



# World's Greatest NATIONAL PARKS

DISCOVER THE MOST STUNNING  
LANDSCAPES ON EARTH



## THE *Lake District*

Enjoy the idyllic scenery of the UK's most popular park

## THE *First National* PARK

Why establishing Yellowstone was "America's best idea"



- ★ Trek across glaciers
- ★ *Explore ancient ruins*
- ★ Go sand surfing
- ★ *Visit the land of dragons*

Digital  
Edition



EXPLORE UNIQUE ENVIRONMENTS



FIND A WILDERNESS ADVENTURE



RECONNECT WITH NATURE



ENCOUNTER A WORLD OF WILDLIFE





WELCOME TO

*World's Greatest*  
**NATIONAL  
PARKS** ★ ★



On 1 March 1872, the Yellowstone National Park Protections Act was signed into American law by President Ulysses S Grant. From that day on, Yellowstone and its unique geothermal features would be protected from development, ensuring it was preserved “for the benefit and enjoyment of the people.” Countries all over the world have since followed in America’s footsteps, and today there are over 4,000 national parks all across the globe, protecting a wide variety of landscapes. These pure and unspoiled areas make fantastic travel locations, whether you want to go camping in the Lake District, hike through the chasm of the Grand Canyon, bungee jump by Victoria Falls or cruise along the tranquil Lijiang river, national parks make ideal destinations for nature lovers of all ages. Read on to discover your next adventure...

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F U T U R E  
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# World's Greatest NATIONAL PARKS

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# ★ VISITING NATIONAL PARKS ★

## THE PERFECT DESTINATION FOR WHEN YOU WANT TO GET AWAY FROM IT ALL

**T**he writer and historian Wallace Stegner summed it up perfectly when he described national parks as “the best idea we [America] ever had. Absolutely American, absolutely democratic, they reflect us at our best rather than our worst.” Ever since Yellowstone – the first national park – was designated in 1872, countries all over the world followed suit by establishing their own protected spaces.

There are now over 4,000 national parks dotted around almost every country, creating havens for wildlife across a diverse range of habitats. From lush rainforests to desolate deserts, stunning lakes and glaciers to wild rugged tundra, national parks encompass a huge variety of incredible landscapes and ecosystems. The majority are open to the public, so that everyone might enjoy and explore these wonderful sanctuaries.

Whether you're on the lookout for rare and exotic wildlife, keen to see some of the world's most impressive natural phenomena and historic structures, or simply seeking a relaxing escape from the hustle and bustle of everyday life, national parks make fantastic destinations

for travellers of all ages. Activities range from peaceful hikes and bike rides to more adrenaline-fuelled pursuits like rock climbing and ziplining – there's something for everyone.

The priority of national parks is to protect and preserve these unique environments, so it is important that visitors make sure they practise responsible tourism to keep both themselves and the local wildlife safe. Check park rules before you go to see if there are any regulations on activities like camping or dog walking, and whether any permits are required.

Many of the world's most awe-inspiring landscapes are protected within national parks



## RESPONSIBLE TOURISM

As any nature-lover knows, the best practice when travelling is to ensure we minimise our impact on the environment so these parks will still be here for visitors to appreciate for many years to come. Individual park authorities may have their own specific rules, so be sure to do some research before you travel. In general, it is best to follow the common-sense principles of 'leaving no trace', such as:

- ★ Take all litter with you
- ★ **Stick to allocated pathways where appropriate**
- ★ Use campfires responsibly and only where permitted
- ★ **Respect the local wildlife**
- ★ Don't take plants or rocks from the area

## GETTING BACK TO NATURE

It's no surprise that spending time in the great outdoors has been proven to improve both our physical and mental wellbeing, but sadly in the modern world it is becoming harder for many of us to enjoy these benefits. Humans have an innate affinity for nature, but consider, for example: how many hours a day do you spend indoors? And when did you last walk barefoot through the grass or sand? Many of us now live in urban areas with limited access to green spaces, so taking a holiday to a national park is a fantastic way to reconnect with the wilderness.

Getting out and about in nature can improve your mood, reduce stress and anxiety, and even lower high blood pressure. Besides the direct health benefits, few things are better for our general well-being than discovering more of the world, creating lifelong memories and marvelling at the many wonders of nature. It's impossible not to be left awed by the imposing 2,000-plus-year-old trees of Sequoia, the glittering lakes of Torres del Paine, the intricate 'fairy chimneys' of Göreme, and many other unforgettable sights to see in the world's national parks.



There's nothing quite like waking up in the wilderness. Many parks do allow camping, but check the rules before you go



“FOR THE BENEFIT AND  
ENJOYMENT OF THE PEOPLE”

*“Take only memories;  
leave nothing  
but footprints”*

CHIEF SEATTLE  
1786-1866

YELLOWSTONE  
NATIONAL  
PARK

**THE**

**AMERICAS**



**YELLOWSTONE**

*WYOMING, MONTANA & IDAHO, USA*

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<b>TIKAL</b> <i>GUATEMALA</i> <b>37</b> -	<b>LENÇÓIS MARANHENSES</b> <i>BRAZIL</i> <b>53</b> -
<b>NORTHEAST GREENLAND</b> <i>GREENLAND</i> <b>38</b> -	<b>TORRES DEL PAINE</b> <i>CHILE</i> <b>54</b>
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— THE AMERICAS —

# ★ YELLOWSTONE ★

THE WORLD'S FIRST NATIONAL PARK IS A TRUE WILDERNESS IN THE HEART OF AMERICA, TEEMING WITH GEOTHERMAL WONDERS

**C**ut by the mighty Yellowstone River, this national park has been almost untouched for 150 years. It boasts 10,000 geothermal features that bubble and steam nestled between lush mountains. Hundreds of waterfalls cascade from clifftops, and 1,609 kilometres (1,000 miles) of hiking trails promise views that beckon adventurous visitors. Almost 70 species of mammals and 285 different birds inhabit the land, and there are more than 1,800 archeological sites within its boundaries. Yellowstone is a remarkable place, and there's no wonder it welcomes several million visitors every year. There are five different entrances and 400 kilometres (250 miles) of road for travellers to explore. There are pull-

**LOCATION** Wyoming, Montana and Idaho ★ USA

**AREA** 8,991km<sup>2</sup> ★ 3,471mi<sup>2</sup>

## HIGHLIGHTS

- ★ Rely on Old Faithful to erupt all year round
- ★ *Spot bears emerging from hibernation in spring*
- ★ Hike up the challenging Uncle Tom's trail

**WEB** [NPS.GOV/YELL](https://www.nps.gov/yell)





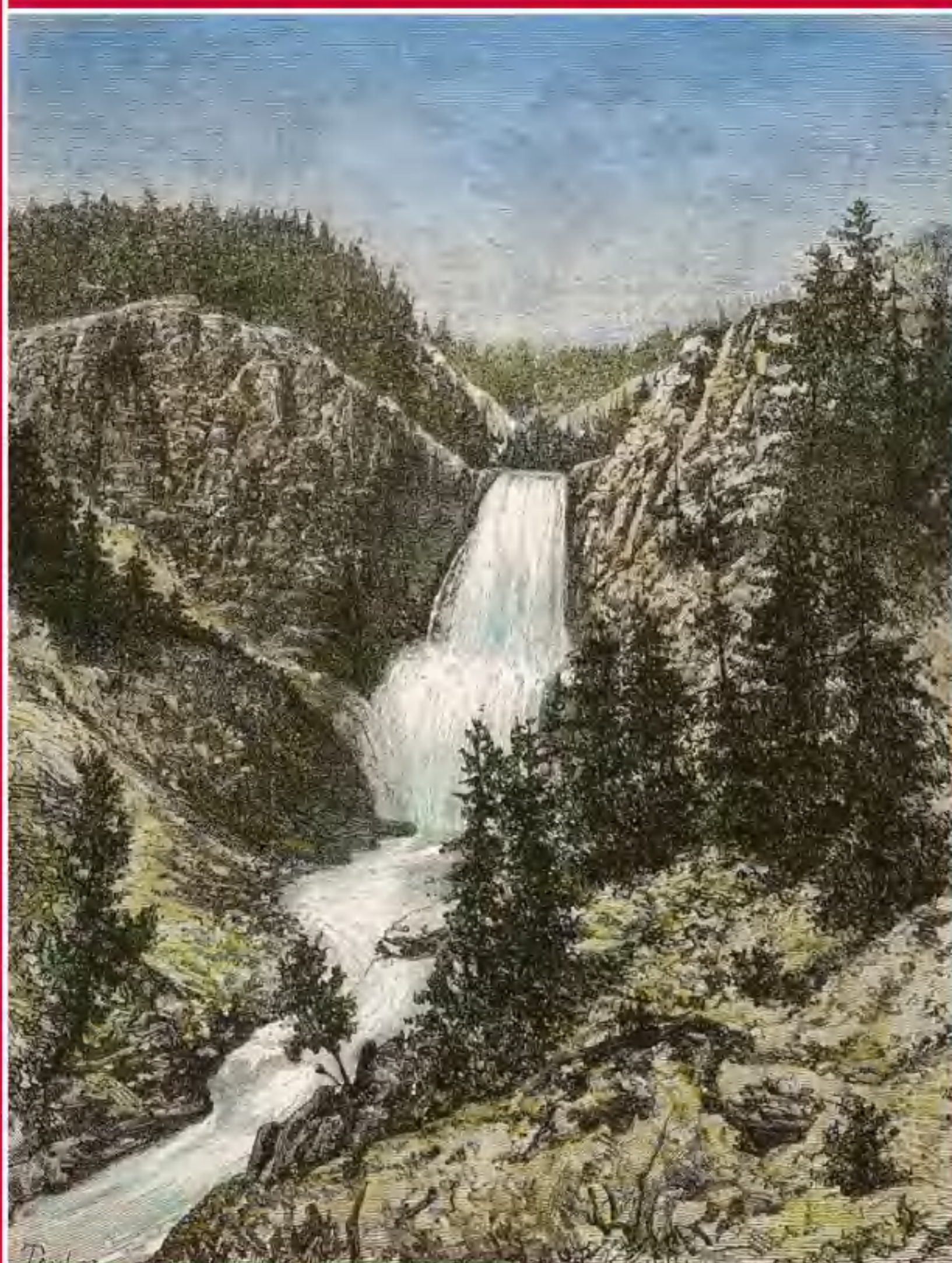
The geothermal sites are the most dangerous features of Yellowstone, and should only be viewed from designated areas

off areas for magnificent sights and natural landforms, along with visitor centres bursting with information about the park's history and geology. Visitors generally drive the warren of roads themselves, but traffic is not allowed in during winter. Guided snowmobile tours are available when thick snow is on the ground.

More than half the world's geysers are situated within Yellowstone. There are almost 500 active geysers that spurt out water as hot as 240 degrees Celsius (460 degrees Fahrenheit). Magma that flows close to the Earth's surface warms up water trapped in cavities underground. Geysers are usually found close to fault lines that have created deep cracks and crevices that have since been filled with water. The fluid soaks into the ground and comes into contact with rocks heated by volcanic activity. The water at the top stays fairly cool and piles pressure on the natural kettle below. This allows the deep water to get much hotter than the typical 100-degree-

## THE FIRST NATIONAL PARK

President Ulysses S Grant signed a bill into law in 1872 to protect the newly created reserve. It was established as a place for the public to visit and enjoy, but also to protect and preserve. The government decided the area's natural beauty and astounding geothermal activity should be open to all to see. A railway was constructed in 1883, and cars were allowed in from 1915 onwards. Yellowstone's boundaries have been altered slightly over the years. Once a plain rectangle, the perimeter has moved to conform to the area's natural topography. Since then, wildlife management has been put into place and the national park service works very hard to maintain the oldest park in the world.



Paintings of Yellowstone were enough to inspire Congress to grant the region its national park status

Pronghorn antelopes are the fastest mammals in North America, reaching 98 kilometres (61 miles) per hour



Waterfalls plunge over cliffs where soft rock has been eroded by running water



Celsius (212-degree-Fahrenheit) boiling point. Eventually, so much steam builds up that it is forced to shoot upwards and causes surface water to splash out. The downward force of the water reduces and the super-hot water instantly turns to steam and shoots upwards into the sky. Eruptions are a common sight in Yellowstone. Old Faithful, the park's most famous geyser, blows every 35 to 120 minutes. Up to 32,000 litres (8,450 gallons) of boiling water blast 56 metres (185 feet) above the ground below.

The park contains four other types of geothermal features. The hottest are fumaroles. These are essentially steam vents that aren't surrounded by water as the vapour is too

***“Visitors generally drive the warren of roads themselves, but traffic is not allowed in during winter”***

Great Fountain Geyser erupts in the world's largest intact temperate ecosystem





It was once acceptable to feed bears in the park, but now even bins have to be bear-proof to stop them relying on humans

## “The Lower Yellowstone Falls are almost twice as high as Niagara Falls”

hot to condense. Mudpots are springs with a limited water supply and resemble bubbling pools of muck. They are normally accompanied by the smell of rotten eggs due to hydrogen sulfide leaking from the ground. Another type of geothermal formation are travertine terraces. Water bubbles up through limestone and absorbs calcium carbonate. This is deposited at the surface as chalky white rock, while steam rises in high plumes. Hot springs

are the most common geothermal feature throughout Yellowstone. Hot water rises to the pool's surface where it comes into contact with cooling air. The water temperature drops and sinks down to be replaced by warmer liquid. This constant circulation ensures hot springs never heat up enough to erupt. Grand Prismatic Spring is the third biggest of its kind in the world. Its namesake colour gradient is caused by microbes feeding on minerals in the water.

Wildlife is another star feature of the park. The area is home to the highest concentration of mammals of anywhere in the 48 mainland states. Small animals like shrews, skunks and porcupines scurry through the vast forest. More than ten packs of wolves hunt throughout Yellowstone, alongside more than 1,000 grizzly and black bears. Almost 5,000 buffalo roam



Bison herds frequently travel along roads, inadvertently causing traffic jams

## BEAVER LANDSCAPING

Though once seen as a tree-cutting pest, we now know beavers play a crucial role in keeping the ecosystem healthy. Damming slows the flow and creates ponds that keep water clean, reduce erosion and eliminate dissolved nitrogen. Interestingly, the re-introduction of wolves had a strong positive effect on the park's beavers. Elk and other deer feast on trees that beavers rely upon. Deer numbers skyrocketed in the absence of large predators, and beavers suffered from having to compete for wood. Deer numbers began dropping once wolves returned to Yellowstone, leaving more vegetation for beavers and transforming the park's waterways.



The second-largest rodents are ecosystem engineers, creating forest clearings and building dams across rivers and streams



over the landscape despite being on the brink of extinction just 100 years ago. Yellowstone is the only place in the US that bison have lived since prehistoric times. An estimated 30 million were once found across the country, but were hunted down to just over 1,000 in 1889. Yellowstone is a safe haven for these giant ungulates and 66 other varieties of mammal. Visitors are warned against approaching or feeding animals because the local wildlife can be dangerous.

Water is the lifeblood of the park. Yellowstone Lake is 2,356 metres (7,730 feet) above sea level, and it's the largest of the region's 600 lakes and ponds. It feeds directly into the Yellowstone River to the north, leading to the park's highest waterfall. The Lower Yellowstone Falls are almost twice as high as Niagara Falls. They can be seen from a viewing platform at the bottom of 328 steps that visitors must climb back up when they're finished looking. There are smaller waterfalls easy to access by the roadside throughout the park that can be viewed without venturing into the wilderness. Visitors can go kayaking and white water rafting to see the scenery from a different perspective.

Thousands of people visit Yellowstone to hike. It's best to go out walking in autumn. Melting snow in spring softens the soil and can even cause landslides, so it's wise to wait until the Earth is rock solid. Even in perfect conditions, a Yellowstone hike isn't suitable for the faint of heart. Many routes involve crossing cold, deep rivers with strong currents, and hikers might

The wolf packs in the park stick to their own territories to avoid conflict



encounter wildlife at any time of the year. Hikers should carry water and be familiar with using bear spray. Visitors are asked to stick to marked trails to prevent erosion and protect people from wandering into life-threatening geothermal areas. Some of the land around geysers is just a thin crust on top of boiling water that would give way if stepped on. Sadly, 20 people have met their end this way with incidents occurring as recently as 2016.

The unique geology and abundant wildlife make Yellowstone a destination for everyone's bucket list. The sights are breathtaking and well worth making the long journey. Summer is the busiest season while winter is the quietest. Visit in spring to see young animals learning how to navigate their new world or head over in autumn to see the leaves change. There's no right or wrong time to visit – Yellowstone is an incredible place all year round.



