



WILD WONDERS

Ever made eye contact with the king of the jungle? Or tailed a gorilla in its natural habitat? Besides the more sought after wildlife experiences in the world, here is our list of the most unique ones. Dress sober, grab a pair of binoculars and go wild!

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Wildlife holiday is mostly about anticipation and requires a lot of patience. Occasionally something magical will happen. Here are some places around the world that offer a unique wildlife experience, that are rich and abundant in flora and fauna and have a high rate of sightings.

■ GORILLA TRACKING IN UGANDA

After a long trek up the mountains, visitors are only allowed to spend an hour with the mountain gorillas—but it could be one of the most exhilarating, emotional and humbling hour in your life. The Bwindi Impenetrable Forest is home to around 340 of the 800 remaining mountain gorillas in the world. There are four areas—Buhoma, Ruhija, Rushaga and Nkuringo—where they can be tracked. You cannot find any mountain gorillas in any zoo across the planet as they have been known to not survive in detention. Take your time out and meet our ancestors.

Travel Tips Trekking gear and good quality walking boots are necessary for hikes. The sun is strong during the day even when cloudy, so always carry and wear sunscreen as well as a sun hat.

Getting There Bwindi is well-connected by airfields at Kihiki and Kayonza for the northern area in addition to Nyakabande in Kisoro for people going to track mountain gorillas within the southern area.

Where to stay There are numerous accommodation options around the Bwindi Impenetrable Forest. Visit www.bwindiforestnationalpark.com to choose your base. All details pertaining to accommodation can be found on the national park's website.

Best Season As the rains are less from May to February, most tourists prefer to visit during these months.



PHOTOS: DREAMSTIME/SHUTTERSTOCK



■ THE BIG FIVE SAFARI, AFRICA

Among the few 'must-not miss' wildlife experiences in the world, this one is probably top of the list. Referred to as the Big Five (the lion, leopard, rhino, elephant and the African buffalo) this is among the most sought after safari sightings in the world. The most famous area is the Kruger National Park in South Africa, which is also Africa's largest game reserve. The top destinations for the Big Five Safari are South Africa, Botswana, Tanzania and Zimbabwe.

Travel Tips Passports and visas are a must for international travellers and you will require 3 empty passport pages for each country mentioned above.

Getting There Direct flights are available to Johannesburg and Cape Town if you are heading to South Africa. There are few direct flights to Botswana, and most tourists will have to make a stopover at Cape Town or Johannesburg, and this includes overnighting in Johannesburg. There are direct and one-stop flights to Dar es Salaam, Kilimanjaro (near Arusha) and Zanzibar Island in Tanzania. There are few direct flights to Zimbabwe. Most people fly to Johannesburg and connect to Harare, Victoria Falls or Bulawayo on the same day.

Where to stay There are numerous options near and around the game reserves. Visit www.safaribookings.com for complete information on bookings and stay.

Best Season The best time for the Big Five safari in South Africa and Botswana is June through September, in Tanzania it is June to November and in Zimbabwe from July to October.



■ DESERT NATIONAL PARK, RAJASTHAN, INDIA

A protected sanctuary and one of the largest national parks in India, this region is a haven for migratory and resident birds. The park also has fossil evidences which date back to the Jurassic era. Spread across 3,162 sq km, it mostly comprise desert and most of the flora and fauna live on its edges. This park is home to the rarest species of birds, one of them being the magnificent Great Indian Bustard. Also, a wide variety of reptiles ranging from the Russell's viper, and saw-scaled viper, to monitor lizards, can be spotted in the region. Being a desert ecosystem, the landform mainly comprises of rock, compact salt lake bottoms fixed dunes.

Travel Tips Carry binoculars and make sure you collect or exchange bigger currency for small change as very few people have change in rural areas.
Getting There Nearest airport is at Jaisalmer, located 45 km from the Desert National Park. Jodhpur airport is located 322 km away, and it is well-connected to major cities. The nearest railhead is Jaisalmer railway station, 42 km away. The Desert National Park is connected to Jaisalmer by well-maintained roads. Regular buses are run by the Rajasthan State Road Transport Corporation.
Where to stay The Desert Adventure Camp, Jaisalmer (desertadventurecamp.in) is around 15 km from the park and makes for a great base. Club Mahindra Jaisalmer (www.clubmahindra.com/our-resorts/club-mahindra-jaisalmer) is another option and is located around 32 km from the national park.
Best Season October to March.

