

The Best Places to Go For Animal Encounters

BY JUDY KOUTSKY

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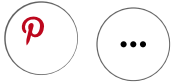
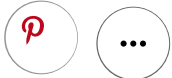


PHOTO: JIM CUMMING

Traveling is a chance to see the world, but it can also be a chance to get to know the species that we share the earth with—many of which would be impossible to see at home. If you really want to make your vacation unique, combine your travels with an animal encounter like camel excursions in Australia, shark diving in Fiji, or tracking turtles in Nevis. Not only do you get up close and personal to some of the most amazing aquatic and land creatures, but you'll learn about their habitat and what it's like to live in their world. And the best part is that these eco-adventures come in different activity levels: some are adrenaline-pumping (like gorilla trekking in Uganda), others are more relaxed (checking out the blue-footed boobies in the Galapagos), while others are ideal to experience with kids (like swimming with dolphins in Mexico). But there's one thing for sure: no matter which encounter you choose, all are simply unforgettable.

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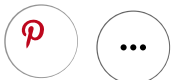
Giraffe feedings in Kenya

PHOTO: DAVID CAYLESS

Wake up to these long-necked creatures looking in your window at Nairobi's [Giraffe Manor](#). Herds of Rothschild giraffes roam freely around the property before returning to the surrounding 140 acres of indigenous forest. The boutique hotel offers up-close-and-personal opportunities with these graceful creatures, including daily feedings and guided walks.

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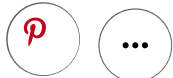
Gorilla trekking in Uganda

PHOTO: GETTY IMAGES

Tracking gorillas in Bwindi Impenetrable National Park means face-to-face encounters with fully grown silverbacks, which are up to three times the size of an average man (yet these animals are playful and

surprisingly tolerant of their human counterparts). While on a safari with [Volcanoes Safaris](#), you spend an hour sitting with and watching these beautiful animals on their home turf. Only eight visitors are allowed per gorilla group each day, so the experience is very personal and intimate. Plus, when you stay at Bwindi Lodge Safari, you have the opportunity to witness the gorillas on property, since this is a favorite haunt of the Rushegura gorilla group (they often sleep at the lodge).

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Camelback excursions in Australia

PHOTO: STEVEN DAVID MILLER

Watch the sun rise (or set) against the beautiful red rock of the spiritual Uluru and Kata Tjuta National Park in the famous [outback of Australia](#). Skilled cameleers will help you guide these graceful animals while describing the flora and fauna of the Red Center landscape around you. You'll learn about the cultural significance of the aboriginal people and their sacred sites. Another animal encounter to check out while in the land down under is the [Kangaroo Sanctuary](#) in Alice Springs, where you can hold a joey and learn all about these fascinating hoppers.

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Swimming with dolphins in Mexico

PHOTO: JUSTIN LEWIS

In Mexico, children and adults get to have an intimate experience swimming with dolphins (and, in some spots, manatees) and learn about what makes these mammals so special. [Dolphin Discovery](#), the largest company of its kind, has locations throughout Mexico including Cancun, Cozumel, Riviera Maya, Playa del Carmen, and Los Cabos. Dolphin Discovery's goal is conservation and education, and they have a team of veterinarians dedicated to the daily care of these mammals—and to help fund research and understanding of our aquatic friends.

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Elephant encounters in Sri Lanka

PHOTO: GETTY IMAGES

Get to know these friendly pachyderms as you watch them eat, bathe, and play at the Pinnawela Elephant Orphanage. Want more? Head to nearby Yala National Park, where you can explore this country's highest plateau while looking for monkeys, sambars (deer), leopards, sloth, bears, wild pig, and ackals. On [Cox and Kings'](#) Sri Lanka itinerary, you can explore animal encounters on this small island in the middle of the Indian Ocean.

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Turtle tagging in Nevis

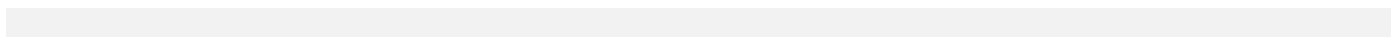
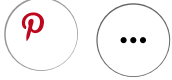


PHOTO: GETTY IMAGES

Reserve a private sea turtle tracking walk with the Nevis Turtle Group while staying at the [Four Seasons Nevis](#) in the Caribbean. The moonlit walk (the encounters take place after 9pm) allows you and your guide to look for turtle tracks to find and tag both turtles and nests. You'll also learn about the migratory patterns of sea turtles and conservation efforts to keep them safe. While at the Four Seasons, you can book other animal encounters like horseback riding, deep-sea fishing, and green vervet monkey tours (these monkeys outnumber people on the island).