One of the world's biggest volcanoes lies beneath Yellowstone, providing the heat that powers the park's geothermal features, like the Grand Prismatic Spring

# ★ GREAT SAND DUNES ★

## HIKE UP AMERICA'S TALLEST SAND DUNES AND SLIDE RIGHT BACK DOWN

**R**esembling a huge, wavy sandpit in the midst of forests, lakes, grasslands and wetlands, the Great Sand Dunes are sure to blow you away by their sheer size and beauty. They cover a wide area in south-central Colorado, and the tallest, Star Dune, is a staggering 230 metres (750 feet) high. Formed by San Luis Valley's wind patterns, you can have lots of fun sandboarding, sledging or simply trekking up and down the dunes, leaving imprints for others to follow.

Go at dusk and you can also watch the sunset along the Rocky Mountains and see the sands turn particularly golden and inviting. Spend some time at the visitor centre and you'll be afforded some great views of the dunes and the opportunity to learn more about them, including via a 20-minute film. Once among the dunes, you're left to make your own way around, although you could try to reach the summit of Star Dune. It will take about five hours but it'll be worth every step.

Depending on the time of year when you visit the Great Sand Dunes, you might be able to enjoy Medano Creek, a popular seasonal stream. At its peak between April and June, melting snow from the mountains fills the stream with water and creates rhythmic waves along the sand – a rare, natural occurrence called surge flow. When this happens, the area suddenly bursts into life. People flock to it with picnics, while children take to the water on inflatables and skimboards. It is effectively turned into Colorado's natural beach.

There are many other active pursuits, too. Consider riding fat bikes – bicycles with wide tyres – or saddling up and riding horseback. Perhaps hire a four-wheel drive vehicle, and drive the 35-kilometre (22-mile) Medano Pass Road, which crosses nine creeks and takes you across sand for a quarter of the way. If you'd rather remain on two feet, embark on one of the forest or alpine trails. Or simply go camping and stare at the uninterrupted darkness: the Great Sand Dunes are perfect for stargazing.

**LOCATION** Colorado ★ USA

**AREA** 603km<sup>2</sup> ★ 233mi<sup>2</sup>

### HIGHLIGHTS

- ★ Go sand surfing – you can hire the equipment there
- ★ **Head out at night to stargaze**
- ★ Visit the seasonal stream at Medano Creek

**WEB** [NPS.GOV/GRSA/INDEX.HTM](http://NPS.GOV/GRSA/INDEX.HTM)



The protected boundaries of the Great Sand Dunes have widened over the decades



## ★ SEQUOIA ★

One of the park's biggest attractions (literally) is General Sherman, the world's largest living tree by volume

### EXPLORE THIS MAJESTIC LANDSCAPE WHERE NATURE'S CREATIONS DWARF EVERYTHING

**S**ize is everything in Sequoia National Park. Located in the very heart of California, this International Biosphere Reserve is jointly administered with neighbouring Kings Canyon National Park. As the site of some of the tallest trees in the world, it will make you gaze up in awe.

The star of the park is the General Sherman Tree. This giant redwood is about 83 metres (272 feet) tall, and over 11 metres (36 feet) in diameter at its base, making it the largest living thing on Earth. It's a humbling experience to stand beside its majestic trunk reflecting on the 2,000 years of history that have passed by since it was a seed. Take the park's free shuttle bus to where this tree is rooted and you'll also be able to hike the three-kilometre (two-mile) Congress Trail surrounded by dozens of other skyscraping sequoias that are part of the Giant Forest.

Gargantuan plants aren't the only jaw-dropping sights in America's second oldest national park, though. Just inside its boundary

is Mount Whitney, the highest mountain in the contiguous 48 USA states. You can see the peak from the Interagency Visitor Center on Highway 395. You'll need a permit from Inyo National Forest to hike up it, though.

Elsewhere, you'll find sparkling rivers and lakes, iconic wildlife and, in spring, beautiful wildflowers. Meanwhile, there are more than 200 caverns to explore underground, including the Crystal Cave, which has surfaces of polished marble. The park has human wonders, too: lovers of archaeology can seek out Native American relics, some of which may be 5,000 years old.

Whatever kind of place you like to stay in, you'll find it here. Many of the surrounding towns have hotels, and the park has lodges and campgrounds aplenty. Once you've set up your base, take a drive down Crescent Meadow Road and go under Tunnel Log. Leave time, too, for hiking, horseback riding, climbing, mountain biking, kayaking or just admiring the view. Whatever you enjoy, you are guaranteed a big adventure.

**LOCATION** California ★ USA

**AREA** 1,635km<sup>2</sup> ★ 631mi<sup>2</sup>

#### HIGHLIGHTS

- ★ Set up your tent in Lodgepole Village for well-catered camping
- ★ **For more tree-mendous sites, visit Kings Canyon National Park**
- ★ Take a hike in the foothills for some stunning views

**WEB** [NPS.GOV/SEKI/INDEX.HTM](https://www.nps.gov/seki/index.htm)

# ★ HAWAII VOLCANOES ★

## A LIVING, CONSTANTLY CHANGING NATIONAL PARK – AND IT'S STILL GROWING

### THE END OF A 35-YEAR-LONG ERUPTION

Kilauea is one of the most active volcanoes on Earth. In fact, it erupted almost continuously from 1983 to 2018. In 1990, it destroyed a town, and in 2018 there was a big spike in activity, resulting in the destruction of Vacationland Hawaii and a small community named Kapoho. However, in August 2018, after perhaps its most violent phase in decades, the eruption ceased, and was declared over in December 2018. Despite the lull in activity, you can rest assured that won't last forever, and that Hawaii Volcanoes National Park will continue living, breathing and constantly reshaping itself.



Following decades of activity, as of December 2018 Kilauea is no longer erupting

**F**ew things in nature inspire as much primal sense of awe as witnessing the raw power of a volcano, and in Hawaii Volcanoes National Park, you can witness not one, but two of the most famous volcanoes on Earth. Kilauea is one of the world's most active volcanoes in historical times, and Mauna Loa is the largest shield volcano on the planet. It is these two volcanoes that make up Hawaii Volcanoes National Park, which was established in 1916 to preserve the rough natural diamond that is the southern part of Hawaii Island, the largest island in the Hawaii archipelago. Then again, 'preserve' might be the wrong choice of word here, as those two extremely active volcanoes have been reshaping and transforming the land around them almost continuously.

Kilauea has been erupting almost constantly since 1983, in what is called an effusive eruption, which is a non-explosive type of eruption. Instead of a big ash plume with massive amounts of tephra released into the air, Kilauea and Mauna Loa release hot, dense, flowing lava out through multiple cracks and craters around the park, which flow like rivers of burning, melting rock. These rivers often end up flowing into the ocean, where you can witness dramatic displays of the lava meeting the cold seawater, resulting in massive plumes of steam as the burning-hot lava instantly boils the water it comes in contact with.

It goes without saying that all visitors to Hawaii Volcanoes National Park must take extreme care when travelling there. The park's website is frequently updated with current volcanic activity, which can and often does

result in closures of one or more parts of the national park. The reason is obvious – the entire park is directly on top of two big volcanoes, and new fissures can open up almost anywhere within it, often with little notice. Any safety notices must be adhered to without fail because careless visitors can easily find themselves in danger if they don't – indeed, there are recent examples from 2018 and 2019 where tourists who ventured into closed-off areas were seriously injured.

There is a variety of activities available to park visitors. This includes a crater rim drive tour, which incorporates a stunning view from an overlook point at Kilauea, various hiking routes and programmes, and even classes where you can learn many skills mastered by Hawaii natives and learn about the rich history of Hawaii and its people.



Hawaii Volcanoes National Park is being constantly reshaped and transformed by frequent eruptions in Kilauea and Mauna Loa

**LOCATION** : Hawaii ★ USA

**AREA** : 1,309km<sup>2</sup> ★ 505mi<sup>2</sup>

### HIGHLIGHTS

- ★ Go hiking across the park – bring good walking boots for rough ground
- ★ *See where the lava meets the sea for a one-of-a-kind experience*
- ★ Climb to the Mauna Loa summit, 4,169m (13,679ft) above sea level

**WEB** : [NPS.GOV/HAVO](https://www.nps.gov/havo)



The park authorities hope to soon reopen the Thurston Lava Tube, where molten rock once flowed from the heart of the volcano to the ocean

Puu Oo, the easternmost of Kilauea's volcanic vents, spews molten lava



# ★ MAMMOTH CAVE ★

## ENLIGHTEN YOURSELF WITH A VISIT TO THE LONGEST KNOWN CAVE SYSTEM IN THE WORLD

**D**eep beneath the hills of Kentucky is a limestone labyrinth of caves. But what you'll see if you embark on a journey down there only hints at its true scale. So much of this national park is still being explored, and estimates suggest less than half has been discovered so far. In many ways, this serves only to ramp up the excitement of a visit, and given its spread over five levels, it'll occupy you for some time.

As it stands, 640 kilometres (400 miles) have been mapped since 1838 – the 17-year-old slave Stephen Bishop was introduced to the cave that year, and took note of its features. He was the first person to ever cross the Bottomless Pit, lighting the way through caverns and tunnels using a lard-oil lamp. He also sailed upon the cave's rivers.

Visitors can take advantage of the hard work Bishop began, embarking on tours that can last as long as six hours. For the best atmosphere, you can avoid the routes that are lit by electric lights, and instead carry a paraffin lamp as you move through tight passageways, learning about the early cave explorers and marvelling at the huge chambers and the gloomy yet beautiful caverns along the way.

Often, a ranger will turn off the lights entirely, plunging you into pitch darkness before lighting a match. But whichever tour you choose – and there are some that have you on your hands and knees through the tightest of spaces – you can look at amazing rock formations and, in the Frozen Niagara section, view the stunning travertine flowstone formation.

Even if you stay above ground, however, there is much to do. Forests filled with birds and flowering species surround the caves and are

perfect for horseback riding. The Green and Nolin rivers flow through, and there is plenty of scope for kayaking, canoeing and a spot of

fishing. The caves are the centrepiece, though, and for good reason since there's nowhere quite like it on – or in – Earth.



© Alamy

**LOCATION** Kentucky ★ USA

**AREA** 213.8km<sup>2</sup> ★ 82mi<sup>2</sup>

### HIGHLIGHTS

- ★ 16km (10mi) of passageways can be visited on tours
- ★ **Come across more than 130 species of wildlife**
- ★ See two of the original locomotives that ran to the caves

**WEB** [NPS.GOV/MACA/INDEX.HTM](http://NPS.GOV/MACA/INDEX.HTM)



The Mammoth Cave National Park has been designated an UNESCO World Heritage Site

Spectacular sunrises and sunsets have helped make the Great Smoky Mountains the USA's most-visited national park

## ★ GREAT SMOKY MOUNTAINS ★

### GO OFF THE BEATEN TRACK IN A POPULAR CORNER OF THE APPALACHIAN MOUNTAINS

**E**leven million people can't be wrong. The USA's most-visited national park sees more people every year than Yellowstone and the Grand Canyon combined, all drawn to the region's history, geography and the ever-popular Appalachian Trail.

Being so popular does have its downsides. Such is the appeal of Great Smoky's landscape that Highway 441, which runs through the park from north to south, suffers from frequent traffic jams and tailbacks. It's even slower on the 18-kilometre (11-mile) road around the historic farming village of Cades Cove, where speeds barely rise above walking pace as wildlife watchers maintain a lookout for black bears. Be sure to stop and explore the derelict village's wooden cabins, churches and mills. They provide a glimpse of pioneer life in the 19th century, with a particular highlight being the John Oliver Cabin, built in 1822 by the first permanent European settlers who displaced the existing Cherokee tribe.

It is possible to avoid the worst of the congestion by going off the beaten track. Elkmont is an alternative historic district. The 20th-century tourist resort is abandoned to the woods; its eerie atmosphere contrasting with the queues near busy Cades Cove. Although most of Elkmont's buildings date to the first half of the 20th century, there are a couple of older structures, including an artist's studio used by painter Mayna Treanor Avent. It's also possible to escape the crowds by leaving your car and hitting the footpaths. Choices vary from an easy four-kilometre (2.5-mile) paved stroll to Laurel Falls to a 32-kilometre (20-mile) hike to the top of Clingmans Dome, the highest peak in both the national park and Tennessee. One of the most popular routes is an out-and-back trek from Newfound Gap to Charlies Bunion, named after a rock protrusion just beneath the mountain's summit. It's a chance to hike a small portion of the Appalachian Trail, 112 kilometres (70 miles) of which runs through the park.

**LOCATION** Tennessee and North Carolina ★ USA

**AREA** 2,114km<sup>2</sup> ★ 816mi<sup>2</sup>

#### HIGHLIGHTS

- ★ Hike the steep path to Chimney Tops mountain
- ★ *Sit in the pews of Cades Cove's abandoned churches*
- ★ View a sunset at Morton Overlook

**WEB** [NPS.GOV/GRSM](http://NPS.GOV/GRSM)



# ★ EVERGLADES ★

## MEANDER THROUGH A MAGICAL MOSAIC OF WETLANDS AND MANGROVES IN THE DEEP SOUTH



**T**he tropical wilderness of the Everglades is a fragile habitat. It has been under protection for almost 90 years and is a World Heritage Site as well as being a national park. 750 different species live on the site, 36 of which are threatened. The animals in the Everglades are of crucial importance to its survival. Thousands of years ago, tropical plant seeds were dispersed by migrating birds. The Everglades saw an explosion of biodiversity as new vegetation burst through the rich soil. Almost 1,000 plant species grow in the park today, and more than a million people trek out to see the Everglades every year.

All of what is now Florida was once attached to Africa, but it migrated west over millions of years of continental drift. The hunk of limestone that makes up the peninsula was under water until around 125,000 years ago. Shells, sand and animal remains were deposited over decades, and created a flat, porous landscape



The Shark Valley Observation Tower is the highest accessible point in Everglades National Park

### PYTHONS IN THE PARK

It isn't an urban legend. Thousands of super-sized Burmese pythons occupy the Everglades after escaping or being released from captivity. This problem has been ongoing since the 1970s since hundreds of thousands of non-native snakes were imported for the pet trade. They are generalist feeders and will kill anything small enough to swallow. As Burmese pythons are some of the largest snakes on Earth, there is little that isn't on the menu. Thankfully, these foreign invaders don't pose much threat to humans in the park. In spite of all the media attention, you are unlikely to see a python during your visit. Visitors are at greater risk of being struck by lightning than suffering a fatal snake attack.



The National Park Service has spent years investigating the best ways to remove invasive pythons from the area

that had the potential to hold a lot of water. Evidence suggests that the land has been flooded for at least 5,000 years. All of the moisture in the ecosystem quenches the thirst of animals and plant life through river flow and frequent thunderstorms.

The Everglades is best explored from the water. Go on a guided boat tour or rent your own watercraft for an unforgettable experience. Visitors will find themselves surrounded by wading birds and enormous alligators. Take care to steer clear of the giant reptiles, as they have powerful bites and strong, agile tails that can shatter bones.

Certified SCUBA divers can go underwater where the park meets the ocean. Here, mangrove swamps are nurseries for a whole host of animals – sharks and other oceanic fish swim upstream to have their babies in the safety of inland channels. The young animals practise the skills they will rely upon later in life before rejoining the open sea. Florida's coast boasts more than 40 types of coral and 600 species of reef fish, but divers should be wary of marine predators.

There is a network of roads that snake through the Everglades, enabling visitors to reach the far corners of the park on foot. Hiking trails weave through the dry areas, along with waterside boardwalks for people to explore. Arachnophobes should watch out for occupied spiderwebs stretching across the path by the water's edge. And some coastal trails require hikers to paddle through submerged stretches, so be prepared to get your feet wet.



Around 250 Florida panthers in the park occupy just five per cent of their former range

**LOCATION** Florida ★ USA

**AREA** 6,107km<sup>2</sup> ★ 2,358mi<sup>2</sup>

### HIGHLIGHTS

- ★ Take an airboat tour to see American alligators
- ★ **Spot some of the 300-plus bird species at the park's birdwatching sites**
- ★ Enjoy a scenic bike ride around the Shark Valley Trail

**WEB** [NPS.GOV/EVER](http://NPS.GOV/EVER)





There is a fee to enter the park, starting from \$15 (around £12) for pedestrians and cyclists

Bryce Canyon has more of these hoodoo rock formations than anywhere else in the world

— THE AMERICAS —

# ★ BRYCE CANYON ★



## TEETERING TOWERS OF ROCK CALLED HOODOOS SEEM TO DEFY THE LAWS OF PHYSICS

**D**espite its name, Bryce isn't technically a canyon, but a collection of enormous natural amphitheatres. Around 15 million years ago, shifting tectonic plates caused the rock of western Utah to crack open. Water trickled in and eroded the soft stone from the inside. The cold nights caused the water in the rock to freeze and expand, enlarging these tiny cracks into deep, cavernous canyons. Eventually ice broke the rock apart completely, leaving the stunning columnar formations that people flock to see today.

