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By Bailey Berg • May 23, 2022

# The Best International Trips for Wildlife Lovers

*A curated list of ethical (and magical) experiences viewing wild animals around the world.*



# AFAR



Getting close to the animals. Really close. Photo by Shutterstock

Encountering animals in their natural habitat is a sublime and unforgettable experience—and there are *so many* organizations angling to provide those moments for their guests. For every legitimate, ecofriendly operator, there are untold numbers whose practices are questionable, if not exploitive.

AFAR wants to help you find the best international trips to see wildlife in a responsible way. We have vetted a number of lodges and operators that embrace wildlife viewing practices that are ethical, sustainable, and socially responsible and offer close encounters—without getting too close. This is by no means an exhaustive list of destinations, but it can serve as inspiration for your next life-changing wildlife experience.



King penguins live in such South Atlantic places as the Falkland Islands, South Georgia Islands, and Antarctica. Photo by Shutterstock

## Antarctica

*Famous wildlife: penguins, whales, seals, and other birds*

Craggy crevasses of millennia-old glaciers and the Seussian shapes of electric blue icebergs are undeniably stunning. But penguins are often the major selling point for travelers to the White Continent. The often-anthropomorphized birds steal the show, from the tuxedo-clad emperor penguins to gentoo penguins with their red-orange, lipstick-like beak markings. They're just the

tip of the iceberg (pun!) when it comes to the countless other charismatic species that call Antarctica home. You may also see male elephant seals vying for the attention of potential mates, orcas in pursuit of a Ross seal, and humpback whales seemingly defying gravity as they hurl their massive bodies out of the water while breaching.

Travelers to Antarctica need to book their cruises through tour operators, and trips generally happen between October and March. Companies like **Lindblad**, **Hurtigruten**, and **Ponant** offer expedition-style sailings, ranging from a week to a month; guests disembark twice a day to get closer to the wildlife. Activities could include a hike to a penguin colony, a Zodiac ride among humpback whales, and a kayaking excursion to ice sheets where seals haul out. Each also offers unique citizen science projects and has on board conservationists to teach people about what they're seeing—the hope is that their guests leave with a new appreciation of Antarctica and what it will take to protect it.



Red kangaroos are a frequent sight in grasslands of the Australian Outback. Photo by Shutterstock

## Australia



***Famous wildlife:*** kangaroos, koalas, wombats, platypuses, snakes, Tasmanian devils

You'll find all manner of animals in Australia, from cuddly to deadly. On land you might marvel at the friendly quokkas, a type of small wallaby, on Rottness Island, which lies just offshore from the western city of Perth. Or you can observe koalas at the [Currumbin Wildlife Sanctuary](#) on the Gold Coast; see sea turtle hatchlings on various Queensland beaches; hear the distinct cackle of the kookaburra in Berowra Valley National Park north of Sydney; or watch kangaroos hop across the horizon with [Exceptional Kangaroo Island](#).

Some 70 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander groups have a continuing connection to the Great Barrier Reef, and in 2018, [Dreamtime Dive and Snorkel](#) launched trips led by [Indigenous Sea Rangers](#) who share cultural knowledge passed down from their ancestors. Visit the new pontoon base for Dreamtime's day trips to Moore Reef, housing an on-site laboratory and underwater observatory.

If you'd prefer to put the planning in someone else's hands, companies like [G Adventures](#) and [Trek Tours Australia](#) offer a variety of itineraries all over the continent that feature small-group (important, in terms of traveler footprint) tours with responsible wildlife encounters.





Capybaras are large semiaquatic rodents seen throughout Brazil. Photo by Shutterstock

## Brazil

*Famous wildlife: jaguars, hyacinth macaws, tapir, capybara*

“We had barely been in the Pantanal, the world’s largest tropical wetlands contained mostly to the western edge of Brazil, for an hour when our safari guide got the call from the bush: Jaguars,” says AFAR digital content director Laura Dannen Redman. “Two of them, a mother and a cub. We had five minutes to gather our binoculars and our courage before clambering into the three-tiered jeep, stacked high like a theater on wheels—we didn’t want to miss the first wildlife sighting of our trip.

