



The vastness. The silence. The nothingness. There's something about being in the desert that gets you, that makes you want to run wild over the tumbling dunes and towering rocks, to play like a child in the immense stretches of barren, lunar-like landscapes that make up about a third of the planet's land mass.

Fortunately, there are plenty of desert experiences that let you do just that, giving adventure-seekers a chance to explore these limitless, arid lands in just about every way imaginable – whether that's from the back of a camel or the basket of a hot-air balloon, the luxury of a 4x4 or the lens of a telescope.

To help inspire both them and you, we've put together some of the very best from countries far and wide.

1 STARGAZE IN THE ATACAMA DESERT, CHILE

The driest non-polar desert, Chile's sprawling Atacama is Earth's answer to Mars, with arid, reddish-brown rock formations rising and falling in ripples, dappled with turquoise lagoons and paper-flat salt plains. Erupting geysers spluttering out of the ground, steaming thermal hot springs and elegant flamingos hobbling along make it a hit for anyone after a proper adventure, but the crowning glory here has to be the stargazing.

Minimal light pollution, high altitude and crystal-clear skies make it one of the most

renowned spots on the planet for astronomers and wannabes alike, and there's a handful of spots where clients can explore its magnificent constellations for themselves. Among the best is the Ahlarkapin Observatory, where visitors get to view the universe through a high-powered telescope while learning more about its intricacies over a mug of hot chocolate.

If that's not special enough, suggest coming in 2019, when a solar eclipse is set to turn the sky pitch-black. Operators such as Grand American Adventures are offering trips around the event, set to happen on July 2. **Book it:** Journey Latin America includes stargazing at the Ahlarkabin Observatory on its 13-day trip to Patagonia and the Atacama Desert, with prices from £3,968 per person. The price includes transfers, domestic flights, hotels, breakfast and excursions including the Moon Valley, Tatio geysers and a visit to the flamingos. International flights are extra. journeylatinamerica.co.uk

2 FLY OVER THE RED CENTRE IN A HOT-AIR BALLOON, AUSTRALIA

Picture floating over the empty, reddish sands that surround Alice Springs as the sun rises over the mountains, glass of bubbly in hand, clusters of kangaroos bounding around below. Premier Holidays offers clients the chance to do just that on its Australia

Experience trip, with a 30-minute hot-air balloon flight over Alice Springs alongside time to enjoy this iconic, culturally intriguing desert town.

"Seeing the vast expanse of the Australian outback from a bird's-eye view is awe-inspiring," says product manager John Parker. "It offers a great opportunity to spot wildlife as you fly over red kangaroos and plenty more."

Book it: Premier Holidays' Unforgettable Australia Experience costs from £2,949, including visits to Melbourne, Alice Springs, Uluru, Cairns and Sydney, with accommodation, return flights and transfers. A 30-minute balloon flight can be added on from £157. trade.premierholidays.co.uk

3 RIDE CAMELS IN THE SAHARA, MOROCCO

Glimpsing the tumbling, orange-red sand dunes that lace the Sahara is true bucket-list stuff – riding over them in a camel against the evening light of sunset takes that up a notch.

It's one of several iconic experiences greeting guests on Intrepid Travel's Morocco Uncovered trip, which meanders its way from Casablanca to Marrakech via Chefchaouen, Fes and the Atlas Mountains. Others include camping out under the stars at Erg Chebbi – where dunes soar up to 150 metres high – visiting a Berber house in far-out, peaceful M'goun, and exploring Ait Benhaddou,

a fortified red city that was the setting for *Lawrence of Arabia*, *Game of Thrones* and *Gladiator*.

For younger clients, suggest Geckos Adventures' Epic Morocco. Activities such as camel trekking, hiking and sunrise yoga are on the agenda during this 13-day itinerary, which visits desert spots including Midelt, Merzouga and Todra Gorge. **Book it:** Intrepid Travel's 13-day Morocco Uncovered trip starts at £1,020, including some meals, activities, transport and accommodation. Flights are extra. intrepidtravel.com/uk

4 WATCH THE SUN RISE OVER DEATH VALLEY, US

The driest spot in North America and reputedly the hottest place on Earth – temperatures reached 57C in 1913 – Death Valley is about as inhospitable as environments come. But the national park happens to be jaw-dropping with its red-orange, ridged rock formations, strangely patterned dunes, sprawling salt flats and remarkable 'sailing stones', where dolomite rocks are famed for moving along the desert ground, leaving mysterious trails behind.

Once mined for gold, silver, copper and other materials, today it's eerily silent and totally peaceful. Sandwiched between towering, marble-coloured mountains, it inspires a sense of awe – especially at sunrise, according to Malcolm Davies, product destination manager

→ for Funway Holidays, when the sky turns a burning orange-violet. “I always recommend getting up early to stand atop Dante’s View, the highest point in Death Valley,” he says.

Other attractions in the area include Zabriski Point, set in the Amargosa Range and overlooking the tiny village of Furnace Creek; Harmony Borax Works, a former borax-producing plant built in the late 1800s; and the Ubehebe Crater, a colourful volcanic site that plunges 180 metres.

Book it: Funway Holidays offers a week at the Ranch at Death Valley from £586 per person, based on an October 10 departure. funway4agents.co.uk

5 EXPERIENCE AN EXPEDITION CRUISE, ANTARCTICA

Picture a desert and the glaring white, icy landscapes of Antarctica probably aren’t the first thing that comes to mind. But, believe it or not, it’s classified as one, with just two inches of snow a year falling here, meaning it gets less precipitation than the Sahara.