The rocks at Bryce Canyon are banded with layers of red, orange and white. These represent layers of sediment that were deposited at different times over millions of years. Rivers and lakes dropped loads of pebbles and minerals that compacted to form a solid mass. The stunning natural gradients can be seen from the park's scenic drive. There are 13 viewpoints

over vibrant amphitheatres, as well as eight well-maintained hiking trails, each of which can be completed in less than a day.

There are vast fir forests and open meadows throughout the park that provide homes for wild animals, such as elk, bobcats and black bears. Several protected species also call Bryce Canyon home, including the majestic California condor. Campers should be very careful not to attract wildlife in order to prevent injuries and to discourage animals from associating with humans in the future.

Enjoy Bryce Canyon by car, on foot or on horseback. The park also offers a free shuttle bus that helps to reduce emissions in summer. You can visit for just one day or spend more time among the rocks at a nearby hotel, lodge or campsite. The sky above Bryce Canyon is one of the darkest in North America – around 7,500 stars are visible to the naked eye, so it's worth staying until after dark.

**LOCATION** Utah ★ USA

**AREA** 145km<sup>2</sup> ★ 55.9mi<sup>2</sup>

### HIGHLIGHTS

- ★ Stargaze at the park's Astronomy Festival
- ★ *Hike the tranquil backcountry trails*
- ★ Take a helicopter tour to see the hoodoos from the sky

**WEB** [NPS.GOV/BRCA](https://www.nps.gov/brca)

# ★ OLYMPIC ★

## DISCOVER LEGENDARY BEACHES, FORESTS AND THE OTHER MOUNT OLYMPUS



With so much space to explore but barely any roads, only hardcore backpackers will ever venture into the vast wilderness of Olympic's interior. Luckily, there are still plenty of highlights to satisfy those who do little more than prod around the edges.

One of the prettiest areas can be found right alongside Highway 101, the road that circles the national park. Halt at one of the stopping points along the southern bank of Lake Crescent to enjoy its crystal-clear waters. This is a glacial landscape, meaning that mountainous peaks rise in all directions. Those keen to explore the slopes can make use of hiking trails that attack the contours; others might prefer to hug the side of the lake for a less undulating walk.

Perhaps the easiest way to reach the peaks is to drive the old logging trail to Hurricane Ridge, where hiking paths scramble across the ridges and plunge down steep descents into green

valleys. Alternatively, a rougher road leads to the Hoh Rainforest and, a 29-kilometre (18-mile) walk from the visitor centre, the summit of Mount Olympus. You won't stumble across a pantheon of gods on this mountain, but you will find glaciers. With 2,386 metres (7,828 feet) of elevation, it's also crazy to think that Mount Olympus sits just 53 kilometres (33 miles) from the Pacific Ocean.

Speaking of which, a narrow strip of Olympic National Park can also be found running along the Pacific coast. This wonderfully undeveloped 117-kilometre-long (73 miles) stretch of beaches and cliffs has seals and sea lions in abundance. It is also difficult to escape the noisy tumult of sea birds, especially in nesting season. The sands of Ozette might be in the far north but are well served by the Old Royal road off Highway 112, while Kalaloch and Ruby Beach are more secluded gems in the southern section of the area.

**LOCATION** Washington ★ USA

**AREA** 3,734km<sup>2</sup> ★ 1,441mi<sup>2</sup>

### HIGHLIGHTS

- ★ Hire a canoe at Lake Crescent
- ★ *Watch for whales off the beaches during migration season*
- ★ Marvel at Washington's giant cedar trees

**WEB** [NPS.GOV/OLYM](https://www.nps.gov/OLYM)



Olympic's coastal strip is renowned for the quantity of driftwood that washes up on its shores, carried there by Pacific currents

Evergreen pine trees line meadows and envelop the rugged peaks bathed in summer sun



# ★ YOSEMITE ★

## WHERE GRANITE MOUNTAINS CARVED BY ANCIENT GLACIERS PROVIDE A SAFE HAVEN FOR WILDLIFE

**P**art of the Sierra Nevada mountain range, this high-elevation park is known for its geology. The rocks in Yosemite today were shaped by ice that formed a million years ago. Glaciers are essentially frozen rivers that flow very slowly. They erode the landscape as they do so, and leave tell-tale landforms that remain long after the ice has melted. The famous Yosemite Valley is U-shaped, resembling a rounded tunnel through the mountains. This is the path left by thousands of years of ice flow. The glacier responsible for the formation of Yosemite Valley was 1,200 metres (4,000 feet) deep and its enormous weight scraped the rock away. Two remaining glaciers still adorn the peaks of the park's mountains and their seasonal melting is a vital source of water for the entire ecosystem in the warmer months.

Yosemite is famous for its waterfalls and contains the highest falls in mainland North America. Water pours off a hanging valley forged by glacier activity. Visitors with their heart set on seeing cascading water should visit in May as many waterfalls slow to a trickle by late-August. The water that flows from the melting glaciers picks up nutrients on its journey down the mountain that enrich the habitat. The plant life flourishes and the park is lush and green as the start of summer. The arrival of autumn brings a dramatic transformation when the leaves turn vibrant amber. October and November combined account for only 13 per cent of park visits, so guests can enjoy the fall foliage in tranquility.

Yosemite is a world-renowned rock climbing destination. It takes some serious skill to

shimmy up some of the park's more drastic inclines created by ancient rivers of ice. Climbers train for years to tackle El Capitan, a sheer rock face extending 914 metres (3,000 feet) vertically into the sky. The current world record for scaling the granite monolith is held by a pair of American climbers. It took them only one hour and 58 minutes to reach the top. Competitive climbing is enjoyed by spectators all year round, so be sure to check famous climbing spots for a free show.

There are accommodation options to fit any budget, ranging from camping to lavish apartments. Visitors can rent kayaks, ride horses or go out rafting. Zipline through the stunning scenery or play a quiet game of golf in nature. Yosemite really does have something for absolutely everyone.

**LOCATION** : California ★ USA

**AREA** : 3,027km<sup>2</sup> ★ 1,169mi<sup>2</sup>

### HIGHLIGHTS

- ★ Drive to the top of Glacier Point for panoramic valley views
- ★ *Hike through cooling waterfall vapour on the grueling mist trail*
- ★ Ice skate on the frozen Tenaya Lake in winter

**WEB** : [NPS.GOV/YOSE](http://NPS.GOV/YOSE)

## GIANT SEQUOIA FORESTS

More than 500 of these stand in Mariposa Grove near the park's south entrance. Also known as giant redwoods, these are some of the longest-living trees on the planet. The oldest ever identified had been growing for 3,266 years just 120 kilometres (75 miles) from Yosemite's boundaries. Visitors can walk through the grove among trees that could grow as high as 95 metres (311 feet). Their bark is fibrous and thick, protecting the tree from fire damage. Mature sequoia can disperse 400,000 seeds per year and were once widespread throughout seven counties of California. Logging activity in the past has impacted the tree's distribution, but guests at Yosemite can enjoy the grand trees at their leisure.



This tree is nicknamed 'Grizzly Giant' and is the 25th largest of its kind



Native Americans believed that standing in the mist of Bridal Veil Falls would help them find a partner



All of the bears in Yosemite are black bears, but can have auburn or blonde fur too

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Scientists estimate that it's only a matter of decades until the last 25 glaciers at Glacier melt completely



## ★ GLACIER ★

### EXPLORE THE 'CROWN OF THE CONTINENT' IN AMERICA'S FROZEN NORTH

**A**lthough there are very few roads spoiling Glacier's pristine wilderness, the best way to see the stunning sights on the USA's northern border is still from behind the steering wheel of a car. The 80-kilometre (50-mile) Going-to-the-Sun Road traverses the park from east to west, passing clear blue glacial lakes and green cedar forests in the lowland valleys and climbing to bitter, white alpine tundra at the top of the 2,206-metre (6,646-feet) Logan Pass. The high point of the road also marks the Continental Divide, the point at which rainfall and rivers on each side flow to different oceans. Scenic viewpoints and lay-bys line the road, providing motorists with the opportunities to stop and take in the views or snap away with cameras.

For a more intimate view of a land created by rivers of ice that give the park its name, open the car door and lace up those walking boots. Hikers are spoilt for choice, with an

abundance of trails to suit all fitness levels and time frames, but highlights include the seven-kilometre (4.5-mile) path to Iceberg Lake and the shorter trail to Sperry Glacier. On both you'll likely be accompanied by some of the mountain goats that call Glacier home, while lower-level trails cross grizzly country. If time permits, Lake McDonald and St Mary Lake offer opportunities to explore the water by canoe or boat.

Although the landscape has remained largely the same since glaciers carved the steep valleys during the last ice age, there is change afoot. Of the 150 glaciers that existed in the 1850s, most have since melted. Only 25 glaciers are still active, and scientists predict that all of those will disappear by the middle of this century. It now appears that it's only a matter of a few decades before Glacier National Park becomes glacier-free. Prospective visitors should aim to visit before it becomes a misnomer.

**LOCATION** Montana ★ USA

**AREA** 4,100km<sup>2</sup> ★ 1,583mi<sup>2</sup>

#### HIGHLIGHTS

- ★ Drive the unpaved Cut Bank Creek Road
- ★ *Try to spot the rare and elusive mountain lions*
- ★ Take a peek inside the historic Glacier Park Lodge

**WEB** [NPS.GOV/GLAC](http://NPS.GOV/GLAC)



# ★ ARCHES ★

## ETHEREAL ARCHWAYS STRETCH OVERHEAD THROUGHOUT THIS HIDDEN GEM OF THE UTAH DESERT

Delicate Arch is one of the most recognisable landmarks of the national park



**T**his wonderland of natural history is made up of landforms like tall pinnacles, balanced rocks and enormous flat rocks called fins.

The park is most famous for its 2,000 natural sandstone arches, the largest of which has the longest span of any natural arch in North America. It's called Landscape Arch and can be found above an area called Devil's Garden. Archways were once a solid fins that have crumbled away in the centre due to water damage. The loose pieces were then blown away by the wind and a delicate arch stands as the final result.

Visitors travel along the main road, Arches Scenic Drive, and stop at each roadside formation. The trail begins with a visitor centre, where guests can get refreshed, dispose of refuse responsibly and learn more about the park and how it has been shaped over time. Devil's Garden is at the very end of the road, where there is a campground and a hiking trail leading to spectacular views of enormous Landscape Arch. Vehicles then head out the same way that they came in, allowing visitors to stop at any landmarks they missed the first time before exiting.

Visitors must be careful not to leave marked trails or to damage the surrounding areas. What appears to be solid rock is actually just a thin layer of hardened sediment – this crust is essential to preventing erosion and retaining moisture in the soil. It's laden with bacteria and other tiny organisms that create nutrients and offer a foothold to anchor desert plants in place. Vegetation supports grazing animals, such as deer and bighorn sheep, which in turn feed big predators like the mountain lion. The park has been sculpted by nature over millennia and should be protected for years to come.

**LOCATION** Utah ★ USA

**AREA** 310km<sup>2</sup> ★ 120mi<sup>2</sup>

### HIGHLIGHTS

- ★ Camp out in the Devil's Garden
- ★ *Marvel at dinosaur footprints immortalised in stone*
- ★ Stand beneath the longest arch on the continent

**WEB** [NPS.GOV/ARCH](https://www.nps.gov/arch)

# ★ WRANGELL-ST ELIAS ★

THE WINTER WONDERLAND SIX TIMES  
THE SIZE OF YELLOWSTONE



**S**ituated on the boundary of the Arctic Circle, this park has been formed by the opposing forces of fire and ice. Volcanoes expelled mounds of lava that hardened into solid rock. Glaciers transported loose rock down the slopes and carved away any stone in their path. Wrangell is the country's biggest national park and contains nine of the 16 highest peaks in the USA. Mount Wrangell is the only active volcano in the park, but it hasn't erupted since 1900. It emits puffs of steam in cold weather due to hot water under the ground. Mount St Elias has the second highest peak on the entire continent, coming in only 230 metres (760 feet) shy of the record. Wide plains of tundra sit at the feet of mountains, and alpine forest covers the low-lying areas.

Moose, caribou and mountain goats are all regular visitors to Wrangell-St Elias along with brown and black bears. Hunting of any kind is not allowed within the confines of the park, so animals enjoy a peaceful existence. Spot the huge, curved horns of Dall sheep trudging through high-elevation snow in winter. This species is commonly seen slurping up minerals from nutrient-rich cliff faces.

Summers are short as winter stretches on for many months. It isn't unusual for snow to still lie on the ground in late June, so visitors should wrap up warm. Huge glaciers cover almost 35 per cent of the park and feed the warren of rivers and streams. Melted glacial water contains a lot of sediment, which quickly fills up small river beds. The flowing water weaves through the park, draining into new channels to escape deposited material.

Bagley Icefield is 205 kilometres (127 miles) long. It's a meeting point for several glaciers, and the ice is thought to be 915 metres (3,000 feet) deep. Ice at the base of the field is approaching 500 years of age. The glaciers touch the sea at a point called Icy Bay. Huge

**LOCATION** Alaska ★ USA

**AREA** 53,420km<sup>2</sup> ★ 20,625mi<sup>2</sup>

## HIGHLIGHTS

- ★ Ski across the vast open countryside
- ★ *Jump in a biplane for a bird's eye view of the park*
- ★ Watch the volcano blowing off steam

**WEB** [NPS.GOV/WRST](http://NPS.GOV/WRST)



Bush plane passengers must write to the Native Alaskan Chuhach to request permission to land

chunks crumble away from the frozen river and float away as icebergs in the Gulf of Alaska. Now that the planet has warmed up the glaciers have retreated to expose a glimmering inland bay. The spot is popular with kayakers, who can charter a bush plane to transport their party and all of the necessary gear to the remote estuary. The untouched wonders of Wrangell Park are well worth the effort.



Mount Wrangell is a shield volcano. This type of landform emits a steady, calm flow of liquid lava in all directions

## EXPLORE AN OLD GHOST TOWN

Wrangell was once a hub of copper mining. Investors made millions from unearthing the pure copper that was hidden beneath the ground. The Kennecott mines were constructed in the early 1900s but were abandoned after only 27 years of operation. The new town built for the workers was left uninhabited by 1938 as it was too costly to transport heavy copper the long distance from Alaska to the rest of the United States. The old mining town was almost destroyed in the 1960s to protect its owners from accident liability. The demolition began but was never finished, so visitors to Wrangell-St Elias can see it for themselves.

