

WILDERNESS HOTELS

THREE CAMEL LODGE GOBI DESERT, MONGOLIA

It took owner Jalsa Urubshurow three years of deliberations with local nomads to find the perfect place to create this remarkable, sustainable hotel. Near spectacular, fossil-rich Bayanzag (known as The Flaming Cliffs) and backed by the Altai Mountains, it opened in 2002 and immediately brought radical new ideas about both comfort and conservation to the country. Guests sleep in 'gers' – Mongolian round felt tents – which are decorated with gloriously hand-painted interiors and spaced around a stone property styled like a Buddhist temple, but equipped with a bar and snoozy armchairs. It was built Mongolian style with local materials and camel hair and without a single nail. Authenticity is close to the heart of American-born Urubshurow, who grew up in a Mongolian community in New Jersey and became enormously successful in the construction industry there. His vision for Three Camel Lodge was simply to celebrate Gobi life and introduce outsiders to its hauntingly beautiful landscape. With his immensely talented team he's continually refining the place; this year reducing the number of gers from 50 to 35 to give more space and privacy. But the inimitable element here is the outlook. The hotel welcomes nomadic herders to its well, so under vast Mongolian skies there is always the ebb and flow of animals to watch – great throngs of cows, horses, sheep and cashmere goats being driven to drink. +976 11 313 396; www.threecamellodge.com. Doubles from about £400 full board



THE GOLD LIST 2016

SINGITA EBONY LODGE SABI SAND, SOUTH AFRICA

For 23 years it has been one of the best in the bush. And now finally, joyfully, Singita's original safari lodge has had a well-deserved makeover by the South African design powerhouse of Cécile & Boyd. Walls have been removed to let in the sunlight and anything stuffy and colonial, the tartan and the heavy drapes, has been binned, replaced by graphic wall murals and oversized sculptures. The 12 suites have gone open-plan using glass and pale canvas to lighten up the spaces; drop-down tiered decks with plunge pools overlook the Sand River where lion laze on the banks, eyeballed by crocs. The epicentre of the lodge has been transformed with split-level terraces, and a handsome fire-lit dining room where the food is phenomenal and the wine list luminous (Singita stocks some of South Africa's most coveted private reserves and limited-release wines, often bought with repeat guests in mind). The alcohol-fuelled evenings do pose a problem given the early wake-up calls and unmissable game drives at dawn.

Especially as this is, of course, where Singita outperforms the competition: 45,000 acres of private reserve in the heart of the Sabi Sand; guides who quietly know their stuff; and crucial conservation programmes. Singita Ebony always was, but is even more so now, South Africa's safari superstar. +27 21 683 3424; www.singita.com. Doubles from about £680 full board, including twice-daily game drives, and walking or mountain-biking safaris

SONORA RESORT BRITISH COLUMBIA, CANADA

Set in 25 glorious acres of the remote Discovery Island chain, Sonora is reached by helicopter from Vancouver, dipping low over landscape coated in Douglas firs with chunks of Pacific Ocean in between, like pieces of a particularly beautiful jigsaw puzzle. It is owned by the Louie family – Vancouver pharmacy magnates – who turned a basic guys' getaway fishing lodge into this swanky, multi-generation-friendly retreat decorated in spruced-up cabin style. There are 30lb Tye salmon to be caught in the icy sea and black bears foraging for berries along its coastline; sea lions station themselves on rocks near the oceanfront, glassed-in dining room waiting for the tide to deliver a fish of their own. Expert and charming guides lead treks through ancient forests of cedar to spot orcas offshore. Or you can just chill on the deck and watch eagles soar. There are spa treatments using seaweed, yoga, tennis and cooking classes with chef Terry Pichor in the Sea Lion House – an art-filled private lodge of Pacific Northwest-modern fabulousness that can be rented on its own – followed by lunch of pan-seared wild salmon with spruce tips, fresh gnocchi and morels sourced within arm's reach. If Pichor's salt spring island lamb with lavender panisse is on the dinner menu, order it, but he'll also take the coho fish you hauled in that morning and magic it into a bouillabaisse just for you. +1 604 233 0460; www.sonoraresort.com. Doubles from about £530 full board



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The Gold List 2016

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