■ GIANT PANDAS, CHINA

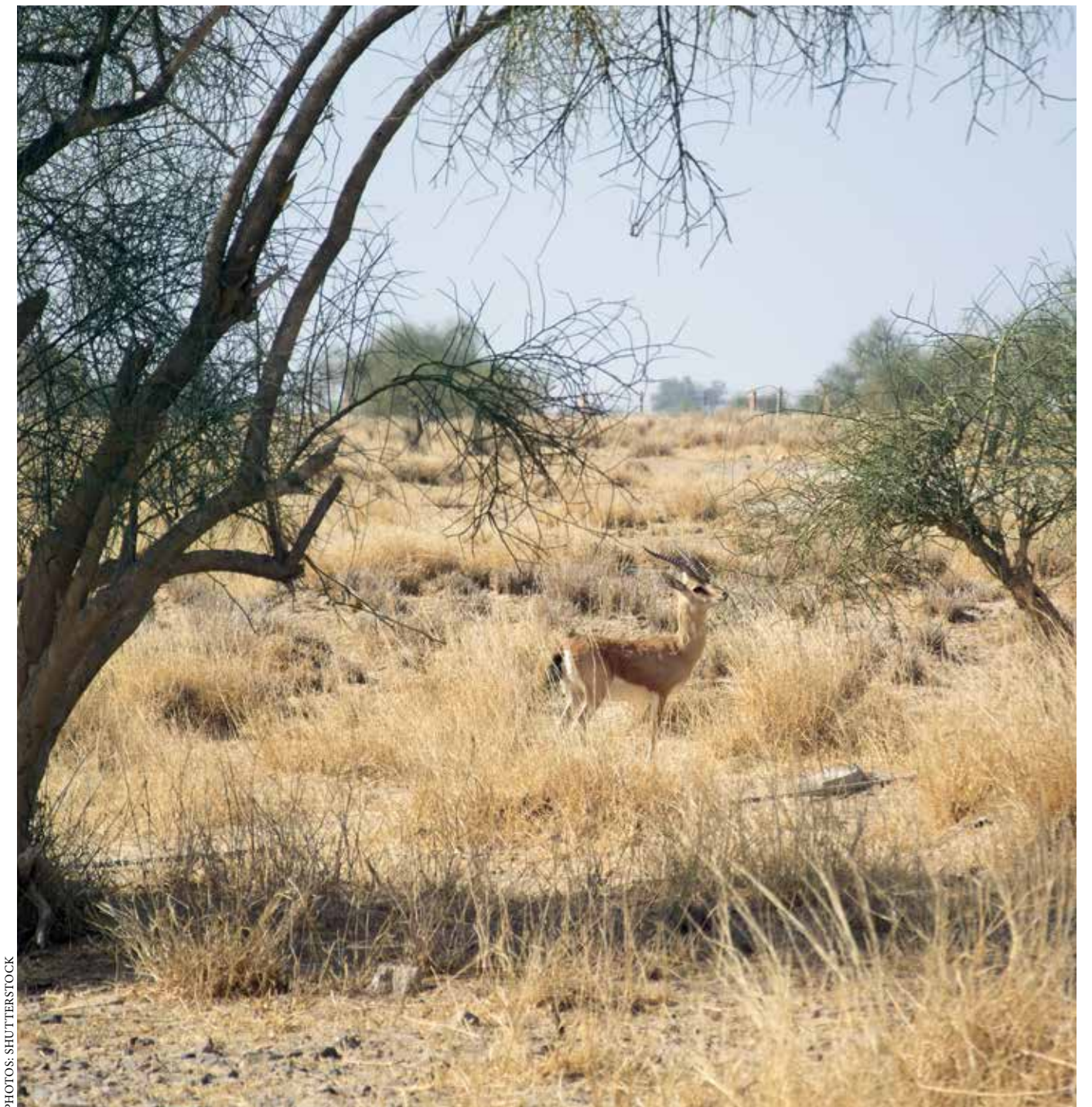
China's treasure, the Giant Pandas, are a delight to watch. With the population rising from 1,600 to 1,864 Giant Pandas left in the world, it is now out of the endangered species' list on the planet. It is also the logo of the World Wide Fund for Nature since 1961 and they play a critical role in facilitating the growth and vegetation of bamboo forests. The most popular place to see pandas is the Chengdu Giant Panda Breeding Centre, which has around 50 pandas. Most of the wild pandas live in the Qin mountains in Shaanxi Province and the Min mountains in Sichuan and Gansu provinces as they prefer humid and high mountain slopes.

Travel Tips In the zoos, the pandas are usually outside or inside a panda house depending on the time and weather. Typically, they can be seen outside between 7 am and 2 pm. They are lazy creatures and fall asleep in the early afternoon. So an early visit is recommended.

Getting There There are many international flights to Chengdu, Xi'an and Lanzhou in Gansu province.