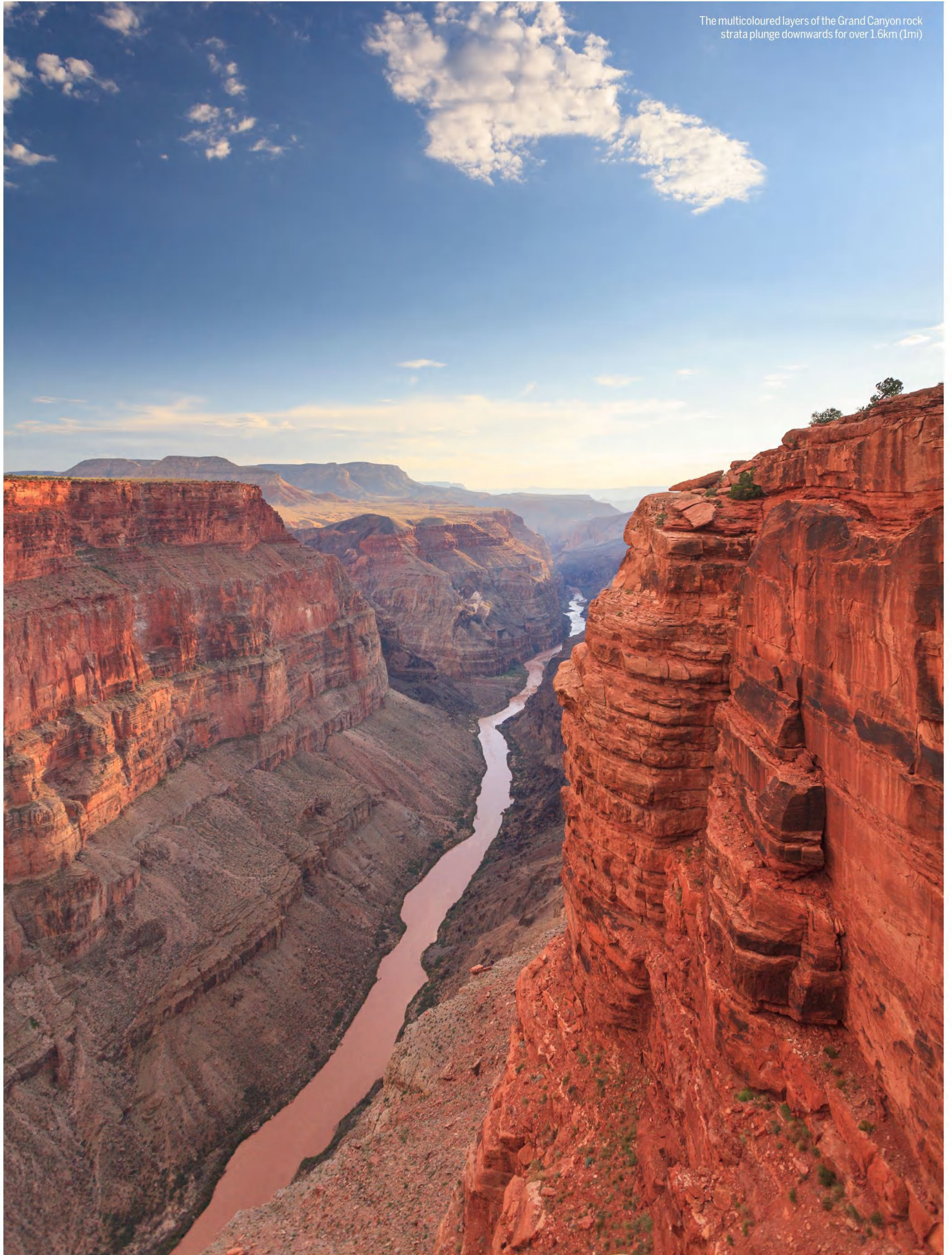


The 14-storey wooden mill stands almost as it did when the town was populated

Kennecott's peaks loom above a pair of crystal-clear lakes inside Wrangell-St Elias



The multicoloured layers of the Grand Canyon rock strata plunge downwards for over 1.6km (1mi)



# ★ GRAND CANYON ★

## MARVEL AT THE EPIC SCALE OF THIS NATURAL WORLD WONDER



**S**urprisingly, the Grand Canyon doesn't set many records. It isn't the longest, nor the widest, not even the deepest. However, it is by far the most famous, so much so that many people simply call it The Canyon as though there were no others in the world.

Multicoloured layers of rock sink into the earth, forming a chasm that gives the impression it must have been created by tectonic plates tearing apart. However, this slice through the USA was created over millions of years, when the Colorado River meandered across what is now north Arizona. Erosion from the flowing water combined with the uplift of the Colorado Plateau to carve the mile-deep canyon.

The popular sites of the South Rim may be busy, but they draw the crowds for a reason. Grand Canyon Village, with a number of wooden buildings dating to the turn of the 20th century, gives a glimpse of canyon country in the final days of the American Frontier. From here,



The Colorado River carved the steep cliffs of the Grand Canyon over millions of years

### RIM TO RIM

It's possible to take a number of different rim-to-rim hikes across the Grand Canyon, although it is not recommended to try it in a single day. Probably the best option is the 39km (24mi) route along the Bright Angel and North Kaibab trails from Grand Canyon Village on South Rim to Grand Canyon Lodge on North Rim. The walk is breathtaking in every sense, but worth it. Alternatively, try the shorter (but still challenging) South Rim to South Rim trek along the South Kaibab trail to the river and back up along the Bright Angel. Whichever way you go, beware the weather. Hikers who leave the clifftops in the cold light of an icy dawn may be wearing thick coats, only to find themselves sweltering in dangerously high temperatures when they reach the bottom of the Canyon.



Hiking trails run along the rims and down the steep sides of the Canyon

Hermit Road runs west for 11 kilometres (eight miles) to the stone-built Hermit's Rest. Those who are keen to hike a portion of the Canyon will find this the easiest way to get their boots dusty: jump on board the free shuttle bus to Hermit's Rest and walk back to Grand Canyon Village along the Rim Trail. For those who prefer to see their natural wonders from the comfort of a seat, hop on and off the buses to your heart's content at the designated stops.

The quieter Desert View Drive, heading east from Grand Canyon Village, is the best way to escape the tourist hordes. This 40-kilometre (25-mile) road relies on visitors having their own wheels, but it includes six viewpoints and five unmarked pullover points. Don't miss Navajo Point and Lipan Point, two places where the dusky red layers of rock can be seen at their best. The road ends at the Desert View Watchtower, just beyond the stunning Tusayan Ruins. These are the eerie remains of a Puebloan village, first constructed nearly 1,000 years ago by around 20 Native Americans who called this land home.

North Rim is the quieter side of Grand Canyon with only ten per cent of the park's visitors venturing across. It makes it the ideal place to seek sanctuary from the crowds. The north is also the colder side since it is around 300 metres (1,000 feet) higher than the South Rim. While those on the North Rim can be stood in falling snow, others far below might be sunbathing along the river bank.

Just outside the park, the Havasupai part of the Canyon is home to the spectacular

waterfalls of Havasu Creek. For sheer beauty, this is one of the finest places in the region. The star attraction of the Hualapai Reservation is the Grand Canyon Skywalk, a glass-bottomed, horseshoe-shaped walkway that extends 21 metres (70 feet) over the rim.



The Desert View Watchtower is one of the best places to escape the crowds on South Rim

**LOCATION** Arizona ★ USA

**AREA** 4,926km<sup>2</sup> ★ 1,902mi<sup>2</sup>

### HIGHLIGHTS

- ★ Hike through the park's backcountry
- ★ **Take a helicopter tour over the canyon**
- ★ Visit in June to enjoy the park's annual star party

**WEB** [NPS.GOV/GRCA](http://NPS.GOV/GRCA)

# ★ AMERICAN SAMOA ★

## EXPLORE SEAS AND SUMMITS IN THE USA'S SOUTH PACIFIC PARADISE



As close to New Zealand as it is Hawaii, American Samoa National Park is located in the island chain of the same name. Administered by the National Parks Service – American Samoa is a remote territory of the United States – it is one of the least-visited US national parks, but those who do make the long journey will find its Samoan inhabitants are ready to provide a welcome every bit as warm as the islands' volcanic origins.

Around one-sixth of the archipelago's total landmass is contained within a national park that ranges across three of the territory's five inhabited islands. Almost every visitor will begin on the largest island, Tutuila, in the capital city of Pago Pago (population 3,500 – a bustling metropolis by American Samoan standards). Pick up a guide to the navigable trails and roads from the park visitor centre and drive to the foot of Mount Alava, where the fun really begins. Ropes and ladders allow the adventurous to

climb nearly 500 metres (1,600 feet) to Alava's summit; the verdant vista across the entire island is ample reward for the tough climb.

On the islands of Ta'u and Ofu, things are even more remote. Ta'u combines bushwhacking through the jungle with a coastal hike up Lata Mountain – at 966 metres (3,170 feet), it is one of the highest sea cliffs in the world. Make sure that you keep your eyes peeled for Samoan flying foxes gliding between the branches of the tropical rainforest.

Ofu, meanwhile, boasts a six-and-a-half-kilometre (four-mile) pristine beach that ranks among the most picturesque in the world. This is the best place to snorkel and glimpse a stretch of the coral reefs that are just as vital to the national park as the lush rainforests and powder beaches. One-third of the national park's area is actually underwater, and its vibrant coral has thankfully escaped the bleaching that has blighted the Great Barrier Reef and Indian Ocean.

**LOCATION** American Samoa

**AREA** 55km<sup>2</sup> ★ 21mi<sup>2</sup>

### HIGHLIGHTS

- ★ Look down on Pola Island from the road near Vatia
- ★ *Take snorkel gear to explore Ofu's coastal waters*
- ★ Experience the steep switchback road to Rainmaker Pass

**WEB** [NPS.GOV/NPSA](https://www.nps.gov/npsa)



Ofu's picturesque beach is framed by steep volcanic cliffs smothered in lush, green rainforest

The majestic Maya ruins of Tikal contains thousands of ancient structures to explore



— THE AMERICAS —

## ★ TIKAL ★



### DEEP IN THE JUNGLE OF CENTRAL AMERICA LIE THE RUINS OF AN ANCIENT CIVILISATION

**T**housands of years ago, in what is now Guatemala's Petén region, once lay the city of Tikal, one of the largest metropolises of the Maya world. This ancient civilisation pre-dates both the Aztec and Inca empires, and ruled over much of Mexico and northern Central America between 250 and 900 CE.

At the height of its power, Tikal was home to as many as 100,000 people and boasted palaces, plazas, towering temples, ceremonial platforms and residences. However, when the Maya Empire collapsed in around 900, Tikal was abandoned and the jungle that surrounded the city gradually reclaimed the land. In fact, it wasn't until 1848 that the ruins were uncovered by an expedition sent by the Guatemalan Government.

Archaeologists travelled from far and wide to explore this ancient wonder, uncovering tombs of Tikal's greatest rulers, such as Ah Cacau (Lord Chocolate) and intricate carvings that shed light on the mysterious Maya.

We now know the Maya were accomplished mathematicians, artists, astronomers and architects. Temple IV was once the tallest building in pre-Columbian America, looming 65 metres (213 feet) in the air. These days visitors can climb to the top for spectacular views, but back then the Maya would have gazed at the skies to track the planetary movements to plan their ceremonial calendar and to predict when to plant and harvest crops.

There are endless trails to explore around Tikal, and as you hike from temple to temple you can soak up the sights and sounds of the surrounding wildlife. You'll feel like an intrepid adventurer as you get up close to the dozens of stone pillars (called stelae) throughout the plaza, each containing carvings and glyphs that, once deciphered, reveal important dates and deeds. Tikal is generally less crowded than other Maya sites too, as it's not as easy to reach, and with so much to see it's no wonder that most favour Tikal over the many other famous ruins in the region.

**LOCATION** Guatemala

**AREA** 576km<sup>2</sup> ★ 222mi<sup>2</sup>

#### HIGHLIGHTS

- ★ Take an early morning tour to beat the hot midday sun
- ★ **Climb Temple IV to see a view that featured in Star Wars Episode IV: A New Hope**
- ★ Bring binoculars – you might spot toucans, parrots and spider monkeys

**WEB** [TIKALNATIONALPARK.ORG](http://TIKALNATIONALPARK.ORG)

# ★ NORTHEAST GREENLAND ★

THE WORLD'S LARGEST AND NORTHERNMOST NATIONAL PARK IS ALSO ONE OF THE MOST ELUSIVE

**Y**ou might assume that a park almost as large as France and Spain combined would be impossible to miss, but Northeast Greenland is a mystery to many and unknown to most. If you're looking for an adventurous escape to explore a truly untouched wilderness, there are few better destinations for a getaway than this.

Northeast Greenland National Park is largely uninhabited – less than 50 people live in the near-million-square-kilometre park over winter to monitor the region's weather and research stations. The closest settlement is Ittoqqortoormiit, Greenland's most isolated town. In this picturesque outpost of brightly painted buildings, you can learn about the local Inuit culture and try your hand at traditional dog sledding and ice fishing.

To travel in the park itself, as with other remote parts of Greenland, a permit is required from the Ministry of Nature, Environment and

Justice (further information can be found at [naalakkersuisut.gl/en](http://naalakkersuisut.gl/en)). If you travel with a tour operator, permits will be arranged for you. Due to its remote location, the park is best reached via dedicated expedition cruises, which often include stops in Iceland and/or Norway as well. These voyages aren't cheap – expect to spend several thousand pounds or dollars for the experience, not including flights to Greenland. However, the price is justifiable given the fact that you'll be travelling aboard a specialised (and usually rather luxurious) vessel capable of tackling the icy conditions in the Arctic Ocean, typically for two or three weeks. You'll also be accompanied by expert guides, and tour groups are often small so there will be opportunities to tailor trips to your particular interests.

Some tour providers offer the chance to take Zodiac boats to go ashore for guided hikes and wildlife watching. In this truly untouched wilderness you might spot musk oxen, Arctic foxes, hares and wolves, walruses, and if there are ice floes, you may also see polar bears. In the water, lucky sightseers may see narwhals as well as humpback, fin and minke whales. Besides the local fauna, Greenland's rugged northeastern coastline features some of the most spectacular geography, with towering striped cliffs reflecting in the mirror-like waters below as icebergs slowly drift by. At night, with the weather on your side, you can admire the full glory of the night sky without the interference of light pollution. If the conditions are right you may also find yourself enveloped by the aurora borealis, as the sky lights up with breathtaking waves of glowing greens, reds, purples and blues.

**LOCATION** Greenland

**AREA** 972,000km<sup>2</sup> ★ 375,290mi<sup>2</sup>

## HIGHLIGHTS

- ★ Spot whales, polar bears and more on an expedition cruise
- ★ *Kayak between icebergs and through isolated fjords*
- ★ Witness some of the best northern lights displays – weather permitting!

**WEB** [VISITGREENLAND.COM/ THE-NATIONAL-PARK](http://VISITGREENLAND.COM/ THE-NATIONAL-PARK)

As you and your expedition crewmates will likely be the only people around for many miles, what might strike you the most during your Arctic adventure is the peace and tranquility that only the ends of the earth can offer.

Be sure to take a camera to capture the hardy locals, such as the musk ox



## UNIQUE PARK RANGERS

Some tours to Northeast Greenland National Park will offer the chance to meet members of one of the world's most unusual military units. The Sirius Patrol are an elite squad of dog sledders from the Royal Danish Navy who patrol the frozen wilds of northern Greenland. There are six teams of two soldiers, accompanied by their sled dogs, who traverse the Arctic wilderness for up to six months at a time (more often than not, without any other human contact). It's an extreme occupation – only applicants who demonstrate the most physical and psychological resilience are accepted – but the Sirius Patrol play an important role in maintaining Denmark's sovereignty over Greenland.



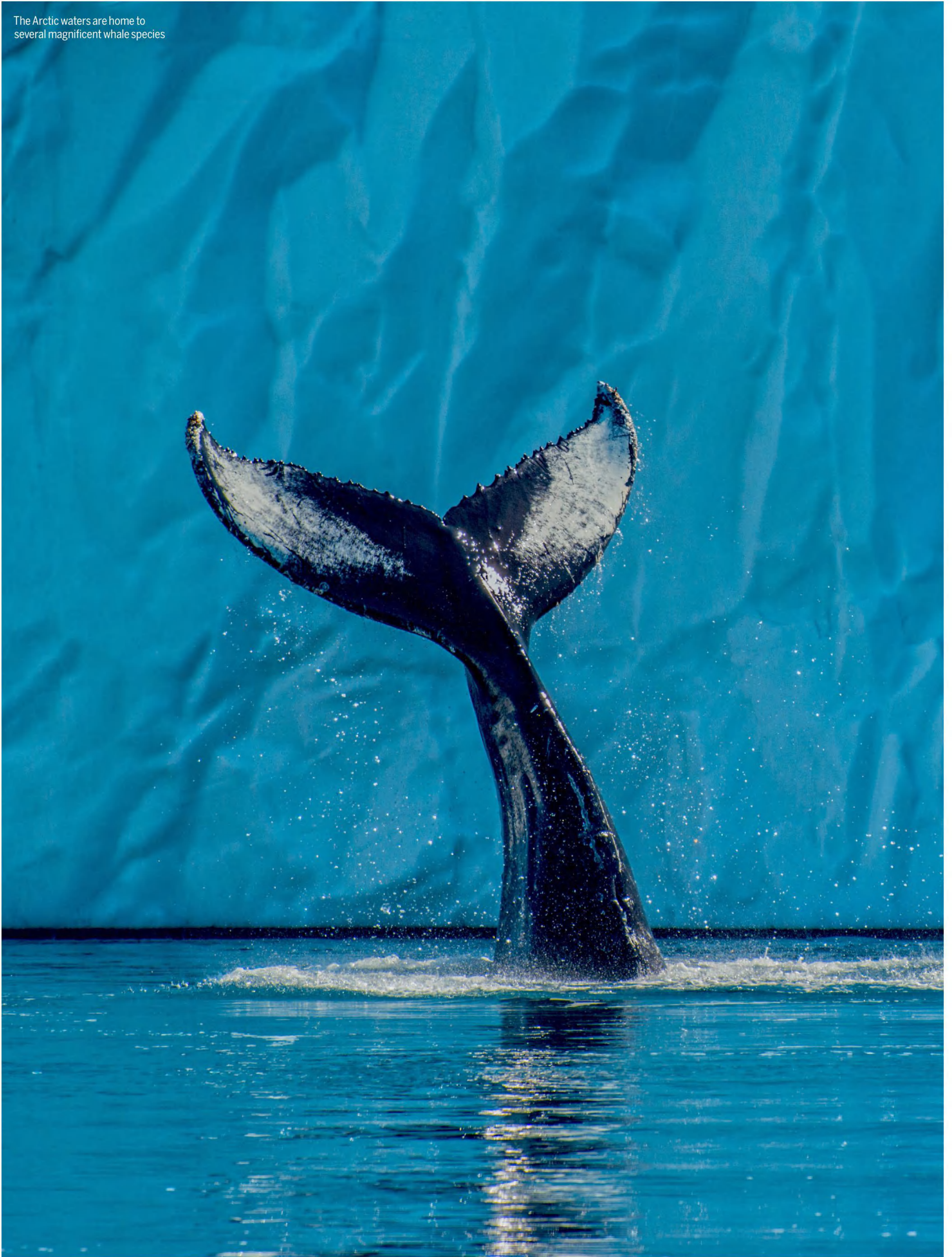
If your expedition takes you to Daneborg, you may meet members of the Sirius Patrol as the headquarters are based there



The park's winding coastline covers 18,000km (11,185mi), containing many fjords and icebergs



The Arctic waters are home to several magnificent whale species



With natural treasures such as Moraine Lake, it's not hard to see why Banff National Park was designated a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1984



— THE AMERICAS —

# ★ BANFF ★

## THIS MOUNTAIN PARADISE IN THE CANADIAN ROCKIES IS BRIMMING WITH PICTURE-PERFECT VIEWS, ADVENTURE SPORTS AND BOUNTIFUL WILDLIFE



Although the USA's Yellowstone National Park (see page 12) – opened in 1872 – holds the distinction of being the world's

first national park, north of the border, the first government-protected reserve in Canada arrived 13 years later in the Rockies of Alberta.

