

COMPASS
WINTER 2011-12
BY COX & KINGS TRAVEL

Terence Conran
Don't call him Sir

Burma's Back
We take the road to Mandalay

Deserted Desert Drives
Namibia

North Island
The new New Zealand

Kate Humble
On 23 Degrees of Travel

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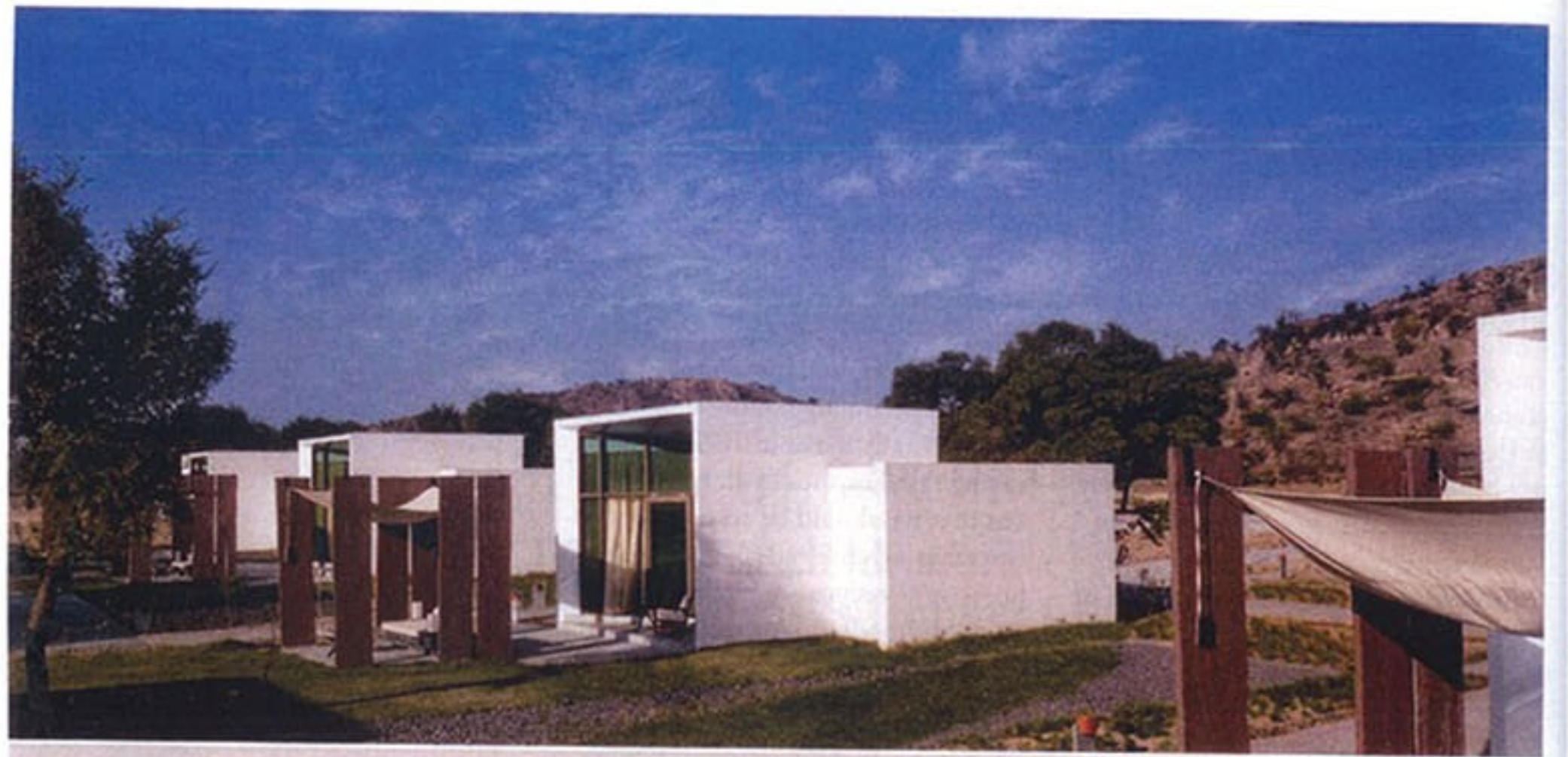
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PITCH PERFECT INDIA UNDER CANVAS

India's tented camps provide a chance to enjoy nature up close, but there's no need to think of them as anything less than luxurious. James Innes Williams picks eight of the best.