Where to stay There are numerous options in Chengdu like Holiday Inn Express Chengdu West Gate (www.hiexpress.com/hotels/gb/en/chengdu), The Ritz-Carlton (www.ritzcarlton.com/en/hotels/china/chengdu), and Shangri-La Chengdu (www.shangri-la.com/chengdu/shangrila/). You can base your stay at Lanzhou in Gansu province at the Crowne Plaza (https://www.crowneplaza.com/hotels/gb/en/lanzhou), Silk Road and Dunhuang Hotel (+86 937 888 2088).

Best Season Generally, panda tours are arranged all year round, but the breeding season is a better time to visit, which is April and May.



PHOTOS: SHUTTERSTOCK

■ ASIATIC LIONS IN GIR, GUJARAT, INDIA

Home to the world's largest population of and the only refuge of the last remaining Asiatic Lions, the Gir National Park has much to offer the wildlife enthusiast. There were only 18 surviving lions in 1913 but they are now thriving in numbers. These lions are smaller and sturdier than their African counterparts with thinner manes and thicker hair at the end of their tails. Spotting these majestic creatures roaming freely in their natural habitat is a sight to cherish. Also, meet the Maldharis, a tribe that lives amidst these kings of beasts, inhabiting scattered settlements inside the forest. Gir's forested hilly terrain makes it a preferred habitat for jackals, leopards, antelopes and deer.

Travel Tips A limited number of permits are allowed in a day. If bookings are not made in advance, make sure that you reach the permit office before it opens in the morning. Bookings can be made three months in advance. Visit www.girlion.in for online bookings.

Getting There Gir National Park is around 380 km from Ahmedabad. The nearest airport is located at Keshod, 90 km from Sasan Gir. The nearest railhead is Sasan Gir Railway Station. Frequent buses ply from Junagadh.

Where to stay The Sinh Sadan Guest House ((0) 2877 285 540) is government-owned and located at the safari entry point. Other options are Taj Gateway Hotel (gateway.tajhotels.com/en-in/gir-forest/) and Fern Gir Resort (www.fernhotels.com/the-fern-gir-forest-resort-gir). Birding enthusiasts can check into Gir Birding Lodge (www.girnationalpark.com/gir_lodge).

Best Season The best time to visit the forest is December to March. It increases the possibility of sightings.



PHOTOS: DREAMSTIME/SHUTTERSTOCK

■ GALAPÁGOS ISLAND, EQUADOR

A UNESCO World Heritage Site and a famous wildlife-watching destination, it is home to some of the best wildlife experiences on the planet, much of which is native to this archipelago only. From blue-footed bobbies, red billed tropicbirds to marine iguanas and sally light foot crabs, arrive almost anywhere on these islands and you will come face to face with one or the other. Also, the giant Galápagos tortoise is the most iconic creature on the islands—the archipelago is named after the tortoise (Galápagos means tortoise in Spanish).

Travel Tips The Galápagos National Park insists that tourists should be at least six feet away from the animals. Carry sunglasses and sunblock.

Getting There Three airlines fly to the Galápagos Islands—Tame, Avianca and LAN. Two morning flights operate daily from Quito via Guayaquil to the Isla Baltra airport, over an hour away from Puerto Ayora (In central Galápagos).

Where to stay Some of the best accommodation options are Royal Palm Hotel Galapagos (www.royalpalmgalapagos.com), Finch Bay Eco Hotel (www.finchbayhotel.com) and Angermeyer Waterfront Inn (angermeyer-waterfront-inn.com). Bookings can also be made from hotel aggregators like TripAdvisor.

Best Season The tourist season is June to August and mid-December to mid-January. June to November is cool and dry and sightings are higher because colder water attracts more marine life.



PHOTOS: SHUTTERSTOCK/GETTY IMAGES



■ **YELLOWSTONE NATIONAL PARK, USA**

The world's first national park and a UNESCO World Heritage Site, Yellowstone National Park is located in the state of Wyoming in the US and is visited by millions of tourists every year. Spread across a vast area of 2,219,789 acres, it is home to a variety of wildlife ranging from two different species of bears, 322 species of birds, and the gray wolf to 1,100 species of native plants and more than 200 species of exotic plants. Yellowstone National Park is the largest active geyser field in the world. Watch the geysers erupt and see the giant, colourful hot springs. It is home to the most famous geyser in the world, which is known as Old Faithful.

Travel Tips A warm jacket and a good pair of shoes are necessary, no matter which season you are visiting. Make your visit a longer one and book a guide who can help you navigate through the park as it is quite vast.

Getting There The nearest airports are Cody and Jackson, Wyoming; Bozeman and Billings, Montana; and Idaho Falls, Idaho. Flights are operational to these airports all year round. You can take buses or hire vehicles to reach the national park.