“That’s not quite true: We had already seen a family of capybara (which look like guinea pigs the size of Labradors) grazing at the entrance to our safari lodge and private reserve, **Caiman**. And then there were the pairs of hyacinth macaws—the largest parrots in the world, stunning in their size (a meter tip to tail) and color, an electric blue like their namesake flower—in the trees above

the swimming pool. Only 1,500 of these beautiful birds existed here in the 1990s, but Caiman has made conservation a priority, partnering with nonprofit organizations like the **Instituto Arara Azul** (Hyacinth Macaw Project) to rehabilitate the species. Guests also get to participate by going on game drives with Institute guides, seeing how they monitor artificial nests and planting manduvi trees that will serve as future homes for the macaws.

“As for the jaguars? Travelers can race out with **Oncafari** (ironically founded by a former Formula 1 driver a decade ago) to witness the new cubs born on the reserve, habituated and growing steadily.”

Sweet, slow-moving sloths are everywhere in Costa Rica. Photo by Shutterstock

## Costa Rica

***Famous wildlife:*** toucans, coatimundis, crocodiles, white-faced capuchin monkeys, scarlet macaws, two-toed sloths

Wildlife abounds in Costa Rica. From the cities to the beaches to the national parks, animals are everywhere.

One of the most popular places to scope out animals is Parque Nacional Manuel Antonio. Even though it's Costa Rica's smallest national park, it is teeming with wildlife. In about 7 square miles, you'll find over 350 species of birds (including toucans, parakeets, hummingbirds, and aracaris), iguanas, sloths, coatis, pacas, anteaters, and monkeys (and if you're fortunate, an ocelot). While you can walk around the park by yourself, you'll learn a lot more if you **book a tour with a park ranger** who is familiar with the rain forest and the neighboring white-sand bay and can often lead you to areas where certain animals like to hang out.

The easiest way to tell the difference between a juvenile and mature blue-footed booby? Adults actually have blue feet. Photo by Shutterstock

## Ecuador



**Famous wildlife:** *marine iguanas, giant tortoises, sea lions, blue-footed boobies, flamingos, crabs, finches, magnificent frigates*

Ecuador's Galápagos Islands are a menagerie of endemic animals, and there aren't many places that can beat it in terms of close encounters with wildlife. Due to the absence of predators on the islands, the animals of the Galápagos aren't afraid of humans. If anything, they're just as curious about humans as humans are about them, so don't be surprised if a sea lion hops up next to you on a bench at one of the ferry terminals.

There are also tropical penguins, the only marine iguanas found on Earth, giant tortoises that can live up to 150 years, and more than 400 species of fish. However, one of the most famous inhabitants of the Galápagos is the blue-footed booby. Named for their vivid blue feet, the marine birds are known for their elaborate, and some might say goofy, **mating dance**.

Those who want to venture outside the islands' few small towns will need to go with a certified Ecuadorian naturalist—it's the law. Arguably the best way to experience the islands is by ship—there are few roads, so boats are really the only way to get around. **Silverseas**, **Hurtigruten**, and **Lindblad** are just three of the many expedition sailing companies that do the Galápagos well. These companies embrace sustainable practices like promoting conservation and keeping a respectful distance from the animals and their habitats.

The Bornean orangutan is a species of orangutan endemic to the island of Borneo. Photo by Shutterstock

## Indonesia

***Famous wildlife:** elephants, orangutans, Sumatran tigers, sun bears, komodo dragons, giant squirrels, Javan rhinoceroses, black macaques*

There are more than 17,000 islands in Indonesia, and of those, around 8,000 are inhabited only by animals. And the diversity is astounding. Roughly 12 percent of the world's mammal species and 17 percent of its bird species live in Indonesia. New species are still being recorded: **Tapanuli orangutans were only discovered in 2017.**

Wildlife experiences in Indonesia could include seeing a 10-foot-long Komodo dragon in Komodo National Park; spotting the world's smallest primate, the pygmy tarsier, in Sulawesi; coming face to face with orangutans in Borneo; stalking tigers at night in Kerinci Seblat National Park; and perhaps even glimpsing one of the 60 Javan rhinos left in the world at Ujung Kulon National Park in Java.