We have a squabble between three railway workers claiming dibs over a hot spring to thank for the establishment of Canada's debutant national park. Rather than grant ownership to a single entrepreneur looking to cash in on the natural attraction, the forward-thinking Prime Minister John A Macdonald declared it a public space, and thus the Banff Hot Springs Reserve was formed in 1885. Over the decades, the since-retitled Banff National Park has been expanded some 250 times its original size to encompass ever-larger tracts of boreal forest, alpine prairies, wetlands, crystalline rivers and lakes, and glaciers.

The start of any visit has to begin in the town of Banff. Lying less than two hours' drive from Alberta's largest city, Calgary, you'll be surprised by just how accessible this wilderness is. Note

**LOCATION** Alberta ★ Canada

**AREA** 6,641km<sup>2</sup> ★ 2,564mi<sup>2</sup>

### HIGHLIGHTS

- ★ Get active with year-round outdoor pursuits
- ★ **Seek out iconic Canadian wildlife**
- ★ Take a dip in the natural hot springs

**WEB** [PC.GC.CA/EN/PN-NP/AB/BANFF](http://PC.GC.CA/EN/PN-NP/AB/BANFF)

that you will need to pay for a pass for each day of your stay, either online ([banfflakelouise.com](http://banfflakelouise.com)) or at one of the park gates; for adults, rates are currently £5.50 (US\$7.30/CAN\$9.80) per day.

You'll quickly gather from the proliferation of hotels, luxury brand shops and souvenir emporiums that Banff is very much geared towards tourism – and high-end tourism at that. But don't let that deter you. It takes barely ten minutes' drive, or a 30-minute walk, to leave

## A TALE OF TWO WATERFALLS

Whatever time of year you visit Johnston Canyon – about 30 minutes' drive from Banff – it's guaranteed to delight. The walk consists of a series of forest trails and suspended catwalks clinging to the walls of the natural gully that overhang the surging waters of the Johnston Creek.

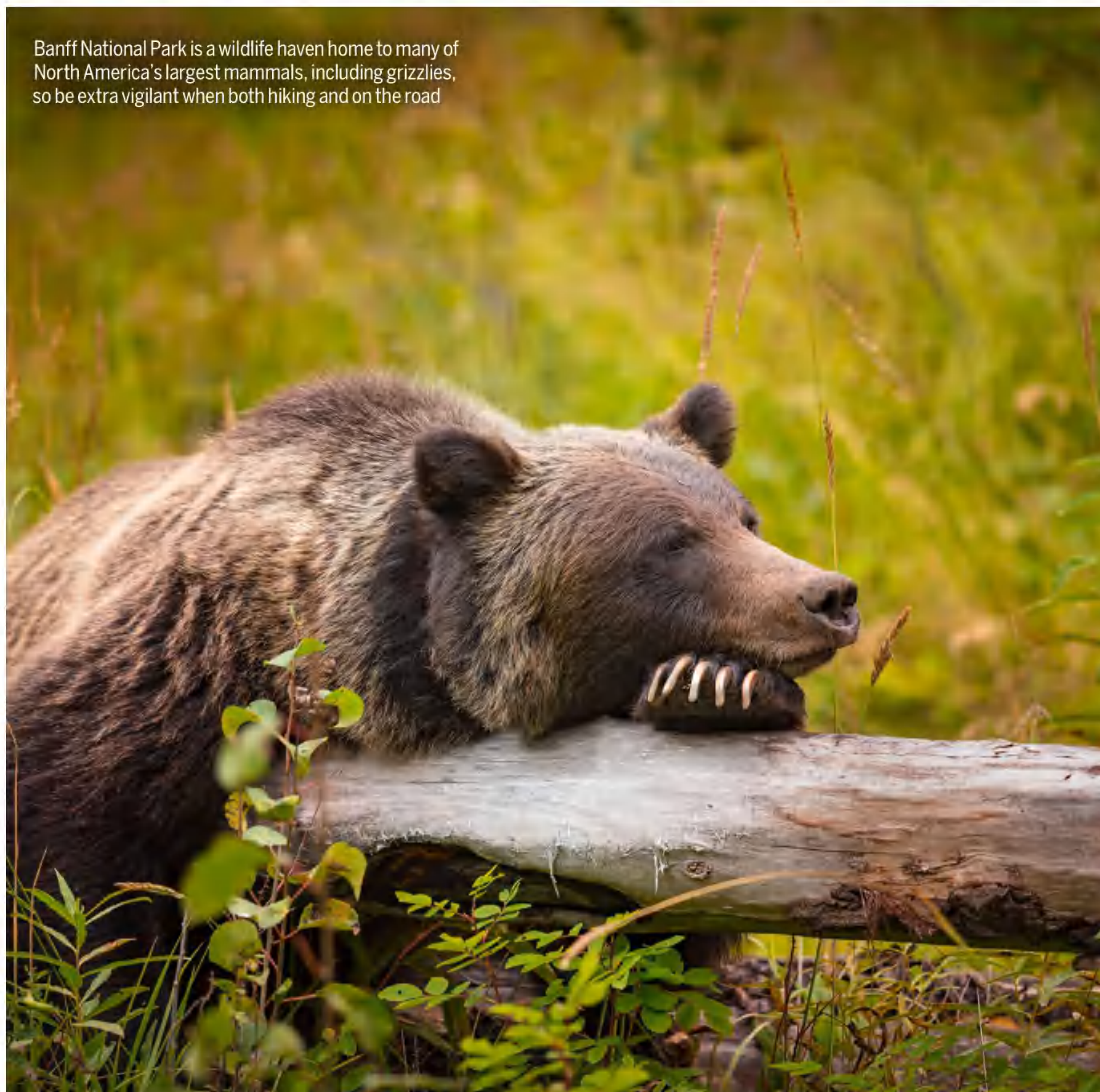
You'll first come to the Lower Falls that display the potential power when water and gravity combine, immersing you in spray and the thunderous roar of the cascade into the plunge pool. Don't stop here though, because the Upper Falls – another 30 minutes or so up the trail – are arguably more spectacular; less powerful but dropping from a greater height.

Still feeling energetic? Beyond the Upper Falls, you can hike on for two to three hours to the emerald-coloured hot springs known locally as the 'Ink Pots' for a bonus feature that is overlooked by most visitors.

Winter brings with it slightly trickier conditions, so take along crampons and waterproof footwear and trousers for patches of ice and potentially knee-deep snow. It's well worth persevering, though. Temperatures plummet so low here that the waterfalls gain a spectacular icy shell, with the still-flowing water flickering beneath the translucent surface.



Johnston Canyon's Upper Falls in winter are like a scene taken straight out of *Frozen*



Banff National Park is a wildlife haven home to many of North America's largest mammals, including grizzlies, so be extra vigilant when both hiking and on the road

all that behind. What's more, after a long day revelling in nature, you might find that the wide selection of bustling pubs and restaurants, as well as offerings such as the not-to-be-missed home-made sweet treats from The Fudgery (215 Banff Avenue) provide a much-needed energy boost.

Indeed, you're going to need a lot of energy if you're planning to make the most of your stay here. More than 1,600 kilometres (1,000 miles)

From season to season, Banff National Park is transformed, offering a range of different experiences (and photo opportunities) throughout the year

of hiking trails lie within its borders, and that's not to mention the plethora of other outdoor pursuits. Whether it's horse trekking, climbing, riding rapids and kayaking in summer or snowshoeing, skiing and snowboarding in winter, this is no destination for beach bums!

As good as place as any to kick off exploring the park proper is Sulphur Mountain, which is just a ten-minute drive from downtown (or you



With hiking, horse trekking, canoeing, white-water rafting, skiing, snowshoeing and more, those who enjoy outdoor activities are spoilt for choice

can hop on Bus #1). At the base of the peak, be sure to call by to pay your respects at the Cave and Basin National Historic Site – this is the natural hot spring and grotto that kickstarted the formation of Canada's first national park. Entry is only around £2.50 (US\$3/CAN\$4), which is worth it for a snap of the dazzling turquoise water alone – and your nose will quickly sniff out how Sulphur Mountain got its name! But beside the Instagram-worthy pics, you'll also find out more about the history, the geology and a critically endangered animal found only in this area's thermal waters...

To properly get your bearings, you'll need to head up. Those feeling energetic can take the walking trail (be warned: the switchbacks feel like they go on forever) or for a more leisurely trip take the gondola from Banff Upper Hot Springs. Unlike the Cave and Basin pool, it's possible to bathe in these waters – a great way to soothe aching muscles after a long day hiking. Gondola prices vary depending on busy periods, but expect to pay £35 (US\$45/CAN\$60) for a return ticket. On a clear day, Sulphur's summit commands views of no less than six Rocky Mountain ranges, as well as the town of Banff, the winding Bow River and surrounding lakes all sitting in the verdant Bow Valley below.

Probably the most famous vista to be found within Banff National Park, though, is Lake Louise, about a 40-minute drive from Banff. The moment you pull up to the boardwalk-fronted, mouthwash-blue water, you'll immediately recognise the scene from countless holiday

## ALL ABOARD!

If you're looking to experience the wonders of Banff National Park in comfort and style, look no further than the Rocky Mountaineer. A trip on this luxury train does not come cheap, but for a special treat, it's well worth splashing out. On-board gourmet meals and first-class service are a given (you'll sleep in equally luxurious hotels along the way), but what really sets this train ride apart are the glass-domed carriages providing unimpeded views of all the stunning scenery that the Canadian Rockies have to offer.

You can hop on the Rocky Mountaineer at the station in downtown Banff, first heading to Lake Louise before passing across the provincial border to the British Columbian town of Kamloops. From here, there are various routes to choose between, one continuing west to the coastal cities of Vancouver or Seattle in the USA, and two heading north (one through the temperate rainforest and another sticking to the mountains). The final destination of both north-bound trains is Jasper, a generally more laid back antidote to Banff town.



Custom-built glass-domed carriages on the Rocky Mountaineer ensure travellers don't miss any of the spectacular surroundings

snapshots and screensavers. Once your memory card is full or device is drained, why not recharge your own batteries in one of the bars or restaurants within the striking Fairmont Lake Louise Castle Hotel on the lake's edge, where you can enjoy the view a little longer? And if your craving for stunning, mountain-circled lakes isn't sated, it's well worth the extra 20-minute detour drive to Lake Moraine – you won't regret it.

The very northern tip of Banff National Park is home to the Columbia Icefield – one of the largest examples lying outside polar regions. If you're okay with heights, start by drinking in the vista from the glass-bottomed skywalk (£20/US\$26/CAN\$35; technically this sits just across the boundary into the adjacent Jasper National Park), then take a fun, bumpy ride on a snow truck up to the Athabasca Glacier. Here, you'll get the chance to step out on to the ice itself – don't forget to sample some of the crystal-clear and perfectly chilled meltwater.

Although, of course, the emphasis of any trip to Banff National Park will always be the great outdoors, don't despair if the weather isn't playing ball or you're in need of some respite from strenuous exercise. One of Banff's top cultural indoor offerings is the Whyte Museum, which houses an extensive collection curated from local artists as well as more far-flung names who were inspired by the region. It also showcases the park's historical heritage, with a permanent exhibition dedicated to the First Nations tribes, trail-blazing pioneers and other notable figures from this part of the world.

For something a little different, the Banff Centre is located just out of town on Tunnel Mountain (though as it's surrounded by its bigger brothers, you'd be forgiven for thinking it a hill). This creative hub hosts a range of

## *“Banff is home to Columbia Icefield – one of the largest examples outside polar regions”*

conferences and symposiums throughout the year, but it is also open to the public, offering revolving art exhibits, lectures and gigs ranging from opera and dance to indigenous craft workshops and book readings. Every autumn, it also screens the world-renowned Banff Mountain Film Festival, with themes focusing on mountain culture, action sports and the environment, as well as a few quirkier entries. It's well worth checking out the line-up should your visit coincide with this prestigious event in the cinematic calendar.

Wherever you are in this national park – whether it's close to a town or in the heart of the wilderness – always be mindful that you are a guest here, with the flora and fauna taking precedence. Many species have flocked to this

protected haven, from wolves and bears (black and brown) to coyotes, elk and cougars. It's a privilege to see any of these amazing creatures in their natural habitat, but it's also down to us to preserve and respect their home. It goes without saying that you should keep to the designated paths and never drop litter – be sure to dispose of rubbish in a bear-proof bin.

As a precaution, one tip that might sound slightly counterintuitive to viewing wildlife is to be a bit noisy during your hike – particularly if trekking alone (though it's generally advised to avoid walking solo if you can). Make your footsteps heavy, whistle or even sing, and be alert at all times – no plugging in, you're not on your morning jog here! Announcing your presence gives any animals that might be around a bend in the path an opportunity to make a getaway and so avoids any surprise confrontations. And however cute those baby bears or deer may be, don't try and take an up-close selfie – mothers with their young represent wildlife at its most dangerous.

If you're a fan of mountain wilderness, outdoor adventures and getting close to nature, Banff National Park doesn't take much of a hard sell. In fact, the only real question in terms of deciding on your visit is not if but when.



A fleet of snow vehicles is on hand to navigate the Columbia Icefield, which is shared by Banff and Jasper national parks



The mirror-like waters of Moraine Lake reflect the Valley of the Ten Peaks



The resort town of Banff sits within the park, offering accommodation and eateries for visitors

# ★ MANUEL ANTONIO ★

**IF YOU'RE AN ADVENTURE-SEEKER WHO ALSO LOVES TO CHILL ON THE BEACH, COSTA RICA HAS THE NATIONAL PARK FOR YOU**

**M**any national parks are spectacular for just one main reason. They can be notable for flora and fauna, mountains, lakes or wildlife. But Manuel Antonio National Park in Costa Rica has an absolute wealth of spectacular features.

Manuel Antonio, named after a conquistador who is buried within the park, is one of the country's smallest national parks, however don't let its size fool you into thinking there isn't much going on. It is one of Costa Rica's most-visited national parks, thanks in no small part to the stunning beaches, views of the world's largest ocean, and hundreds of species of birds and mammals.

Let's start with the beaches. Not many national parks are by the seaside, but Manuel Antonio gazes out over the Pacific Ocean and contains Playa Manuel Antonio – one of Costa Rica's best beaches. This can get crowded, so a little further along the coast is Playa Espadilla Sur, which is just as gorgeous but a lot quieter. One reason why Playa Manuel Antonio is so popular is due to its wonderful coral reef and snorkelling opportunities.

There are hiking trails of varying difficulty snaking throughout Manuel Antonio. The beaches are connected by a gentle, sandy trail, while the Punta Cathedral trail is 1.5-kilometres (0.9-miles) long, featuring some stunning views of the Pacific, but it does have a few tough hills.