Camping has come a long way since the days of Lord Baden-Powell. But to truly experience just how far, then forget the Calor and leave your tent under the stars: the ultimate in camping pleasure is to be found in the ultra-luxurious tented camps of India.

Tented camps allow you to enjoy nature in the most intimate manner imaginable, but not at the expense of comfort. Enjoy dinner by candlelight, cooked and served by a liveried butler, under the stars. Sleep on a full-sized bed, waking to the sound of the jungle, enveloped in the scent of sciacia blossom. Bathe in a claw-foot tub in its own pavilion or soothe away the day with a massage on the private viewing platform. Stress-free, pleasure-rich camping has arrived and India's tented camps are showing the way.



RASA, JAIPUR, RAJASTHAN

This fabulous, futuristic tented camp lies 15km from Jaipur city centre, at the foot of the Amber Fort. Set in an idyllic bowl of woodland and farmland, it is surrounded by hills in an immensely peaceful, secluded spot.

The 40 luxurious 'tents' are state-of-the-art canvas cubes with verandas that are surprisingly private, due to their ingenious design. The tent interiors are spacious, light and beautifully equipped with contemporary furniture and permanent, marble bathrooms. The tents feel snug and cosy on a chilly day, cool and fresh when warm.

Dining here is another treat: whether sunk in the swimming pool; in the timeless yet strikingly new Toran restaurant with its mesmerising sail-like ceiling, or out in the gardens for a romantic private dinner under the night skies.

The stunning landscaping with grids of colourful, native plants, shrubs and trees contrasts beautifully with the white tents and natural setting. Watching the sun set over one side of the property and the moon rise over the other side almost immediately afterwards, is truly memorable.

70

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THE BISON CAMP, NAGARHOLE NATIONAL PARK, KARNATAKA
Relax in an idyllic waterside location on the edge of Nagarhole National Park. With a backdrop of low hills and views over the water and farmland, Bison Camp is immensely peaceful, private and a world away from the city in one of the prettiest settings in south India.

Most of the camp is raised slightly on wooden stilts, safe from seasonal flooding, and the tents are reached by wooden walkways. Spacious with excellent, large bathrooms, the tents' beds are positioned to face out across the water. The two machan tents are enormous with masses of private space and raised 20ft off the ground for the best panoramic views.

Constructed almost entirely of local wood, there is a cosy dining room, along with a sitting room and viewing bar. Here, late night chats around the camp fire and a private bush dinner are things you will never forget. The waterside swimming pool has wonderful views and, as you sit relaxing on the veranda, you are likely to see wildlife, including elephants, strolling by. What's more, it is only a short drive to the national park entrance, and there is the added advantage of being able to travel from there by boat, from your very own jetty.

CHHATRA SAGAR, NIMAJ, RAJASTHAN
Undoubtedly one of the most unique, peaceful and friendly hideaways in Rajasthan, the camp's delightfully comfortable tents are pitched on a dam, overlooking a lake teeming with seasonal birds. Surrounded by grasslands replete with wildlife, the luxury tents come complete with opulent granite bathrooms, small sitting areas and dressing rooms.

From the veranda, guests enjoy glorious, uninterrupted views of natural wilderness. Meanwhile, the camp's food features family recipes passed down over generations, so you'll enjoy some of the finest home cooking in Rajasthan.

The owners, the charming Nimaj family, are personally involved in looking after guests in the nine lakeside tents and the two smaller, but more private, hilltop tents. Staying here allows you to experience rural Rajasthan in a way that few other properties can offer. Let your hosts show you around the farm and local temples, and meet the villagers. Alternatively, take a drive through the grasslands, spying myriad bird species, herds of blue bulls and other animals. Then, return in the evening for a drink at sunset and alfresco dining under an incredible canopy of stars.

RAMATHRA FORT, SAPOTRA, RAJASTHAN
This dreamy small hotel lies in a beautifully unspoilt area of eastern Rajasthan, between Ranthambore and Keoladeo national parks. The 350-year-old Ramathra Fort was originally the 17th-century stronghold of the Jadoon Rajputs and today belongs to their descendants, who are your affable and involved hosts.

Brick by brick they have restored the fort and it now oozes charm and warmth. Set on a mound surrounded by farmland, wilderness, lakes, gorges, plateaux and hillocks, the views are spectacular and, even during the driest months, the area remains green and the lake retains its water.