For those interested in seeing Borneo's tigers, rhinos, and elephants, **Borneo Eco Tours** offers an array of responsible, animal-focused tours. Travelers keen on spotting a Komodo dragon can book a trip with **Aqua Expeditions**, which has a seven-night cruise from Bali to Komodo National Park, wherein it teaches guests about marine conservation. Hoping to commune with orangutans? **Audley Travel** (a company with extensive animal welfare and carbon offset policies) has an **11-day trip through Java and Sumatra**.

Lions at Maasai Mara live in prides of 15 to 20 members, with up to three males, several adult females, as well as some subadults and cubs. Photo by Shutterstock

## Kenya

***Famous wildlife:** lions, cheetahs, hyenas, jackals, bat-eared foxes, rhinos, gazelles, impalas, giraffes, zebras, warthogs, flamingos*

Kenya continues to do commendable work in wildlife conservation, and for that reason, safaris in this East African country are enormously popular.



A trip to Maasai Mara National Reserve might include watching prides of lions, elusive leopards, or a clan of hyenas follow great herds of wildebeests and zebras. In Amboseli National Park, travelers can photograph large-tusked elephants with the snow-capped Mount Kilimanjaro in the background. On the Lailipia Plateau it's possible to view black rhinos, and at Samburu National Reserve blue-legged Somali ostriches roam. Along the Kenyan coast, divers can swim alongside whale sharks and humpback whales. And at Nairobi National Park visitors can view elephant calves.

You'd be remiss not to spend at least two weeks in Kenya—there's so much to see and do. And even then, you'll wish you'd stayed longer. Companies like [Trafalgar](#), [go2Africa](#), and [Matriarch Africa](#) can organize customized tours based on travelers' interests. They can also take travelers to less crowded spots, where their tourism dollars will have a greater impact on the community.

Madagascar is the only place lemurs naturally call home. Photo by Shutterstock

## Madagascar

***Famous wildlife:*** *lemurs, fossas, whales, chameleons, a variety of endemic bird species*

For wildlife and nature lovers, Madagascar is hard to beat. Sometimes referred to as the world's eighth continent, this island nation is home to a variety of plants and animals—90 percent of which **live nowhere else**. A trip to the island could mean swimming beside coral fish and turtles in the reefs off Nosy Be; exploring limestone pillars and bat-filled caves at Tsingy de Bemaraha; stumbling on the world's smallest chameleon in the rain forests of Ranomafana; watching lemurs swing from baobab trees in the desert-like terrain at the Avenue des Baobabs; or bird-watching while hiking the mountains and rocky, moonlike plateaus of Andringitra or Isalo National Parks.

Limited domestic flights and rough roads off the RN7 (Madagascar's main north-south highway) make traveling between parks a challenge. It's easiest to go with a guide or tour group, such as **Intrepid** or **G Adventures**, which have naturalists on staff to explain how Madagascar's rich, endemic biodiversity affects the rest of the world. Travel is best during the country's dry season (roughly May through October) when dirt roads are far less likely to get washed out by heavy rains.

Gray whales give birth only in Baja California. Photo by Shutterstock

## Mexico

***Famous wildlife:** multiple species of whales, whale sharks, sea turtles, sea lions, ospreys, pronghorns, gray foxes, turkey vultures, various shorebirds*

Mexico is wildly (see what we did there) diverse. Scientists estimate the country is home to about 12 percent of the world's biodiversity, with roughly 1,000 bird species, more than 1,500 mammals, amphibians, and reptiles, upwards of 1,800 species of butterflies, and an untold number of fish and sea-dwelling mammals.

Wildlife lovers flock to Baja California because it's one of the best places in the world to spot whales. Gray whales, blue whales, humpbacks, fin whales, and more gather off the Pacific coast's warm, shallow waters to birth their calves from December to April. In fact, gray whales give birth



only in Baja, so your chances of seeing a newborn calf are good. The peninsula also offers opportunities to spot whale sharks, turtles, dolphins, and seals in the water, as well as ospreys, pronghorns, gray foxes, and turkey vultures on land.

While myriad operators throughout the peninsula offer whale watching tours, some are better than others in terms of sustainable and responsible practices. **Pachico's Eco Tours**, **Adventures in Baja**, and **Whale Watch Cabo** are among the operators that understand the importance of conservation—that manifests by staying a respectful distance from the whales, operating smaller, greener boats, and by using guides who can talk about why whale conservation is so important.

