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## ENCOUNTERS IN THE WILD

From rainforests and mountain ranges to remote islands, this is the time of year when wildlife thrives across the world's most extraordinary landscapes and marine habitats. Lauren Jade Hill readies her telephoto for the action



Clockwise from far left: Catch sight of leopard; and lion; a stay at Nomad Serengeti; the dining 'room'; the thundering herds

## THE SERENGETI, TANZANIA

**Why go** Endless grassy plains, acacia woodland, great twisting rivers and dramatic granite outcrops make up this vast Unesco World Heritage ecosystem, home to Africa's largest lion population, along with leopards, elephants, rhinos and buffaloes among its teeming wildlife. The annual, circular Great Migration of around two million wildebeest and zebra passes through the Serengeti-Mara ecosystem – moving between Serengeti National Park and Kenya's Maasai Mara – throughout the seasons, giving unrivalled opportunities to witness predator-prey interactions. At this time of year, the tail end of calving season sees what's recognised as the world's largest land animal migration begin to move across the Southern

Serengeti, and the Ndotu area specifically, making it possible to see the new calves while also catching sight of the thundering herds as they begin to move north.

**How to do it** For the best chances of seeing the Great Migration, book into a mobile camp, such as Nomad Tanzania's Serengeti Safari Camp, which follows the action. Each day, 4x4 game drives take you into an extraordinary environment. Set out early to see wildlife before it retreats from the heat, then follow a siesta with afternoon exploration and a sundowner.

**The details** Nomad Tanzania's Serengeti Safari Camp from £1,004pp per night, including meals, activities, guiding, park fees and logistical transfer flights. [nomad-tanzania.com](http://nomad-tanzania.com)





RAJA AMPAT, INDONESIA

**Why go** Meaning 'Four Kings', Raja Ampat lies right at the heart of the Coral Triangle – a vast marine area renowned for being the global epicentre of marine biodiversity, with 76 per cent of the world's coral species. Raja Ampat stands out, in particular, as one of the most biodiverse regions on Earth. Despite taking its name from its four major islands – Waigeo, Misool, Salawati, and Batanta – this West Papuan archipelago contains more than 1,500 small islands and cays. Here, emerald jungle clammers across the limestone islands that dot these impossibly turquoise waters, making them a sight to behold. White-sand shores fringe the isolated islets, and villages of stilted houses are scattered throughout the region. Going beneath the water's surface feels like entering another world, as the intensity of colour and life outdoes that of anything found

above. Vibrant coral gardens provide the habitat for thousands of fish species, manta rays and turtles, with the endemic epaulette shark, wobbegong (carpet shark) and pygmy seahorse among its most notable resident species.

**How to do it** Several eco lodges host guests within the archipelago. With significant distances to cover, though, many travellers opt for a small-boat phinisi cruise. While much of the focus is on exploring the marine environment, days also bring island hikes, in search of wildlife such as Wilson's bird-of-paradise, and visits to local villages and pearl farms.

**The details** Cruise aboard *Mutiara Laut* (the 'Pearl of the Sea') from £560pp per night. Doubles at Raja Ampat Eco Lodge on Waigeo island from £131 per night (minimum 3 nights), including meals. [mutiaralaut.com](http://mutiaralaut.com) [rajaampatecolodge.com](http://rajaampatecolodge.com)



## THE GALÁPAGOS, ECUADOR

**Why go** Located nearly 1,000km from mainland Ecuador, the Galápagos Islands' distinctive environment is unmatched. This remote archipelago, shaped over thousands of years by volcanic forces where ocean currents meet, is home to many species that are found nowhere else on Earth. When you consider how the wildlife of each environmentally distinct island has adapted to its habitat – with a staggering percentage of wildlife being endemic here as a result – it's easy to understand why the Galápagos inspired Darwin to develop his theory of evolution. A lack of natural predators adds a fearlessness to the creatures' behaviour, affording visitors close encounters you seldom come across elsewhere. Springtime brings lush landscapes and warm waters – expect to swim with circling sea lions, snorkel alongside

