expecting the unexpected, and it’s exactly what I got.

How to get there
SAA flies several times a day to Upington – www.flysaa.co.za; or by 4x4 – 8 hours from JHB

Who to go with
Magic of Desert – tailored private tours into Northern Cape. Botswana, Namibia and beyond – www.magicdesert.com; Tel/Fax (054) 332 5787
Email: magicdesert@sat.co.za

Where to stay
South Africa: (012) 428 9111 or reservations@parks-sa.co.za, www.parks-sa.co.za
Botswana: 09 267 318 0774 or dwp@gov.bw

When to go
All year round – Summers can be excruciatingly hot and winters too cold at night if you’re camping. Fall and Spring are good compromises.