Manuel Antonio is also known for its wildlife. There are 109 different species of mammal in the park, as well as 184 different bird species. Due to the size of the park and the diversity of the wildlife, it's hard to go far through it without spying a two- or three-toed sloth, iguana, poison dart frog, squirrel monkey or toucan. While you are free to make your way through the park by yourself, local accredited guides are happy to show you around, using their knowledge and expertise to take you to the very best hotspots to see the local wildlife.

If you're looking to make a visit to Manuel Antonio, it is recommended that you get there early. Overcrowding in the past has meant that visitor numbers are limited to 600 on weekdays and 800 at weekends and holidays, and it's not unknown for the roads into the park to be gridlocked with cars waiting to enter. Deforestation has meant that Manuel Antonio is one of just two areas of tropical rainforest along Central America's Pacific Coast, so it's little wonder that it's a magnet for tourists and locals.

If you're able to get in early, Manuel Antonio is one of the most breathtaking and unique national parks in the world. The wildlife, the beaches, the coral and oceanic views truly make this the national park for everyone.

**LOCATION** Costa Rica

**AREA** 6.83km<sup>2</sup> ★ 2.64mi<sup>2</sup>

## HIGHLIGHTS

- ★ Spot toucans and sloths
- ★ *Go snorkelling over the coral reef*
- ★ Hike the Punta Cathedral for Pacific Ocean views

**WEB** [MANUELANTONIOPARK.COM](http://MANUELANTONIOPARK.COM)



The super-slow sloths in the park are plentiful, and clearly more than happy to pose for a photo

## ACTIVITIES ABOUND

For such a small national park, Manuel Antonio fits a lot in, but the surrounding area is bursting with activities too. One of the highlights is Central America's longest dual zipline, which gives you unparalleled views of the park and the Pacific Ocean. If you love the sea, then a catamaran tour is also a must, which gives you the opportunity to view humpback whales and dolphins. And if that's not enough wildlife for you, Damas Mangrove Island is a haven of unique plant and animal life, where you can see white-faced monkeys, anteaters, boa constrictors, kingfishers and many more stunning creatures.



The beautiful, isolated Damas Island is teeming with a rich selection of wildlife and mangrove trees



How many national parks in the world have a beach within a stone's throw of a tropical rainforest?



The park is a wonderful place to take a hike, with views and wildlife around every corner

— THE AMERICAS —

# ★ IGUAZÚ ★

THESE AWE-INSPIRING WATERFALLS ARE AN UNMISSABLE SIGHT FOR ANY SOUTH AMERICAN TRIP

## WHERE TO STAY

For a truly unforgettable stay, you can book rooms with unparalleled views at one of the two luxury five-star hotels overlooking the Iguazú Falls: Gran Meliá Iguazú (Argentinean side) and Belmond Hotel das Cataratas (Brazilian side). These resorts are perched in prime position on the clifftops by the falls, but such an enviable location within the national park comes at a price. Rooms start from around £200-400 (\$250-500) per night.

However, there are plenty of other, more wallet-friendly accommodation options in the nearby cities of Foz do Iguacu, Brazil, and Puerto Iguazú, Argentina, for budget-conscious travellers. You can get to the falls from both cities by bus, but many hotels will organise shuttle services or private taxis for you, which will be much faster.



The five-star Belmond Hotel das Cataratas is just metres from the Brazilian side of the falls

**P**oor Niagara!" exclaimed former First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt upon seeing Iguazú Falls for the first time – and it's not hard to see why. Taller than Niagara and wider than Victoria, Iguazú comprises around 275 distinct falls over which an average of 1.5 million litres of water pour per second. They might not be the most famous, but the stunning staircase-like cascades of the Iguazú River are arguably the most impressive.

The falls are located along the border between Argentina and Brazil, so you can visit from either country. Each side provides a different vista and range of experiences for tourists. It's worth visiting both if you can, but if you only have the time or budget for one, it all depends on what you'd most like to see.

The majority of the falls can be accessed on the Argentinean side; there are more vantage points and you can get within touching distance of the falls along several circuits of man-made walkways. If you're visiting on a sunny day, you are also much more likely to see glorious single or double rainbows through the spray from this side of the border.

Across the border, the Brazilian side provides more panoramic views so you can marvel at the full scale of the falls. You can also take helicopter tours of the area (not currently available on the Argentinian side), to experience breathtaking sights of the waterfalls from above.

Both sides offer boat tours, which are a fantastic way to get closer to appreciate the sheer power of the cascades. Just be sure to bring waterproofs with you – some trips will include an Iguazú 'baptism', taking you right under the falling water!

The falls are located within the two national parks, which are UNESCO World Heritage sites. Besides the waterfalls themselves, both Iguazú National Park (Argentina) and Iguacu National Park (Brazil) contain lush subtropical rainforests, home to rare flora and fauna, including jaguars, tapirs, giant anteaters and harpy eagles.

Several operators run tours to explore the parks beyond the waterfalls – such as jungle safaris and visits to native reservations – offering plenty of experiences to make the most of your Iguazú adventure. One particular highlight on the Brazilian side is the bird sanctuary, Parque das Aves, which is the largest of its kind in South America. Just outside the park gates, it's home to more than 1,400 birds (plus butterflies, reptiles and more) that are no longer able to live safely in the wild. Walking through the park's large aviaries you will encounter wonderful tropical birds like macaws, toucans and parakeets, with the chance to meet them face-to-beak.



Parque das Aves has over 150 different species of birds, including bright-beaked toucans

**LOCATION** Argentina & Brazil

**AREA** 2,500km<sup>2</sup> ★ 965mi<sup>2</sup>

### HIGHLIGHTS

- ★ Visit the many viewpoints to see the falls from every angle
- ★ *Get an Iguazú 'baptism' on a boat ride*
- ★ Meet the local wildlife at Parque das Aves

**WEB** [IGUAZUARGENTINA.COM/EN/INDEX](http://IGUAZUARGENTINA.COM/EN/INDEX)  
[CATARATASDOIGUACU.COM.BR](http://CATARATASDOIGUACU.COM.BR)



The park's walkways take you across the water for stunning views of the falls



Iguazú Falls were voted one of the 'New7Wonders of Nature'



— THE AMERICAS —

Marine iguanas are the only ocean-swimming lizards on the planet, and are just some of the incredible animals that thrive on the Galápagos Islands



## ★ GALÁPAGOS ★

### THE ONLY PLACE ON EARTH WHERE YOU CAN MEET TROPICAL PENGUINS, GIANT TORTOISES AND BLUE-FOOTED BOOBIES

**E**arly explorers called this volcanic archipelago 'Las Islas Encantadas' (The Enchanted Isles), and for good reason. Isolated from humans, over 966 kilometres (600 miles) west of Ecuador, South America, the extraordinary flora and fauna have evolved undisturbed. The results of 'nature's greatest experiment' captivated naturalist Charles Darwin; his observations of the Galápagos Islands in 1835 inspired his theory of evolution.

Many creatures are completely unique to the Galápagos Islands, and because they evolved without major predators, they aren't fazed when humans pay them a visit. Rare tropical penguins, marine iguanas (the only ocean-swimming lizards) and birds with bright blue feet are just some of the incredible animals that thrive there, but the most iconic of them all has to be the giant tortoise. The islands were even named after them, as Galápagos means tortoise in Spanish. Specimens grow more than 1.5 metres (five feet) in length and live for over 100 years – the longest lifespan of all vertebrates. You'll find them taking a refreshing bath in the warm volcanic mud.

Crystal-clear waters, blue skies and a breathtaking selection of more than 2,900 species of marine fauna qualify this as one of the world's greatest snorkelling and diving destinations. If you're seeking undersea adventures, the best time of year to visit is during the rainy season, starting from as early as December to as late as June. However, due to the islands' proximity to the equator, the climate is fairly consistent all year round. Temperatures range from 21 to 30 degrees Celsius (70 to 86 degrees Fahrenheit), so there is no bad time to visit. Having visited more than once, TV legend and naturalist Sir David Attenborough recommends allowing a week to see as many critters as you can.

Not only are the Galápagos Islands a national park, they are also number one on the UNESCO World Heritage list to protect its fragile ecosystem. For this reason, many parts are only accessible in the company of a guide, and both cruises and land-based tours are available. There are 19 islands – 13 large and six small – with a multitude of islets, but you don't need to visit them all to make the most of this natural wonder of the world.

**LOCATION** Ecuador

**AREA** 7,995km<sup>2</sup> ★ 3,087mi<sup>2</sup>

#### HIGHLIGHTS

- ★ Take the picturesque walking path along Tortuga Bay
- ★ Visit the fascinating exhibits of the Charles Darwin Research Station
- ★ Enjoy the catch of the day in Puerto Ayora's fish market restaurant

**WEB** [GALAPAGOS.GOB.EC/EN/NATIONAL-PARK](http://GALAPAGOS.GOB.EC/EN/NATIONAL-PARK)



# ★ CANAIMA ★

## FAMOUS FOR ITS NATURAL WONDERS, THIS PARK IS AN ADVENTURER'S PARADISE

T

he word 'park' does not come close to describing the vastness of Canaima. Roughly the size of Belgium, it encompasses savannas,

rainforests, mountains and the highest uninterrupted waterfall in the world. Angel Falls is 979 metres (3,211 feet). They're named after American aviator Jimmie Angel who flew

over them in 1933, searching for gold. To this day Angel Falls is still only accessible via plane, just like the rest of Canaima. Despite being a national park since 1965, this spectacular landscape is as wild and untouched as ever. As such, it is home to a variety of rare and endangered species, including jaguar and giant armadillo, as well as birds and plants that are not found anywhere else in the world.

Another unique natural wonder you'll find in Canaima are the table-topped mountains, known as tepui in South America. Meaning 'house of the gods' in the native tongue of the Pemon Indians who have lived there for centuries, it's thought these giant flat-topped mountains were formed billions of years ago when the continents drifted apart and South America was separated from West Africa. The most popular of the mountains to climb is Mount Roraima, on the border of Brazil, Venezuela and Guyana. With a summit 2,810 metres (9,222 feet) high, with 400-metre (1,300-foot) cliffs on each side, the journey up Mount Roraima isn't easy, but after a six-day trek you'll be rewarded with scenery that's out of this world: pink sand, valleys of crystals, pristine lakes and rare orchids. This is thought to have inspired the setting of Arthur Conan Doyle's 1912 classic *The Lost World*.

For all the activities on offer there are also opportunities to relax, whether by the Canaima Lagoon or in the tourist village of Kavac. There, you can stay overnight in a hammock, enjoy the hospitality of the Pemon people and bask in the extraordinary surroundings.



**LOCATION** : Venezuela

**AREA** : 30,000km<sup>2</sup> ★ 11,583mi<sup>2</sup>

### HIGHLIGHTS

- ★ Visit between October and November to avoid heavy rainfall
- ★ **Pack for an adventure – a trip to the falls involves hiking, swimming and canoeing**
- ★ Relax by the Canaima Lagoon with sandy beaches and breathtaking views

**WEB** : [THINK-VENEZUELA.NET/ENGLISH/VENEZUELA-NATIONAL-PARKS.HTM](http://THINK-VENEZUELA.NET/ENGLISH/VENEZUELA-NATIONAL-PARKS.HTM)

Angel Falls is the highest waterfall in the world and flows into Devil's Canyon

# ★ LOS GLACIARES ★

## MONUMENTAL GLACIERS MEET COLOSSAL PEAKS IN ONE OF THE MOST DIVERSE LANDSCAPES ON EARTH



**A**rgentina's Parque Nacional Los Glaciares is a tale of two halves – the north, dominated by shark-tooth peaks and lenga forests, and the windswept south, bequeathed 350 glaciers and huge, milky sapphire lakes. Declared a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1981, the park unfolds across 600,000 hectares (1.5 million acres) in the remote Patagonian Andes.

While giant ice fields cover 40 per cent of the park, the jewel in its icy crown is Perito Moreno Glacier. A remnant of the Ice Age – stretching 30 kilometres (19 miles) long and towering 70 metres (230 feet) above the glacial water – it grows by up to two metres (seven feet) a day. One of the only advancing glaciers in the world, it's also one of the most accessible, and can be observed from a network of walkways and observation balconies that wind along the shore of Lago Argentino.

A jagged wonder, the chaotic field of ice plays out in shades of pure white, aquamarine, grey and electric blue. Occasionally, double-decker sized icebergs calve from its age-old crevices and spires – crumbling like icing sugar before crashing into the waters below. Boat trips ferry daring passengers to the foot of the glacier to experience the beguiling beauty of the ice up close. Yet, true immersion can only be had trekking atop the glacier itself. Snaking across bottomless blue cracks and chasmic caves, travellers don crampons to explore the ice on foot – the occasional creak a lingering reminder of nature's powerful volatility. Truly adventurous souls, willing to test their mettle in one of the most difficult environments on Earth, can join ten-day expeditions across the little-explored Southern Patagonian Ice Cap.

To the north, in the shadow of the neck-straining Fitz Roy Massif, lies El Chaltén – the



The park's rambling routes are well maintained, so hikers can explore solo

de facto trekking capital of Argentina. The ideal base for hikers and outdoors enthusiasts, the hippy enclave marks the starting point for a number of world-class trails – from relaxed, half-day routes to challenging full-day circuits. From the frontier-feel town, travellers can head straight out onto the trails after breakfast and return each evening to a delicious meal and warm bed.

The 22-kilometre (12-mile) Laguna de los Tres trail rewards generously with 360-degree grandstand views of Los Tres, or The Three: Poincenot, Cerro Torre and, of course, Mount Fitz Roy. Laguna Torre, another popular trail, winds 20 kilometres (12 miles) alongside the Fitz Roy River, through magical Nirre forests and old glaciated valleys, before reaching the foot of the majestically rugged Cerro Torre. Alternatively, several shorter and gentler trails, including Laguna Capri, Los Condores and Las Aguilas, are waiting to be explored. For keen campers, a sprawling network of multi-day trails weaves through the park's most remote corners, past hanging glaciers, the mighty Patagonian ice field and unexplored valleys, like the Túnel, Eléctrico and Diablo.

No matter the trail, flora and fauna abound. Black and red Magellanic woodpeckers, chucao and white-throated caracaras flit through temperate forests, as the endangered, and painfully shy huemul deer forages for food below. To the north, Andean condors and black-chested buzzard eagles soar through the sky and compete for carrion while yellow orchids, bright red firebush and Calafate berries – which, as legend has it, anyone who eats is destined to return to Patagonia – bedeck the verdant woodland underfoot.

### MOUNT FITZ ROY

Sandwiched between Argentina and Chile, the sky-puncturing peaks of Mount Fitz Roy are visible for miles. First summited in 1952 by French alpinists Lionel Terray and Guido Magnone, it was named after Robert FitzRoy, the meteorologist and captain of the HMS Beagle, who travelled to South America with Charles Darwin. Standing guard over Los Glaciares National Park, it's become the enduring symbol of Patagonia, made even more famous by Yvon Chouinard, who after summiting the mountain in 1968, used its outline as the logo for his clothing brand, Patagonia. One of the most inhospitable peaks in the world, a number of technically experienced, elite mountaineers attempt to navigate its sharp angles and sheer granite face each year, but on average just one succeeds.



The craggy granite peak of Mount Fitz Roy stands at 3,375m (11,072ft) high

**LOCATION** Argentina

**AREA** 6,000km<sup>2</sup> ★ 2316.6mi<sup>2</sup>

### HIGHLIGHTS

- ★ Strap on crampons and hike across Perito Moreno glacier
- ★ **Explore the park's two largest lakes, Lago Viedma and Lago Argentino**
- ★ Camp out to catch otherworldly sunrises and sunsets

**WEB** [LOSGLACIARES.COM](http://LOSGLACIARES.COM)



Strange cloud formations linger atop Perito Moreno, thanks to the microclimate caused by the sheer amount of ice

Lakes and snow-capped mountains form the perfect combination for a high-altitude adventure

## ★ SAJAMA ★

### EXPLORE THE PEACEFUL HIGH-ALTITUDES OF BOLIVIA'S LESS-TRAVELLED NATIONAL PARK

**A**t 4,000 metres (13,100 feet) above sea level and set on the far-reaching plains of the altiplano on the border with Chile is Bolivia's oldest national park, the Sajama. A less frequented location, this park offers a true escape from the crowds and burgeoning South American tourism stream. Boasting features of mammoth volcanoes, adorable alpacas, grand reflective lakes and thermal hot springs, there is plenty to see and experience. Hike around the incredible Laguna Huanakota, a giant reflective lake backdropped by an imposing snowy mountain, and then bathe in one of the many natural hot springs to soak those aching muscles. After feeling refreshed, head further afield to explore colonial era architecture in the village of Curahuara de Carangas.