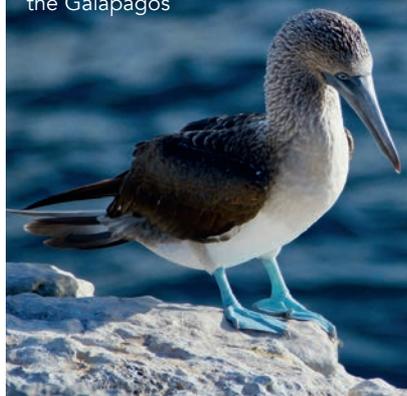
penguins, come face to face with blue-footed boobies and walk among giant tortoises in the highlands.

**How to do it** To cover the greatest distance, the islands are best explored on multi-day cruises like those of HX Expeditions, with itineraries taking in the eastern or western side of the archipelago. Or explore your surroundings in more depth by staying on one of the islands, at hideaways like Scalesia Galápagos Lodge on Isabela Island, from where you can opt for day trips taking in neighbouring isles.

**The details** HX Expeditions' In Darwin's Footsteps nine-day cruise from £5,449pp. Two-night/three day stay at Scalesia Galápagos Lodge from £1,204pp, including meals, activities and transfers. [travelhx.com](http://travelhx.com) [scalesialodge.com](http://scalesialodge.com)



Opposite page: Raja Ampat from above and below. This page: Unique species inhabit the Galápagos





This page: Nest Baja, a base for surfing and spotting marine life. Opposite page, from left: An encounter in Borneo; and Sri Lanka



## BAJA CALIFORNIA SUR, MEXICO

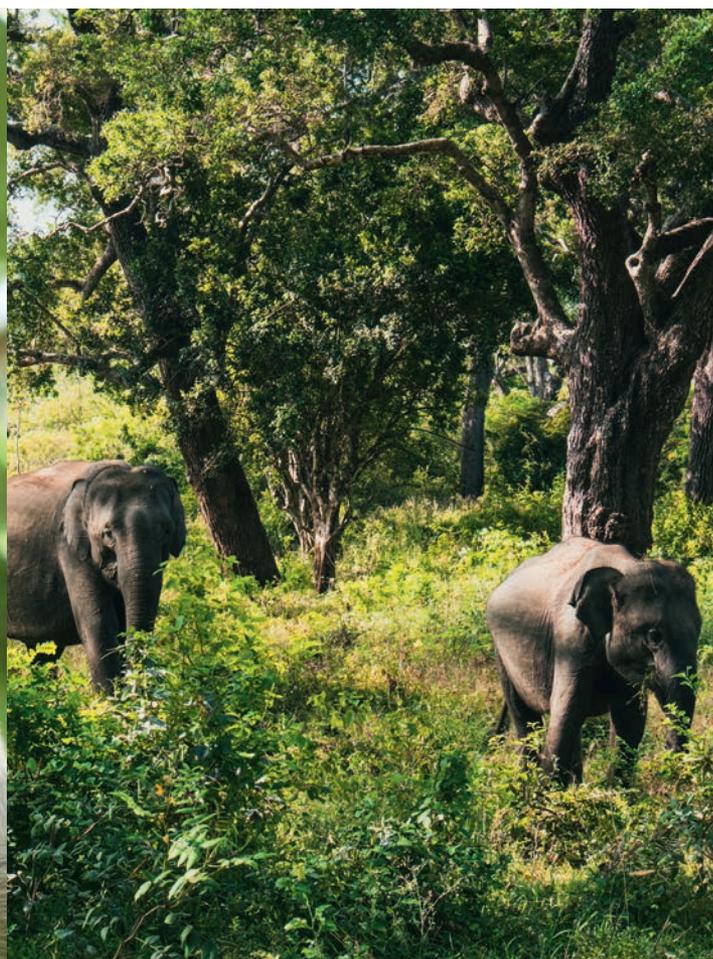
**Why go** A dramatic coastline fringes this exceptionally scenic state on the Baja California Peninsula of north-west Mexico. While one side of the peninsula faces on to the Pacific Ocean, the other looks out over the Sea of Cortez. Here, shallow, warm waters and protected lagoons provide a sanctuary for famously friendly grey whales to birth and nurse their calves, while the nutrient-rich waters of the open sea draw in blue and humpback whales for feeding and breeding. Travel to the Unesco World Heritage San Ignacio and Ojo de Liebre lagoons, to get up close to grey whales on the Pacific Coast and visit the whale-watching hotspots of La Paz, Loreto and Cabo San Lucas on the Sea of Cortez to see blue and humpback whales as they pass through. Visiting between late December and early April

