

THE

CALL

OF

NATURE

We asked our intrepid travel writers for some of their favorite national parks around the world—from familiar to far-flung. Hiking boots and camera recommended.



Sunset from the top of Padar, a small island located within Komodo National Park in Indonesia.



CORCOVADO NATIONAL PARK COSTA RICA

Seeing wildlife in the jungle shouldn't be this easy: a Baird's tapir napping beside a mud puddle, the pack of white-nosed coati females traversing the trail ahead and four monkey species rotating by. But Costa Rica's Corcovado National Park is like that, a tapestry unfurled as easily as the endangered squirrel monkey's tail.

The wildlife within the 164-square-mile park is hardly exclusive to the forest. Bull sharks and spectacled caimans inhabit Rio Sirena and Laguna Corcovado. And not every species is as easy to spot as the scarlet macaws that fly over in pairs, a steady streak of rouge in the sky. Jaguars are difficult to find; seeing two-toed and three-toed sloths requires good fortune and patience as well. Add the harpy eagle, another rare and elusive resident, and it's easy to see why National Geographic labels Corcovado the "most biologically intense place on earth in terms of biodiversity."

The white-faced capuchin and other monkeys are laden with young when I visit in the fall, the newborns clinging to their parents who skip, leap and soar through the trees. I long to swap eyes with some of the 10,000-plus insect species (Don't miss a night tour!) as I must constantly choose between scouring the trees for 140 different mammals and 367 species of birds and surveying the trail where, among others, the venomous fer-de-lance snake is a common traveler.

—CRAI BOWER

GETTING THERE: **UnCruise Adventures**, an expeditionary small ship operator, collects passengers directly from the San Jose International Airport for Costa Rica and Panama itineraries. Visitors also can fly directly outside of the park and camp at the Sirena Ranger Station. All park travel must be accompanied by a certified guide. uncruise.com

WHERE TO STAY: You can fly domestically to Palmar Sur and take a boat to Drake Bay. **Drake Bay Getaway Resort** is a wonderful boutique property with five bungalows, and proprietors Yens and Patrick will prearrange private tours of Corcovado National Park via a 1.5-hour boat ride. drakebaygetaway.com



Banff National Park

CANADA

At first, fat-tire biking 10 kilometers didn't seem like a big deal. But just a short distance into our ride on Brewster Creek Trail in Banff National Park, the phrase "spinning my wheels" had taken on literal meaning. I spent the better part of three hours pedaling ever upward in my lowest gear as I climbed deep into the backcountry of the majestic Canadian Rockies.

My destination was Sundance Lodge, a cozy log cabin that rewards those who reach it—with hot chocolate, a home-cooked feast, comfy beds and stunning views of the surrounding Sundance Mountain Range.

Established in 1885, Banff National Park bursts with opportunities to delve into 2,500 square miles of pristine Rocky Mountain wilderness. More than 1,000 miles of trails lead to forests, meadows, rivers and glaciers, most of which can be explored year-round. In fact, although crowds peak during summer, delighting in the region's sparkling emerald lakes, superb hiking and bountiful wildflowers, Banff is equally magical when the snow starts to fly.

One ticket grants skiers and riders access to 8,000 acres of epic on-piste and backcountry terrain at Banff's SkiBig3: Lake Louise, Mount Norquay and Banff Sunshine, which boasts one of the longest seasons in North America. Off the slopes, snowshoers trek along the Tunnel Mountain Trail for up-close views of iconic Mount Rundle or ride a lift to explore the powder paradise of Sunshine Meadows. At Johnston Canyon, ice climbers scale frozen waterfalls crystalized into a jagged collection of icy, turquoise cascades. —GINA DECAPRIO VERCESI

WHERE TO STAY: Rest mountain-weary limbs—perhaps with a soak in the steamy outdoor pool—at the **Fairmont Banff Springs**, the "castle in the Rockies." fairmont.com/banff-springs

PREVIOUS SPREAD: KASPAR BOSSERS / GALLERY STOCK (KOMODO); THIS PAGE: NICK HAWKINS / NPL / MINDEN PICTURES (CORCOVADO); PAUL ZIZKA / AURORA PHOTOS (BANFF); FOLLOWING PAGE: TUI DE ROY / MINDEN PICTURES (GALÁPAGOS)



Galápagos National Park

ECUADOR

As we sailed into the waters surrounding the Galápagos archipelago, 600 miles off the coast of Ecuador, I knew each island had its own unique ecosystem. And I knew we would see an eye-popping variety of wildlife: We hiked past blue-footed boobies feeding their babies between their webbed feet. We snorkeled with sea lions, penguins, eagle rays, sea turtles and hammerhead sharks. We stepped around hundreds of iguanas and Sally lightfoot crabs as they scrambled over lava fields. We gawked at giant tortoises mating at the Darwin Research Center on Santa Cruz Island.

What I hadn't expected was the diversity in topography. Fernandina Island, the most recent of the volcanic islands in Galápagos National Park, features jet-black lava fields punctuated with bright green moss and tide pools teeming with life. Seabirds have found a haven on windswept Española Island. On Bartolomé Island, we climbed a dormant volcano to a lookout with glorious views of the sea and neighboring ochre-colored landscape.

These days, you'll also see more and more people in the Galápagos. So whether you take a cruise or explore on your own, look for operators and businesses that are committed to protecting the islands' cherished natural habitat. —SARAH ELBERT

HOW TO EXPLORE: The most seamless way to see the Galápagos is via a small-ship cruise; **Quasar Expeditions** and **National Geographic Expeditions** are among the top tour operators, with beautiful ships and excellent Ecuadorian guides and cuisine. You'll connect through Quito and Guayaquil. quasarex.com, nationalgeographic.com/expeditions