A variety of animals congregate around a waterhole in Etosha National Park. Photo by Shutterstock

## Namibia

*Famous wildlife: lions, hippos, giraffes, ostriches, baboons, springboks, wild dogs, kudus, oryx*

Etosha National Park is characterized by its otherworldly salt pans, which stretch for 1,900 square miles and are so substantial they are visible from space. Yet even in this arid landscape, wildlife is abundant because of the plethora of watering holes throughout the park. You'll see herds of zebras, elephants, and springboks coming together at these vital pools over a drink. Lions, rhinos, hippos, and ostriches are also common. (More than 100 species of mammals live within the park limits.) Responsible safari outfitters and conservationists include [Mushara Bush Camp](#), [Mokuti Etosha Lodge](#), [Onguma Tented Camp at Waterhole](#), and [Little Ongava](#).

Namibia also has the most cheetahs of any country in the world. The fleet-footed cats can be seen throughout Namibia; perhaps your best chance of viewing them is at the 77-square-mile Okonjima Nature Reserve. Here you may also spot leopards, brown hyenas, and even elusive pangolins. [Okonjima Lodge](#) offers day, evening, and nocturnal game drives.

Highland cows live in wet and mountainous grassland in Scotland. Photo by Shutterstock

## Scotland

**Famous wildlife:** *Highland cows, Scottish wildcats, golden eagles, pine martens, red deer, capercaillie, badgers, humpback whales, otters, puffins*

Despite its small size, Scotland contains some of the largest wilderness areas left in Europe.

In its vast, water-logged moorlands, you'll find red deer and red grouse, Britain's only native endemic species. Its dense forests contain red squirrels, capercaillie, pine martens, and Scottish wildcats. Its mystical highlands are home to the classic Highland cow, famous for its shaggy red fur, and the fast and nimble golden eagle. And along its craggy coast, you'll see gray seals, humpback whales, otters, puffins, and bottlenose dolphins.

One way to view wildlife is on a walking tour. **Wilderness Scotland** offers guided multiday hikes along single-track trails **in sparsely populated Assynt**, a region on the west coast of Scotland, between glistening lochs and dizzying mountains. If you're not keen on lacing up your hiking boots, the company offers less demanding wildlife tours, such as a **seven-day boat tour to the remote Atlantic islands of St. Kilda**, where birds are abundant.

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### Tanzania Safari: Ruaha & Nyerere National Parks



### Tanzania

**Famous wildlife:** *cheetahs, lions, wildebeests, gazelles, ostriches, elephants, giraffes, crocodiles, leopards*



Picture 2 million wildebeests roaming the plains, elephants showing their young the seasonal migration routes, lion prides lounging on warm rocks, and crocodiles basking on the riverbank. That's only a small portion of what makes the vast Serengeti National Park such an inspiring safari destination. Some eco-conscious safari camps (both in design and practice) that get guests up close to the action include [andBeyond Grumeti Serengeti Tented Camp](#), [Melia Serengeti Lodge](#), [Namiri Plains](#), [Ubuntu Migration Camp](#), and [Sanctuary Kusini](#).

Farther south, at Nyerere National Park (formerly Selous Game Reserve), the scene is completely different. Because the climate is more tropical and the Rufiji River bisects the reserve, the landscape is greener. Beneath the shade of the Borassus palms, hippos graze on plant life, Goliath heron wade into shallow marshes in search of their next fish dinner, and African buffalo move in great herds. Thanks to the remoteness of the reserve, there aren't as many safari lodges as in other places in East Africa. But fewer lodges mean higher chances of alone time with wildlife. A few ideal bases include [Beho Beho Camp](#), [Rufiji River Camp](#), and [Roho ya Selous](#). Tour specialists, like [go2africa](#) can arrange itineraries that connect multiple national parks in Tanzania.

*Sarah Reid and Jessie Beck contributed to this reporting.*

**>>Next: [The Great Nebraska Migration of the Sandhill Cranes and the Birders Who Love Them](#)**

## Bailey Berg

Bailey Berg is the associate travel news editor at AFAR, where she covers breaking news, trends, tips, sustainability, the outdoors, and more. When not interviewing sources or writing articles, she can be found exploring art galleries, visiting craft breweries, hiking with her dogs, and planning her next adventure (at present, she's been to 75+ countries and hopes to spend time in every one someday).

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