affords the best chances of seeing them along with other marine life, including dolphins and sea lions.

**How to do it** Base yourself at a boutique hideaway offering whale watching tours, like Nest Baja on the southern tip of the peninsula, or opt for a multi-day tour taking in several locations. Journey Latin America offer a 12-day, self-drive itinerary encompassing whale watching tours in Loreto and San Ignacio.

**The details** Doubles at Nest Baja from £204 per night, including breakfast (book whale watching tours separately). Journey Latin America's Self-drive Mexico: Discover Baja California and the Sea of Cortez 12-day tour from £3,000pp, including accommodation, car hire and guided excursions. [nestbaja.com](http://nestbaja.com) [journeylatinamerica.com](http://journeylatinamerica.com)





Spot proboscis monkeys and crocodiles while cruising the channels of Danum Valley Conservation Area, before hiking to hidden waterfalls, keeping an eye out for orangutans and hornbills in the forest canopy

#### BORNEO, MALAYSIA

**Why go** Rainforest estimated to be around 130 million years old provides the foundation for the biodiverse wilderness sprawling across the island of Borneo and, of particular note, the ancient Danum Valley in the Malaysian state of Sabah. Across rainforest, beach, coral reef and numerous protected areas including nine national parks, wildlife is abundant on this northern side of the island. World-renowned as a naturalist's paradise, the Danum Valley Conservation Area is among the most impressive wildlife areas here. Orangutans, among other primates such as charismatic-looking proboscis monkeys, pygmy elephants and the more elusive clouded leopards live within the ancient, extremely biodiverse forest, which is navigated along waterways including the Kinabatangan River. You can spot proboscis monkeys, elephants and crocodiles while cruising these channels, before hiking to hidden waterfalls and keeping an eye out for orangutans and hornbills in the forest canopy.

**How to do it** The 31-chalet Borneo Rainforest Lodge lies right at the heart of Danum Valley Conservation Area, alongside the Danum River. From here, guests are taken on immersive treks through the jungle, on morning and night walks, on cruises along the river and to the Danum Valley Canopy Walkway for extraordinary views over the treetops.

**The details** Three-day/two-night stay at Borneo Rainforest Lodge from £940pp, including meals, excursions and guided hikes and transfers to and from the nearest town, Lahad Datu. [danumvalley.rainforestlodge.com](http://danumvalley.rainforestlodge.com)

#### SOUTH-EAST SRI LANKA

**Why go** As many as 350 leopards roam the grassland and dry lowland forest of Yala National Park, giving it what's believed to be the world's highest density of the dark-spotted big cats. One of the country's oldest national parks, with a long coastal stretch hugging the park, this oceanside wilderness spans nearly 130,000 hectares of forest, tall grassland, scrubland, rocky outcrops and brackish lagoons. Elephants, sloth bears, sambar deer, jackals and crocodiles inhabit this land too, along with more than 200 bird species, including the endemic grey hornbill, to be seen flitting among treetops, soaring overhead and thriving in the wetlands. Water levels in the region are low between February and July – the dry season – making these months the optimum time to visit as the animals venture out into the open. Game drives take visitors in search of the leopards, bears and elephants, among countless diverse species.

**How to do it** Several lodges, camps and boutique hotels lie close to the park's boundaries. While some provide the classic safari experience, others offer a base for exploration of the wider area. Stay at the lodge-style, beachside resort Cinnamon Wild Yala or get the full safari experience at Leopard Trails.