The park's main attraction is its towering snow-capped volcano, Nevado Sajama, which stands as Bolivia's highest peak at a staggering 6,542 metres (21,463 feet). Expect to pay a small entrance to the park, roughly

£11 (\$14.50) or so, and to get the most out of your visit it's worth joining in as part of a guided tour.

The area's indigenous people, the Aymara, play a significant role in the conservation and cultural experience for foreign travellers. Look out for ancient burial buildings and cave paintings that reveal a cultural insight into how the local people have lived and survived within these harsh conditions.

Booking yourself in for a night or two's kip in the town of Sajama is doable through a few of the park's more basic hostels and lodgings. Ecotourism is happening in a big way for Sajama, with entirely Aymara-run establishments such as Tomarapi eco-lodge, providing local food and basic lodging for up to 3,000 visitors a year. And when you're not taking pictures of the stunning landscapes, don't miss the opportunity to visit prehistoric rock paintings and chullpas (towers containing the mummies of noble families) to complete your stay.

**LOCATION** Bolivia

**AREA** 1,002km<sup>2</sup> ★ 386mi<sup>2</sup>

#### HIGHLIGHTS

- ★ Look out for Queñoa trees that adorn the park
- ★ *Witness the mysterious Sajama Lines etched into the ground*
- ★ Don't miss the Lauca River for amazing wildlife

**WEB** [SERNAP.GOB.BO/SAJAMA](http://SERNAP.GOB.BO/SAJAMA)



# ★ LENÇÓIS MARANHENSES ★

## IN NORTHEAST BRAZIL, THE ELEMENTS TRANSPIRE TO CREATE THE MOST UNLIKELY OF PARTNERSHIPS

**S**trewn across Brazil's northeast coastline state of Maranhão is a natural marvel unlike any other. A desert of alternating white sand dunes and sparkling turquoise lagoons stretches out towards the horizon, like a million perfectly crumpled little beaches.

Covering 1,554 square kilometres (600 square miles), across 70 kilometres (44 miles) of shoreline, the national park is one of Brazil's unsung wonders, and South America's largest field of sand dunes. The best way to truly immerse in Lençóis Maranhenses is with an extended hike. These typically set off from the state capital and former colonial city of São Luís, rambling by sun and moon for just shy of a week. Adventurers sail down the mangroves of Rio Preguiças, named after its resident sloth population, before traversing the dunes, and bathing in the crystalline blue and green lagoons. By the full moon, they sleep beneath the stars – snug in the hammocks and fishermen's huts of the village of Atins and

the oasis communities of Baixa Grande and Queimada dos Britos.

Casual day-trippers, who prefer to find their own way to the dunes or play in the sand can hire local guides and transportation from the city of Barreirinhas, 250 kilometres (155 miles) from São Luís. If slogging through sand gets too much, just add horses – multi-day horseback rides are a memorable, environmentally friendly alternative to hiking the taxing dunes.

The national park is home to an incredible array of wildlife, including the endangered scarlet ibis, neotropical otter, northern tiger cat and manatees. Meanwhile, the mangroves are also host the spectacled caiman, red brocket and lowland paca. At times, when local rivers cut through, fish are able to make their way into the temporary pools – some, such as the wolfish, even embedding themselves in the mud until the wet season begins.

Although approximately a third of the planet's land surface is covered in desert, there is no other quite like this.

**LOCATION** Brazil

**AREA** 1.55km<sup>2</sup> ★ 0.6mi<sup>2</sup>

### HIGHLIGHTS

- ★ Dive into the crystal-clear ponds at Lagoa Azul
- ★ **Rent a 4x4 and ride across the 50m (164ft) dunes**
- ★ Watch light and shadow play over the otherworldly landscape at sunset

**WEB** [ICMBIO.GOV.BR/PARNALENCOISMARANHENSES/VISITANT-GUIDE.HTML](http://ICMBIO.GOV.BR/PARNALENCOISMARANHENSES/VISITANT-GUIDE.HTML)



The dunes are sculpted in the dry season and filled in the wetter months



As the park's most famous attraction, most hiking trails pass by the base of these magnificent granite columns





# ★ TORRES DEL PAINE ★

**A WHIRLWIND OF TOWERING PEAKS, ELECTRIC LAKES AND THUNDERING GLACIERS, TORRES DEL PAINE IS PATAGONIAN WILDERNESS AT ITS MOST SPECTACULAR**

**A**t the southern tip of South America's spine, the majestic Andes reveals its grand finale: Torres del Paine National Park. A cacophony of teal lakes, Magellan forests, and gigantic blue glaciers, it's a geological treasure trove sprawling more than 227,000 hectares (560,929 acres) across southern Chile. At its heart, three cloud-cloaked spires erupt from the bowels of the earth, thrusting heavenward. The highest soars 2,884 metres (9,462 feet) over the Patagonian steppe, flanked by two twisted towers – together the three granite

monoliths are Torres del Paine, the park's namesake landmark.

Founded in 1959 and named a UNESCO Biosphere Reserve in 1978, Torres del Paine is regarded by many as the eighth wonder of the world. Today, its rugged wilderness draws more than 250,000 visitors a year – lured by its spectacular scenery, unrivalled hiking trails and abundant wildlife. Though it would take years to truly explore its every precipice and pampa, for most visitors, merely witnessing a slice of its untamed landscape is enough.

World-famous peaks, thorny massifs and iconic passes crowd this remote corner of the world, making it a hiking mecca. While a network of trails – ranging from two-hour rambles to ten-day treks – weave across the park, most adventurers opt for one of the two classic multi-day circuits: the 'W' or the 'O'. Both offer excellent hiking infrastructure, well-maintained trails and designated campsites.

The five-day W rolls through the grassy tundra, where herds of baby guanaco – the cousin of the llama, camel and alpaca – roll in the dust. Following the banks of Lago Grey, the trail passes Glacier Grey – an iconic sweep of ice stretching out to the horizon – before ascending the French Valley, a magnificent gorge sat in the shadow of the black slate horns of Los Cuernos. The trail continues past waterfalls to Mirador Las Torres at the base of the three towers, via a 60-minute boulder scramble. Every morning, at first light, the sheer granite faces of Torres del Paine's peaks are bathed in pink.

The popular 80-kilometre (50-mile) trail is best hiked from west to east, to save the

**LOCATION** Chile

**AREA** 2,273km<sup>2</sup> ★ 877.6mi<sup>2</sup>

## HIGHLIGHTS

- ★ Stand at the base of the 'Three Towers'
- ★ *Don't miss the electric blue Salto Grande waterfall*
- ★ The French Valley is a must for hardy hikers

**WEB** [TORRESELPAIN.COM/EN](http://TORRESELPAIN.COM/EN)



Not only can guanacos reach speeds of up to 56kph (35mph), they can jump 1.2m (4ft) high



## A LITTLE LUXURY

While low-cost campsites and refugios dot the hiking trails, those in search of a balanced blend of adventure and luxury need not look far. For those craving solitude, Awasi Patagonia, situated in its own private reserve featuring just 14 villas, is the ultimate indulgence. With each villa assigned a private guide and four-wheel-drive, guests can explore at their own pace, crafting a bespoke adventure. Overlooking Lake Pehoe and Torres del Paine's granite towers, Explora Patagonia offers a luxurious base from which to explore the park. Its full-board packages include accommodation, locally sourced cuisine and 40 exciting excursions. Alternatively, hidden away next to the Serrano river, the Rio Serrano Hotel + Spa is perfectly located for fishing, horse riding, kayaking and off-the-beaten-track hiking. Its spa, swimming pool and sweeping veranda provide the ultimate relaxation at the end of a busy day, and the huge windows in every room reveal magnificent views of the massif, bathed in pink and orange at sunrise and sunset.



Nestled organically into the hillside, the luxurious Awasi Patagonia is the perfect antidote to a long day exploring the wilderness



Grey Glacier, which spans 27,000ha (66,718ac), is born in the Patagonian Andes Mountains

## WHEN TO VISIT

Peak season, from December to March, means high prices and heavy crowds as the park enjoys its warmest weather and longest days. However, it also brings with it the strongest winds, so travellers should come prepared. The autumn months of April, May and June may be colder, but they tend to offer some reprieve from the bitter Patagonian gale. Clear skies and gorgeous autumnal colours are a bonus, as is the peace and quiet, once the crowds of high season have dispersed.

Intrepid explorers hoping to witness sparkling landscapes of snow and ice will have the park almost entirely to themselves from June to August. While the main trails are still open, the O Circuit and more remote routes close for winter. Meanwhile, lower prices and footfall make shoulder season – from mid-late September to November – a draw for those who are looking to disconnect and immerse themselves in nature.



Although summer visitors will have to compete with the crowds, the weather is ideal for exploring the park

toughest sections for when backpacks are at their lightest, and is dotted with cozy refugios – no-frills guesthouses offering hearty meals, robust Chilean wine and comfortable beds. Alternatively, there are free and paid camping sites at regular intervals.

Meanwhile, the O circuit covers the W trail, in addition to the less travelled but picture-perfect north side of the park. Rolling 110 kilometres (68 miles) anticlockwise from Refugio Las Torres, the trail snakes past beech forests, barren slopes and turquoise lakes, offering up mesmerising views of Glacier Grey at the highest, and most challenging, point of the trek, John Gardner Pass. Although refugios are available across much of the nine-day trail, camping is the only option in its more isolated reaches – the solitude and spectacular sights are enough to persuade even the most ardent of indoor sleepers to set up under the stars.

While Torres del Paine's W and O circuits host up to 300 people a day, some of its lesser-known tracks see fewer than 100 a year. For hardened hikers hoping to push further into the Chilean backcountry, Pingo Valley is Patagonia's answer to Jurassic Park. Unscathed by the devastating forest fire of 2011, the



Glacial rivers lead kayakers to some of the park's most remote and isolated corners

valley's carpet of moss, usnea and fern has continued to flourish and today wild cows roam free. Just north, the Cerro Zapata peak, though challenging, can be summited without technical experience, rewarding conquerors with spectacular views of Tyndall Glacier.

For real wanderers, exploring off-trail is possible, but often requires a semi-technical approach. Off-limits to self-guided hikers, the Silencio and Bader valleys offer up some incredible climbing spots, including Cerro Fortaleza and Cerro Escudo, known as 'The Shield'. To the east, the red and orange Sierra Baguales mountain range seems like an otherworldly transplant – out of place in the Patagonian wild. Once covered by ocean, today thousands of fossils, including shark teeth, are buried beneath its surface.

For travellers hoping to balance comfort and adventure, most of Torres del Paine's iconic sights are just a day's hike from the park's

***“Most of Torres del Paine's iconic sights are just a day's hike from the park's hotels and lodges”***

hotels and lodges. The enchanting French Valley can be conquered in six hours, and is considered by many as the most beautiful in the park. Not for the faint of heart, the steep two-kilometre (1.2-mile) Mirador Ferrier trail ascends quickly, but graciously rewards weary travellers with views of the saw-toothed peak of Mount Ferrier and glacier-studded lakes.

Journeys through Torres del Paine don't end at the water's edge. Boats sail across Lago Grey, past huge, house-sized hunks of blue-tinged ice, to the foot of Grey Glacier. Standing 30 metres (98 feet) tall, its white face is scarred

with crevices and ribbons of deep blue. Despite the fact that it's thinning twice as fast as it was a decade ago, Grey Glacier stretches 28 kilometres (17 miles) long and forms part of the Southern Patagonian Ice Field, one of the largest expanses of ice in the world.

Those keen to explore the frozen wilderness up close can board kayaks and glide past black beaches and sub-Antarctic forests towards the



There's certainly no shortage of scenery when hiking in the park



Lake and Glacier Gray in Torres del Paine National Park

icy mass. Lapped by waves, bergs sparkle in the afternoon sunlight as they float south, carried by Patagonia's famously fierce knock-you-down westerlies to a soundtrack of creaking ice.

Back on dry land, Torres del Paine's vast pampas and metamorphic mountains offer brilliant riding trails for experienced equestrians – after all, this Mordor at the end of the world has been horse country ever since remote cattle herders and lone gauchos were the only ones roaming the land. Mounting stocky criollo horses, riders canter between working estancias,

See if you can catch sight of a puma or any of the other wildlife that calls Torres del Paine home



With plenty of treks to choose from, you can't be disappointed

exploring ever-changing landscapes and remote landmarks like Glacier Dickson.

Whether on foot or horseback, the park's diverse ecosystem captivates, featuring 26 mammal species and over 100 different birds. Overhead, Andean condors circle and swoop – with a wingspan of over three metres (ten feet), it's one of the largest species of bird on earth. Meanwhile, endangered huemul deer cautiously graze along remote trails, their unusually large ears pricked. Even the notoriously shy nandu,

the South American ostrich, can be spotted running with wings spread wide. One of the world's fastest land animals, it can reach speeds of up to 80 kilometres (50 miles) per hour. Once the sun begins to set, the park's most elusive residents finally make an appearance – a solitary puma slinks through the long grass, searching for its next meal. In the distance, the peaks bid adieu to the day, as the horizon bleeds ever darker, and the stars begin their shift.

Torres del Paine's rugged landscape is dominated by the Paine Massif, a rocky spur of the Andes that looms high above the Patagonian steppe



**JOSTEDALSMBREEN**

*NORWAY*

**60**

-

**CONNEMARA**

*IRELAND*

**64**

-

**CAIRNGORMS**

*SCOTLAND*

**65**

-

**PLITVICE LAKES**

*CROATIA*

**66**

-

**SAXON SWITZERLAND**

*GERMANY & CZECH REPUBLIC*

**68**

-

**VIKOS-AOÖS**

*GREECE*

**70**

**TEIDE**

*TENERIFE, SPAIN*

**71**

-

**SNOWDONIA**

*WALES*

**72**

-

**BLACK FOREST**

*GERMANY*

**74**

-

**DOLOMITI BELLUNESI**

*ITALY*

**75**

-

**THINGVELLIR**

*ICELAND*

**76**

-

**TRIGLAV**

*SLOVENIA*

**78**

**VALBONA VALLEY**

*ALBANIA*

**79**

**PYRENEES**

*FRANCE*

**80**

**OULANKA**

*FINLAND*

**82**

**SWISS**

*SWITZERLAND*

**83**

**LAKE DISTRICT**

*ENGLAND*

**84**

**TATRA**

*POLAND*

**86**

**EUROPE**





— EUROPE —

Briksdal Glacier is one of the most accessible branches of Jostedalsglaciären for visitors

# ★ JOSTEDALSREEN ★

NESTLED IN THE FJORDS OF NORWAY, THE LARGEST GLACIER IN MAINLAND EUROPE IS A SIGHT TO BEHOLD

**F**ew places in Europe have the variety of dramatic landscapes in such close proximity as Jostedal National Park. Between its untouched forests, mountain peaks and pristine lakes, there lies a frozen giant. The Jostedal Glacier, from which the park gets its name, serves both as a reminder of Earth's ice-age past and a warning about its increasingly warm future.

Norway's iconic fjords were carved by mighty glaciers during the last ice age, forcing their way through the land and leaving cliffs and valleys and freshwater lakes in their wake. While most prehistoric glaciers are long-gone, Jostedalbreen remains, and is the biggest ice sheet to be found in mainland Europe. It continues to creep along the slopes at the eponymous glacial pace, moving between one centimetre and a metre (0.4 inches and 3.3 feet) each day.

