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◀ Leap year: with the green list going nowhere, now is the time to dive into a UK holiday

Beat the green-list blues

Fed up of waiting for foreign holidays to return? Desperate to book a summer escape? There's still hope! Try one of these 25 great British options – all with availability in July and August

What was that? I definitely heard two noises. Two distinct noises. One was a lengthy squeaking sound, increasingly high-pitched and ragged, as if the air was leaking from a badly knotted party balloon. The other was a really loud "ping", as if something had reached its furthest point of elasticity, had been pulled beyond it, and had finally snapped.

Ah yes, you heard correctly. The first noise was the burgeoning national feeling of anticlimax at the "green list" of overseas travel options for this summer.

The second was much of the country arriving at the limit of its patience with the whole tortured conversation about traffic lights, amber destinations, quarantine periods and PCR tests, and wondering if it isn't just easier to keep to domestic shores in the coming weeks.

It might be. While it is still too early to abandon the idea of a foreign holiday this July or August, there is no doubt that a British break avoids a lot of the fuss that is now built into boarding a plane. The trouble is, this thought is starting to occur to even the most seasoned of

explorers. At this stage of the year, is there any remaining room in the UK inn?

The answer, thankfully, is "yes". Although availability may be scant in some places, and prices steep in those particularly popular hotspots – Cornwall, Devon et al – that see high demand even in "ordinary" circumstances, there are still plenty of possibilities for those who want to go away while staying at home. This feature picks 25 of them, and in a range of styles and budgets – from cycling tours that cross the Cairngorms and hiking odysseys which run

across the rooftops of the Lake District, to luxury sojourns in Scottish castles and multi-generational reunions in Herefordshire cottages.

The summer isn't over. It has barely started – and it may yet involve Spanish beaches and Tuscan hills. But if, for now, you would rather take the shorter, simpler route to holiday relaxation, you still have time.

Chris Leadbeater

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▲ Hot stuff: the red sands of Sossusvlei, where the highest peak is nicknamed 'Big Daddy' by locals

▲ Groom with a view: an open-air bathroom at Sossusvlei Desert Lodge

GETTY

ard seen prowling the region of late. I made my peace with this eventuality, and drifted off to the symphony of the barking gecko; a species endemic to southern Africa that calls for hours on end in search of a mate during the summer months, only to be kicked out of its painstakingly built sand den straight after copulation, and forced to find a new patch and start the whole sorry process again. I could relate.

I spent the next morning watching a bat-eared fox scamper across the plains as the hot wind tossed sand into the nothingness. There I feasted on freshly baked cookies in the company of a plucky white-tailed shrike that hopped around at my feet pecking at crumbs. I had come to realise that this was the perfect place to be wounded; alone in the wilderness, no one's downbeat companion, free to brood uninterrupted. Brooding, I reckon, is a much underrated coping mechanism. With that out of my system, my spirits were much improved.

On we drove through the otherworldly expanses, past vanishing mercury mirages, to the mighty sand dunes of Sossusvlei. Franco and I tired ourselves scaling the tallest one – "Big Daddy", a 1,066ft-high heap blown from the Kalahari – before sliding down with great relish into the white salt pans on the other side, where we wandered among dead camel thorn trees still rooted, stubbornly, in the cracked clay. Elegant decay was everywhere. Even Namibia's desert-adapted elephants have an unexplained fascination with death; they are prone to carrying old bones around, Franco told me.

We crossed the famed town of Solitaire – a remote graveyard for discarded vintage cars – and wound up at Sonop, another brand-new, luxury lodge constructed – unfeasibly, it appeared – atop a scramble of boulders, and modelled on the lavish explorer's camps of the 1920s. It was a shrine, the general manager explained, "to the British travellers who traded

'Namibia cured my broken heart'

On a journey across the world's oldest desert, with ostriches, geckos and the odd leopard for company, Annabel Fenwick-Elliott discovers the healing powers of the wilderness

I landed in Namibia – home to the world's oldest desert, a place I'd longed to visit – with the weight of the world on my shoulders: moose, tired, and irritated with the person back home who might possibly ruin it for me.