Where to stay Visit www.yellowstonenationalparklodges.com/ and choose and book accommodation from the website.

Best Season April to May or September to November. However, different seasons bring new perspectives to the park and offer a variety of seasonal pursuits.

■ **KANGAROO ISLAND, AUSTRALIA**

Australia's biggest wildlife attraction, Kangaroo Island, is the third largest island of the country and is home to more than 60,000 marsupials. More than a third of the island is covered by national park and conservation area. The main attraction are the kangaroos. Other animals that are found on the island are the cute and cuddly koalas, Australian sea lions, bandicoots, possums, goannas (monitor lizards) and different species of snakes. One of the nature's wonders is the Remarkable Rocks which have earned the name as they are weathered over 500 million years and are covered with red lichen and some resemble a bear's head or a whale's vertebrae.

Travel Tips There is limited phone reception, so be ready to be disconnected from cell reception.

Getting There The island has only one airport, which is the Kingscote airport. You can also fly into Adelaide airport and catch a flight to Kangaroo Island. Flights depart twice from Adelaide, one in the morning and one in the evening. You can also take a ferry which operates between Cape Jervis (two-hour drive Adelaide) and Penneshaw. To pre-book your tickets visit www.sealink.com.au.

Where to stay www.tourkangarooisland.com.au/accommodation is from where you can book resorts and retreats, bed and breakfast, backpacker hostels, apartments or caravans and camps.

Best Season The best time to visit Kangaroo Island is during the months of June-August.



■ DEEP SEA DIVING, SEYCHELLES

One of the top 10 diving destinations in the world, Seychelles attracts a lot of visitors looking for underwater adventures. The Aldabra Coral Reef, a UNESCO World Heritage site, is a perfect place for divers. One can spot masses of marine life ranging from the barracuda, giant grouper, and grey reef shark to the ribbon-tailed stingray, silvertip shark and whale shark. The other most visited diving spots are the Brissare Rocks, which are home to a variety of fish species, the Fishermen's Cove Reef, the Shark Bank, a perfect place to spot barracudas and stingrays, Therese Island, the Trompeuse Rocks, which have a thick coral reef and many fish species, and the Vista Bay Rocks, which offer shallow diving.

Travel Tips Depending on season and wind direction, seaweeds plague the beaches of Mahe and Praslin, and swimming becomes near impossible. Ask your hotel to take you to a seaweed-free beach or take the free shuttle services to these beaches.

Getting There Fly into Mahe Airport. Mahe is the largest island in the Seychelles. Another option to reach this destination is to take a cruise ship. Could be more exciting.

Where to stay Some of the best resorts in the Seychelles are Ocean Jewels Resort (www.seychelles-oceanjewel.com), Panorama Guesthouse Beau Vallon (www.panorama-guesthouse.com), Casa De Leela (www.casa-de-leela.com) and Chateau St Cloud (www.chateaufcloud.sc). Choose from the numerous options provided by hotel aggregators like TripAdvisor.

Best Season The waters are calm from March through May and also September through November.



PHOTOS: DREAMSTIME/SHUTTERSTOCK/GETTY IMAGES



■ PERUVIAN SIDE OF AMAZON

The Peruvian Amazon is a part of the Amazon rainforest which covers more than three-quarters of the Peruvian territory east of the Andes. There are three national parks—Manu National Park, Tambopata National Park and Pacaya-Samiria National Park. The area has two parts—the high and low Selva. The high Selva is dry and richly forested and has a unique ecosystem, which consists of plant life like the giant begonia and a wide variety of orchids, more than anywhere else in the world, and endangered animal life like the North American black bear and the pygmy deer, for which the government of Peru has created the Manu National Park. The deeper you go into the forest towards the lower Selva, the vegetation becomes denser and the wildlife exotic. Visitors can spot colourful birds, exotic butterflies and snakes

while traversing the Amazon river. It is also believed that indigenous groups live in these parts who have not had any contact with outsiders.

Travel Tips Yellow fever vaccination is a must, which is provided at Puerto Maldonado airport. Diphtheria/tetanus, typhoid and hepatitis A vaccinations are recommended.

Getting There Fly into Lima and connect to Puerto Maldonado. Lan Peru and Aerocondor operate flights from Lima. You can then get a guide who will escort you up the Tambopata river to the rainforests.

Where to stay There are numerous options, some of the best being Explorer's Inn (www.explorersinn.com/en), Inkaterra Reserva Amazonica (www.inkaterra.com/inkaterra/inkaterra-reserva-amazonica) and Wasai Maldonado Lodge (www.wasai.com).

Best Season May through October is the dry season. The number of visitors and prices drop from November through April as it is the rainy season. ■