**The details** Doubles at Cinnamon Wild Yala from £254 per night, with add-on experiences, including game drives, available to book. Leopard Trails tented camp from £422pp per night, including meals, game drives and park fees. [cinnamonhotels.com](http://cinnamonhotels.com) [leopardtrails.com](http://leopardtrails.com)

## MONTEVERDE, COSTA RICA

**Why go** Away from the rainforest and beaches defining Costa Rica's Caribbean and Pacific coastlines, wildlife-rich cloud forest draws travellers to the cooler Tilarán mountain range forming a part of the country's volcanic Continental Divide. At the centre of this geographical boundary, more than 1,400m above sea level, Monteverde combines evergreen, cloud-enshrouded forest home to an exceptional abundance of plants and birdlife, as well as mammals such as spider monkeys, armadillos and sloths, with a welcoming community of naturalists and outdoor enthusiasts waiting to introduce you to this environment. In a habitat of around 2,500 plant species, including 420 types of orchid, live as many as 400 varieties of birds. Join a local guide on a birdwatching tour introducing you to the iconic, resplendent quetzal, vibrant keel-billed toucan and purple-throated mountain-gem hummingbirds.

**How to do it** The atmospheric mountain town of Santa Elena is a popular gateway to Monteverde Cloud Forest Reserve, with several eco lodges tucked away in the surrounding lush wilderness. The 25-suite Cloud Forest Lodge places you between Monteverde and Santa Elena on a private 23ha nature reserve featuring its own thrilling zipline and canopy walk. Guided tours from the small town and excursions from individual lodges take you into the main reserve as well as the quieter Curi-Cancha Reserve, known for its excellent bird-watching opportunities.

**The details** Doubles at Cloud Forest Lodge from £323 per night, including breakfast. From here you can book guided excursions, but you could also opt to explore Monteverde Cloud Forest Reserve independently by following marked trails. [cloudforestlodge.com](http://cloudforestlodge.com)



Photos by Unsplash; Zdenek Machacek; James Ting; Eleni Koureas; Michael Steinman; Trevor Vannoy; Alla Kemelmakher; Sage Lodge

Opposite page: Discover Monteverde's vibrant birdlife, including the quetzal (top) from on high. This page from top: Explore Yellowstone's natural wonders, with Sage Lodge as a luxury base



## YELLOWSTONE NATIONAL PARK, UNITED STATES

**Why go** Designated in 1872, Yellowstone is considered to be the world's first national park. This otherworldly landscape has the largest concentration of geothermal features found anywhere, including half of the planet's geysers, and spectacular geological formations resulting in landscapes like the Grand Canyon of the Yellowstone, all lying across a supervolcano. This one-of-a-kind ecosystem provides the habitat for bison, wolves, bears and elk, with the snow-blanketed landscapes in winter providing prime wildlife viewing opportunities in the lower Lamar and Hayden valleys, along with the Mammoth Hot Springs area. The northern range stays open all year, with visitors using snow coaches and winter tours as access. The heat from these thermal areas attracts wildlife seeking warmth and food.

**How to do it** Two of the park's lodges remain open for those planning ahead for a winter adventure: Mammoth Hot Springs Hotel & Cabins and Old Faithful Snow Lodge & Cabins. However, once these close in March and April, the best option is to stay in Gardiner, Montana, by the park's Gardiner, or North, Entrance (open year-round), providing direct access to Mammoth Hot Springs and the Lamar Valley. Stay at Sage Lodge, 35 minutes north of Yellowstone National Park, for adventurous pursuits such as the Wolves of Yellowstone tours, available all year.

**The details** Doubles at Sage Lodge from £248 per night. Eight- to ten-hour Yellowstone Expeditions £965 (one-to-two people; £74pp for each additional guest), including transportation, meals, a private naturalist guide, high-powered optics for wildlife viewing and park fees. [sagelodge.com](http://sagelodge.com)