The six tents are scattered around the perimeter of the garden inside the ramparts. They are spacious and prettily decorated, with fixed bathrooms, and featuring modern, comfortable furniture. The main fort has a further six rooms and two suites.

A stay at Ramathra offers a chance to experience the great outdoors and 'village India' at its best, combined with fort lifestyle and exceptional Rajput hospitality.

SAMODE BAGH, JAIPUR, RAJASTHAN
This peaceful hotel is situated in incomparably beautiful Mughal gardens close to Samode Palace. Comprising a collection of extremely comfortable and impeccable tented rooms scattered around the large premises, it radiates a sense of the colonial, albeit in a contemporary and stylish way.

Fixed structures with modern bathrooms, the 'tents' are spacious and well insulated: walled on all sides, but with a tent effect ceiling and roof. The stunning dining tent serves delicious local and international cuisine and friendly staff are always on hand to serve you a refreshing lime soda or a strong cup of real coffee.

The expansive gardens are among the finest in India. Paths lead between the numerous pavilions and fountains, lawns and flowerbeds; you'll always find a shady place to sit and read or listen to the birds, undisturbed. The beautiful swimming pool is in the pavilion, also home to an airy, pillared sitting area and a terrace bursting with plants. The massage and steam rooms provide the perfect place to unwind and relax.

INDIA | REPORTS



THE SERAI, JAISALMER, RAJASTHAN

An opulent and luxurious camp situated outside Jaisalmer in desert scrubland. The huge tents are magnificently furnished in desert themes. The finest linen, campaign-style furniture, Jaisalmer stone floors, beds and local artefacts all blend to create a classic elegance. With a large sitting area inside and outside, and immaculate roomy bathrooms, the tents are among the finest in India, some even have outdoor plunge pools.

Iconic, isolated sand dunes – perfect for a cocktail at sunset – are a drive and camel ride away. While there is the sense of being remote and serenely distant from the hustle and bustle of the city, a stay here allows for an eye-opening visit to nearby Jaisalmer. You'll enjoy a rare insight into desert life, while being pampered in the spa; dozing by the pool or savouring an impossibly romantic dinner under the starry sky. The camp has a magical, almost fairy-tale quality as it rises out of the desert sands: it is the epitome of desert luxury, exuding style and sophistication, with every comfort.

THE WILDERNESS CAMP, ROHET, RAJASTHAN

Situated 17km west of Rohet, just south of Jodhpur, this fabulous little camp on a small mound on the edge of the Great Thar desert comprises seven tents, surrounded by desert scrub. The tents are spacious, comfortable and have excellent modern, walled bathrooms.

Desert colours create a wonderfully soft, gentle light in the tents, which are set up either side of cosy, deep cushioned sitting and dining areas. It is an incredibly relaxing place to spend your days, and ridiculously romantic at night when lit with candles and lanterns. The views are fabulous and the whole camp is brought alive with colour from the furnishings and boundless bougainvillea plants that welcome you into the tent.

The site is idyllically remote and peaceful with nothing but shepherds, camels, livestock and wild animals wandering around, as the lights of the Mihir Gauri palace fortress flicker across the desert scrub. It is also a bird's dream.

Perhaps the highlight, however, is heading across the desert with the owners, stopping for sumptuous picnics. Venture even deeper to really 'hear' the silence.



SHER BAGH, RANTHAMBORE, RAJASTHAN

This is the perfect jungle camp. Just a few minutes from the gates of Ranthambore National Park, comfortable jungle tents are arranged in a semi-circle around a garden and tented tea pavilion. Each has its own veranda with comfortable chairs, while the interiors are stunningly decorated with elegant campaign furniture. The excellent bathrooms comprise green marble, stone and copper and have sunken showers.

These pretty tents are entirely in keeping with their jungle surroundings and manage to retain the stylish simplicity and

authenticity of original shikar tents, yet offer supreme comfort. Woodland paths lead to the camp fire, a gorgeous swimming pool, hidden daybeds and a delightfully secluded spa tent. The bar in the main lodge has fabulous views of the surrounding hills and countryside.

Here, guests can head out for excellent wildlife viewing, explore Ranthambore Fort, take camel rides or go on bird walks with hugely informative naturalists. Alternatively, just relax by the pool, drink fine wine and enjoy a pampering massage.