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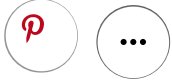


Shark diving in Fiji

PHOTO: TERRY MOORE

Here, you can swim with eight different species of sharks—Blacktip Reef, Whitetip Reef, Grey Reef, Silvertip, Tawny Nurse, Sicklefin Lemon, Bull, and Tiger. Plus, you'll be surrounded by over 300 types of fish. [Aqua-Trek](#) organizes shark diving at Lake Reef, which has a large shark population and excellent opportunities to see the elusive Tiger shark. Stay at nearby [Nanuku Fiji resort](#), which is a short distance away and the ideal spot to base your Fiji adventure.

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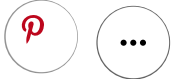


Blue-footed boobies in the Galapagos Islands, Ecuador

PHOTO: ©NIGEL PAVITT/JOHN WARBURTON-LEE PHOTOGRAPHY

The Galapagos Islands are home to some of the most unique species in the world, and [Ecoventura's](#) fleet offers daily excursions through the archipelago's diverse islands—from swimming alongside sea lions to watching the blue footed boobies shake their feet in a mating dance and snorkeling with penguins off the islands of Santa Cruz and Isabella. Of course, seeing giant tortoises is one of the highlights of a cruise here.

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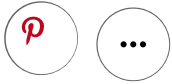


Horseback riding on a dude ranch in Colorado

PHOTO: GETTY IMAGES

You may have gone horseback riding for an hour or so on previous vacations, but there's nothing quite like spending a week atop these amazing creatures. In the heart of the Rocky Mountains, in [Grand County, Colorado](#), there are four world-class dude ranches providing all-inclusive, week-long interactions. [Bar Lazy J Ranch](#), the oldest continuously operating guest ranch in Colorado, has a truly Western horseback riding experience as well as add-ons like trout fishing right on property. [C Lazy U Ranch](#) is known for its rustic elegance and "5-Spur Service," both in the cabins and in its luxury spa. [Drowsy Water Ranch](#) has an amazing kids program for the junior cowboys and [Latigo Ranch](#) is secluded and intimate—the sound of traffic is miles away and the maximum number of guests is 35.

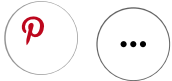
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Puma Tracking in Patagonia, Chile

PHOTO: JEFF VANUGA

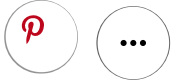
The season to see the pumas is from May to September, when the *huanacos* (a type of llama) come down from the hills to avoid the snowline and congregate by bodies of water. Their major predator, the elusive Andean Puma, follows its prey closely and is often hunting in the middle of the day. The puma tracking safari on [Quasar Expeditions](#) allows you to see the elusive big cat, plus a plethora of other animals—foxes, armadillos and the strange Geoffrey's cat—against the beautiful backdrop of the famous Torres del Paine National Park.



Black rhino and African wild dogs in Zimbabwe

PHOTO: ©NIGEL PAVITT/JOHN WARBURTON-LEE PHOTOGRAPHY LTD

Once spread across the greater part of sub-Saharan Africa, wild dogs, also known as Cape or Painted hunting dogs, now only reside in a handful of countries, including Zimbabwe. At [Singita Pamushana Lodge](#), you have an opportunity to see these beautiful creatures as well as the elusive black rhino (this region has the highest concentration of black rhino in the world). Other sightings in the area include Lichtenstein hartebeest, sable, nyala, klipspringer, cheetah, lion, and leopard.

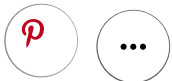


Polar Bears in Norway

PHOTO: GETTY IMAGES

According to the Norwegian Polar Institute, there are 3,500 polar bears in [Norway](#). The best chance of seeing these majestic creatures is via a cruise around [Svalbard's](#) northern and eastern regions. While on this Arctic Ocean sojourn, you are also likely to see walruses, whales, and seals, as well as full grown and baby polar bears.

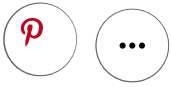
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Atiu Swiftlet and other rare birds in Cook Islands

PHOTO: DANITA DELIMONT

Seeing the endangered Atiu Swiftlet is many a birder's dream. [Cook Islands](#), home to fifteen small islands with 18,000 residents, is located half way between Hawaii and New Zealand in the South Pacific. It boasts many rare bird species, including the endangered Rimatara Lorikeet—the beautiful red-breasted, green-winged variety. Excursions allow you to go deep into the islands—oftentimes in caves—to see our elusive feathered friends.



Sleep among the wolves in Saguenay-Lac-St-Jean, Quebec, Canada

PHOTO: JIM CUMMING

The [Saguenay – Lac-Saint-Jean](#) region, just north of Quebec City, offers an intimate wolf experience in the heart of boreal forest at Parc Mahikan, a wolf observation and interpretive center. Sleep in a chalet on stilts overlooking the wolf den and watch them in the wild while falling asleep to their howling sounds. There’s also a good chance of seeing black bears, and if you still want more, you can sign up for dog sledding adventures.

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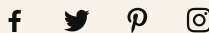
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