There are adventures all over the continent – from mountaineering to wildlife-spotting, sea kayaking to snowshoeing – and the best way of experiencing it is on an expedition cruise.

If emperor penguins are the main impetus for a trip here, suggest Quark Expeditions’ 14-day March to the Emperor Penguins cruise, which takes passengers to visit Snow Hill Island – one of the remotest destinations on the planet thanks to the ice surrounding it – and offered exclusively by the cruise line.

If clients are more swayed by orca-spotting, direct them to Aurora Expeditions’ Spirit of Antarctica trip on board the new *Greg Mortimer*, which takes passengers across the Drake Passage to the Antarctic Peninsula. As well as spotting these immense creatures at sea, passengers can also camp out on the ice for a night, watching the penguins and glimpsing leopard seals.

But if it’s an adrenaline-fuelled adventure they’re seeking, look no further than Aurora’s new ski touring programme, which offers advanced skiers the chance to plummet down



the likes of Mount Tennant and Mount Hoegh on several of its itineraries, with outings included in the add-on package.

Book it: Aurora Expeditions’ 12-day Spirit of Antarctica cruise starts at £7,990 per person based on two sharing a cabin, excluding international flights. auroraexpeditions.com.au

6 STAY WITH A NOMADIC FAMILY, MONGOLIA

No list would be complete without mentioning Mongolia and its vast Gobi Desert, where yurt camps sit among plunging yellow dunes on one side and sprawling, verdant grasslands on the other.

G Adventures explores the best of them on its Nomadic Mongolia trip, taking guests to hike among the majestic Khongoryn Els sand dunes – also known as the ‘Singing Dunes’

TOP: Aurora Expeditions’ *Greg Mortimer*

ABOVE LEFT: Mongolian cultural show

ABOVE RIGHT: Berber experience in Morocco

and considered the most impressive in Mongolia – before moving on to the grasslands to stay at a nomad camp. Here they’ll enjoy a traditional meal with a camel-herding family in remote surroundings, learning more about the nomadic way of life in this extraordinary part of the world while staying in a traditional ger camp. **Book it:** G Adventures’ 14-day Nomadic Mongolia round-trip from Ulaanbaatar starts at £1,682 per person including transport, accommodation, entrance fees and most meals. gadventures.co.uk

7 RIDE A 4X4 ROUND MONUMENT VALLEY, US

Few sights are quite as recognisable as the trio of huge rocks towering up from a sea of red-orange sandstone, made famous



Falconry in Dubai: If Only recommends Bedouin-style camp Al Maha, A Luxury Collection Desert Resort & Spa, for activities ranging from falconry and archery to horse riding, all in the heart of the dunes.

Kalahari, Botswana: Lions, cheetahs and leopards roam the 20,000 square miles of savannah that make up the dusty Central Kalahari Game Reserve, and safaris take clients out to see the best of them.

Huacachina, Peru: This 'oasis in the desert' has gained clout among thrill-seekers, with dune bugging, sandboarding and swimming in a mirror-flat lagoon among its most popular activities.

Bardenas Reales Natural Park, Spain: The park provides one of Europe's few desert settings, with dramatic canyons flanking sandstone, clay and chalk formations, spread across 28 miles.

→ by John Ford's westerns and several other iconic movies.

Grand American Adventures features a visit here on several itineraries, taking clients on a 4x4 drive and Navajo cultural experience. They'll head out to see sacred sites and ancient rock art on a bumpy, jump-off-your-seat adventure through the remote, rainbow-coloured wilderness with a local guide, before enjoying a traditional meal with music and dancing under a star-covered sky.

Just as impressive is Moab, where the operator's Grand Canyon In-Depth tour carries on to afterwards. Set in the heart of the Wild West, it's a far-out, secluded town surrounded by yet-more-impressive sandstone formations, which guests get to explore on a second 4x4 ride as they

pass famous sites such as Elephant Hill, and ancient petroglyphs that give a glimpse into the American Wild West of yesteryear.

Book it: Grand American Adventures' six-day Grand Canyon In-Depth tour starts at £2,124, excluding flights. grandamericanadventures.com

8 SANDBOARD IN THE DUNES, ABU DHABI

Soaring down sand dunes, breeze in the face, feet strapped into what's essentially a snowboard, has to be up there with some of the most exhilarating experiences you can try, and from Peru to Perth, you'll find it in just about every desert you stumble across.

But for those wanting to combine it with the allure of Arabia, Celebrity

Cruises has the answer: an Enchanted Desert shore excursion in Abu Dhabi.

One of the line's signature Ben Fogle Great Adventures – designed by the explorer who crossed the Antarctic on foot – it gives adventurous types the chance to whizz down the softly sloping dunes while taking in the scenery, before indulging in an Arabian feast under the stars: think grilled meats and traditional dishes served with a side of shisha and an unforgettable backdrop.

Book it: The Abu Dhabi Enchanted Desert experience starts at £286 and is available on regional itineraries including the 14-night Arabian Sea & India Cruise, which starts at £2,519 per person including flights, transfers, drinks and \$300 onboard credit (round-trip from Abu Dhabi). cruisingpower.com



ABOVE LEFT: Navajo cultural experience

ABOVE RIGHT: Sandboarding in the UAE

LEFT: Death Valley, US

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