Twenty-four hours earlier I had been sitting at the wanky, too-small table of a grim London café, opposite the man I was once sure I'd grow old with, over two plates of untouched food, hot tears forming blotches on the red tablecloth beneath me.

It was one of those deeply disappointing exit interviews, for which you have arrived charged up with an arsenal of queries and insights, practised over and over, in a desperate quest for truth and a satisfying finale, only to leave with nothing, feeling limp; like a glove that has been turned inside out.

The only question, really, was the unutterable one: why don't you love me anymore? There is never a good answer to that, so he filled the long pauses with platitudes, then got the bill and left. And so I stepped off the plane into the arid Namibian heat carrying the sort of acute sadness you can only forget intermittently, much as you try otherwise. The sort that makes you flinch every time another memory strikes, sending your stomach through your shoes. The sort that can ruin a holiday.

My whistle-stop tour of the nation's south would take me via an array of new, ever more mind-bending lodges that have sprung up in recent years, accompanied by Franco, a kind, soft-spoken local wildlife expert



▲ In no mood for mingling: Annabel takes a bike ride

▶ Omaanda lodge

▼ You are more likely to see an oryx than another person



who was my guide for the week. We drove from the airport at Windhoek straight into a scene of pathetic fallacy; a crashing thunderstorm that turned the sky purple and threw a brief cascade of water over the parched earth, the first rain for many months.

Namibia, a 55-million-year-old desert clinging above South Africa to the continent's south-west coast, is as staggeringly beautiful as it is ruthlessly hostile. Long droughts here are a way of life. Farming is tough and in many cases impossible.

As a result, it is the second least populated country in the world, spanning more than 500,000 miles with a population of just over 2 million. Given that I wasn't in the mood for mingling, this prospect suited me fine. Our road trip took us



South-west through the lumpy Khomas Hochland highlands, before heading down the Great Escarpment into the Namib Desert. Every time I nodded off, forehead against the rattling window, I awoke to a drastically new canvas for the fading sun to paint shapes across: black volcanoes; rippling sandstone; ochre dunes; mountains streaked with

pastel pink; peaks atop with multicoloured chalk dust; and not a human settlement in sight. The desolation wasn't oppressive, it was comforting. As we passed, a lone klipspringer stood stock still as the breeze picked up a plume of dust around it. A pair of ostriches trotted past, trampling tufts of brittle vegetation that were striving to grow, somewhat in vain – Namibia's current drought has lasted for years.

That night, I was the only guest at a new camp, Sossus Under Canvas, a collection of rustic, two-storey huts built from caged rock, old oil drums, recycled wood and tin roofs, situated on the seemingly limitless, near-empty Neuhof Nature Reserve. It was one of the most memorable open-air sleeps I've had, in a bed of crisp white cotton on the roof of my abode, Jupiter shining bright; the sky, far from any light pollution, infested with brilliant pinpricks.

For the first time in a long while, I wasn't fretting over my wretched relationship, but worrying instead that I might be snatched by the solitary leopard

THE DETAILS
Ampersand Travel (020 7819 9770; ampersandtravel.com) offers a six-night trip to Namibia from £3,515 per person, based on two sharing. This includes one night at Omaanda, two nights at Sossus Under Canvas, one night at Sonop and two nights at Sossusvlei Desert Lodge, as well as return international flights from London to Windhoek and a private driver in Namibia.



their beloved homes for the bare Namibian desert dunes". Upon reflection, I couldn't blame them. The following morning, cycling around the reserve's looming geological masterpieces, I came across a pair of puffed-out bloggers. They got off their bikes and asked their guide if global warming was to blame for Namibia's latest drought. The guide shook his head, as if he'd been asked this a hundred times, and said: "These weather patterns come in cycles, it's nothing new."

If I took one thing away from my desert foray, it was that. I'd lost my heart to the wrong person, just like every barking gecko and probably every one of my human ancestors before me. Nothing is more humbling than being in a place so old and stoic that it shrinks your problems into obscurity. I left Namibia neither morose, tired nor irritated. Ready, instead, to start again.

▲ Take a seat: stargaze round the campfire at Sossus Under Canvas

Overseas holidays are currently subject to restrictions. See Page 3.

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