Today, the colossal Jostedalbreen straddles two of the world's longest fjords: Sognefjord and Nordfjord. The glacier covers over 487 square kilometres (188 square miles) – almost

**LOCATION** Norway

**AREA** 1,310km<sup>2</sup> ★ 506mi<sup>2</sup>

## HIGHLIGHTS

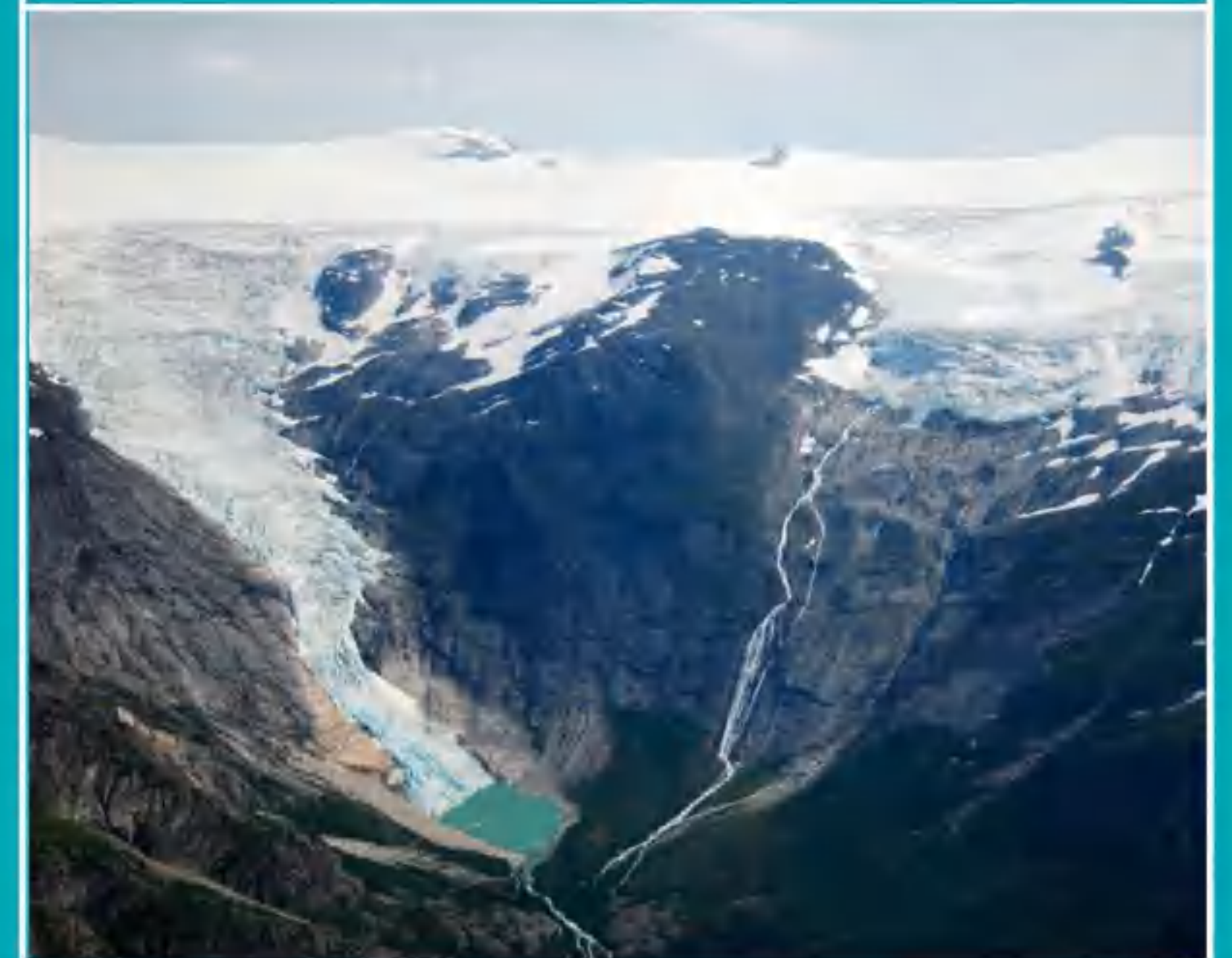
- ★ Climb across the Nigardsbreen branch of the glacier
- ★ *Spend the night atop Mt Skala and watch the sunrise*
- ★ Kayak across the turquoise waters of Lovatnet

**WEB** [JOSTEDALSREEN.ORG/ENGLISH](http://JOSTEDALSREEN.ORG/ENGLISH)

half the park – and intrepid visitors can embark on hikes across its icy surface. You can join glacier walks, accompanied by professional guides, which depart most days from some of Jostedalbreen's outlet glaciers across the park. These hikes vary in difficulty, often dictated by your departure point and/or the weather

## EUROPE'S BIGGEST GLACIER

Jostedal glacier's sheer scale has to be seen to be believed. But even as you hike across its surface, it's difficult to comprehend just how much ice lies beneath your feet. The glacier itself covers over half the park by area, and in parts it is nearly 600 metres (1,969 feet) deep. It is estimated to contain some 73 cubic kilometres (17.5 cubic miles) of freshwater locked up in its ice. That's the equivalent of around 300 billion bathtubs worth of water – enough to meet Norway's water demands for over 100 years!



The glacier's true size only really becomes clear when it's seen from above



© Alamy

The steep climb of Mount Skala is challenging, but the summit views breathtaking

conditions. Those looking for a challenge might wish to tackle the ice from the remote Tunsbergdalsbreen, which takes you to higher, snow-covered altitudes on hikes lasting up to ten hours. Those in the mood for something less demanding, or who are pressed for time, may prefer the relatively flat ice accessible from Styggevatnet-Austdalsbreen, where hiking tours take around four hours. However you choose to cross it, being able to explore the glacier – hearing the melted ice flowing below the solid surface while the blue-white beast creaks beneath your feet – is sure to be a unique and unforgettable experience. During winter at the Nigardsbreen glacier outlet, you can also explore the spectacular blue-ice cave beneath the surface. These glass-like caverns are bathed in blue as the daylight filters through the thick ice.

Although it covers a significant proportion of the park, there is far more to explore than just the glacier itself. The land ranges from 300 to 2,000 metres (984 to 6,532 feet) above sea level, containing verdant valleys, deciduous forests, tumbling waterfalls, rugged cliffs and alpine peaks. Parts of the park are still used



Guided glacier walks offer safe passage across the ice with an expert guide

farming and grazing, making use of the life-giving meltwater that runs off the glacier.

For many visitors, even the journey to the park is a highlight. There are several access roads from nearby towns which will offer the ultimate scenic route as you wind your way into valleys around the park's perimeter. Bear in mind that there are no roads within the park itself, and you'll usually have to walk a few kilometres from the car parks or bus stops on the outer fringes to the glacier and other points of interest.

The park's official visitors centres provide the perfect place to start if you're unsure of what sights to see or which hiking trails to try. The Norwegian Glacier Museum in nearby Fjaerland, the Breheimsenteret Glacier Center in Jostedal and the Jostedalsbreen National Park Center in Stryn have plenty of tourist information about activities and accommodation, and they host exhibitions where you can learn more about the park's prehistoric history and the glacier's formation. Pick up a map from one of the centres and follow any one of the nature trails (difficulties range from easy to expert) to hike through the dramatic landscape. Most footpaths are easily accessible in summer, but in winter you

## FJAERLAND

Not far from the south-western border of the park, on the banks of the Fjaerlandsfjord you'll find the charming glacier village of Fjaerland. It is an international book town, with second-hand book stores located in a strange array of buildings, including a cafe, bank, stables and the post office. In total, there are around four kilometres (2.5 miles) worth of bookshelves across the village.

Fjaerland is only a ten-minute drive from the park and there are daily bus services to Norway's hubs such as Oslo and Bergen. It is also served by passenger ferries at the nearby dock in Mundal.



Bookshelves can be found throughout Fjaerland, even at bus stops







Hike to Lovatnet to see the Ramnefjellsfossen cascade into the green-blue waters of the lake below



Venture beneath the glacier on a tour of the blue ice caves

can rent skis or snowshoes to tackle the routes when snow falls.

If you're looking to get away from the busier areas of the park, there are many glacial lakes off the beaten track where you can rent a kayak. Gliding across the crystal-clear waters against the Jostedalbreen backdrop is a wonderfully peaceful experience. Operators also run kayak tours to approach the glaciers from the water, providing an alternative opportunity to appreciate the ice sheets' sheer size. In the summer months when Jostedal River is boosted by the meltwater, you can get your adrenaline fix by white water rafting down the river, navigating the rocks and bends and conquering big waves.

Those in search of an even greater challenge can attempt the longest uphill climb in Norway: Mount Skala. Reaching the summit of this 1,848-metre (6,063-foot) peak is not easy, and takes around four to eight hours, but the views once you reach the top are sublime. You can rest your weary feet in one of the summit's hiking cabins – either take a break for a few minutes before descending, or stay the night to watch the sunrise in the morning.

To the north of the park, you can find one of the highest waterfalls in the world, the Ramnefjellsfossen. Water from the Ramnefjellbreen outlet glacier cascades down 818 metres (2,685 feet) into Lovatnet lake below. The falls are more impressive in summer when they are fed by melting ice. The picturesque lake appears unusually green as it contains clay and rock particles that have been crushed by the glaciers.

In the forests and valleys of Jostedalbreen, take some binoculars and stay on the lookout for local fauna: eagles, red deer, lynx, wolverines and even brown bears can be

***“When the Jostedal River is boosted by meltwater, get your adrenaline fix by white water rafting”***

found within the park. Birdwatchers will be able to spot lots of feathered friends during the summer months, when many bird species return from Africa.

There are campsites all around the park's borders where you can pitch a tent, park a caravan and – in many cases – rent a small cabin. Villages and towns nearby, such as Fjaerland, Olden and Gjerde, have hotels and provide easy access to the park itself.

Sadly, the changing climate has not been easy on the ice of this epic landscape. Many of the glaciers have been retreating for several years due to increased melting rates that snowfall can't replenish. Plan your trip soon to make the most of Jostedalbreen while it's still stable enough to explore in all its frozen glory.

# ★ CONNEMARA ★

## THE RUGGED COASTLINE OF WESTERN IRELAND IS GUARANTEED TO TAKE YOUR BREATH AWAY

**B**est viewed from the 400-metre (1,460-foot) peak of Diamond Hill, this coastal park in County Galway is wet, wild and beautiful. High rainfall feeds blanket bogs and heathlands, painted purple by low-growing moorgrasses. Look closely at the ground and you'll see carnivorous sundews holding out sticky leaves like natural flypaper. If you're lucky, you might also find the delicate flowers of wild orchids.

One of the best places to stay is the town of Clifden, the capital of Connemara. Overlooked by the quartzite peaks of the Twelve Bens mountain range, and within easy reach of the coast, it's the perfect base for park explorers. Visit in August to catch the annual pony show, or in September for the community arts festival.

A short trip from Clifden will see you to the Roundstone Bog. This Special Area of Conservation is home to rare heathers and old

ruins, including the haunted Halfway House inn. There's a farmer's market every Sunday in June, July and August, offering the best of local produce to hungry walkers, and if you're keen to sample local entertainment, musicians and dancers gather at the Roundstone community centre every Wednesday evening.

Away from the bustle of village life, expect a holiday steeped in history. Inland, the great standing stones of megalithic tombs still dot the landscape, marking sacred places, thousands of years old. Near Clifden, you'll find the Marconi Wireless station, where the first wireless messages were sent and received in 1907. And, at the coast, you'll find the remains of ancient creatures. The golden sand at Trá an Dóilín in Ballyconneely contains beautiful fragments of calcified seaweed known as maërl. Kick off your shoes, search for seashells, and unwind in the cool, clear Atlantic waters.

**LOCATION** Ireland

**AREA** 29.57km<sup>2</sup> ★ 11.42mi<sup>2</sup>

### HIGHLIGHTS

- ★ Take a pony trek at Cleggan Beach
- ★ *Sample traditional Irish music in Roundstone*
- ★ Visit the haunted remains of Halfway House

**WEB** [CONNEMARA.NET](http://CONNEMARA.NET)



They don't call it the Emerald Isle for nothing – expect verdant hills, lush vegetation and frequent showers on your trip to Connemara



Mist and mystery await you at the shores of the lochs in the UK's largest national park

— EUROPE —



# ★ CAIRNGORMS ★

## EXPLORE RUGGED SLOPES, GLASSY LOCHS AND ANCIENT FORESTS IN THE UK'S LARGEST NATIONAL PARK

**T**he Cairngorms National Park is an ecosystem treasure trove. Within its boundaries, you'll find pristine moorlands, forests, lochs, rivers and wetlands, and the rare creatures that call them home. Expect golden eagles, wild cats, red deer, and mountain hares against a backdrop of breathtaking mountain scenery. See salmon leaping through the crystal waters of the world-famous River Dee, or trek between the ancient pines of the Caledonian Forest in search of the rare capercaillie grouse.

One of the best ways to see the park is to take a slow drive along the 145-kilometre (90-mile) Snow Roads route. Beginning at Blairgowrie and ending at Grantown-on-Spey, these tracks include some of the highest roads in the UK. Parts of the route are narrow, some of the summits are blind, and corners can be tight, but stunning views await patient travellers. The Snow Roads live up to their name, so it's advisable to keep an eye on the weather forecast if you're planning a winter trip. Take it slowly, book accommodation in

advance, and take advantage of fuel stops en-route for a scenic Scottish adventure you won't soon forget.

There are plenty of places to stay in the park, from hotels to eco pods and woodland campsites. If you're feeling adventurous, you could even try pitching your tent out in the wilderness. Scotland is the one place in the UK where wild camping is legal. Check the Scottish Outdoor Access Code, and remember to 'tread lightly', leaving nothing but footprints when you go.

Wherever you choose as your base, be sure to take a walk in the wild. Trails cross the park in all directions, and there's something for everyone; the shortest walk is just 15 minutes, while the longest promise to keep experienced hikers occupied for days. Along the way, keep an eye out for wooden stakes topped with camera brackets. These Photo Posts are part of a science project documenting the changing landscape of the Cairngorms. Snap a picture and add it to the Photo Posts website to become a citizen scientist.

**LOCATION** Scotland

**AREA** 4,528km<sup>2</sup> ★ 1,748mi<sup>2</sup>

### HIGHLIGHTS

- ★ Take a slow, scenic drive along the Snow Roads
- ★ ***Pitch a tent in the wilderness***
- ★ Upload a Photo Post snap and become a citizen scientist

**WEB** CAIRNGORMS.CO.UK

# ★ PLITVICE LAKES ★

## THE GATHERING OF WATERS AT THE PLITVICE LAKES OF CROATIA OFFERS BREATHTAKING BEAUTY



**T**he most popular tourist attraction in Croatia is the natural phenomenon of Plitvice Lakes, a wonder of waters where 16 lakes come together in stunning beauty. The Lakes, just 130 kilometres (81 miles) southwest of the Croatian capital city of Zagreb, are the main attractions in the Plitvice Lakes National Park, designated a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1979.

The national park covers 300 square kilometres (116 square miles), and includes shimmering turquoise waters with abundant flora and fauna. Cascading waterfalls connect the lakes in a resounding chorus, and invite visitors to linger and observe the sheer beauty of nature, where water has flowed for millions of years, creating a pristine marvel. Varied species of wildlife, including bears, birds, boars, wolves and deer, are also regular visitors to the life-sustaining waters. Hiking the trails throughout the park allows time to contemplate the natural setting or snap photographs of stunning vistas.

For those on a tight schedule, the Plitvice Lakes are worth the investment of a full day; however, many visitors choose to stay overnight and spend a bit more time exploring the lakes, waterfalls and hidden wonders. Be aware that crowds are common and trails may be congested at times. Still, for those with an adventurous spirit, the possibilities for discovery are endless.

Two entrances allow access to the park, one for the lower lakes and another for the higher lakes, which converge over a distance of eight kilometres (five miles). Wear comfortable shoes and take water, lunch or snacks to save time – and be prepared for a dramatic shift in altitude. The highest point in the park reaches 1,280 metres (4,200 feet), while the lowest point is 380 metres (1,247 feet). The largest waterfall is the legendary Veliki Slap, which descends 70



You can rent small row boats in some areas of the park for around £6 (\$7.70) an hour

metres (230 feet) to the crystal pool below. For those who wish to sit and immerse themselves in the moment, or take a leisurely stroll and enjoy the natural beauty, several rest areas are readily available.

A small train and several ferries operate daily within the confines of the park, transporting visitors throughout. A four-hour guided tour, available in English, German, Spanish, French, Italian and Croatian, may be booked ahead for a minimum of 15 people.

The park is open daily and offers extended hours during the summer months, typically between 7am and 8pm local time. Admission for adults is around £6.50 (\$9), although prices do vary with the busy season, increasing from April to October. Admission is cheaper for children, and those under the age of seven are admitted free of charge.

**LOCATION** Croatia

**AREA** 300km<sup>2</sup> ★ 116mi<sup>2</sup>

### HIGHLIGHTS

- ★ Take in the scenery as you hike along any of the eight available trails
- ★ *Go horseback riding in the Plitvice valleys to the north*
- ★ Visit in autumn to witness stunning leaf colour displays

**WEB** NP-PLITVICKA-JEZERA.HR/EN



Walkways criss-cross the park offering unobstructed views of the lakes

### HOW TO GET THERE

Getting to Plitvice Lakes National Park is straightforward. The nearest airports are located in Zagreb and Zadar, and car rental facilities are available. Day tours from Croatia's larger cities, with transportation there and back provided, are a popular option for many tourists. There are also regular buses to the area which you can catch for affordable rates. Overnight accommodation can be booked with one of the three affiliated hotels located just outside the park's perimeter, or you can rent a space at a campsite nearby. You could also choose to stay in private accommodation in one of the surrounding towns or villages, or for something different, try a farm stay.

The entry fee includes transport within the park on the electric boat and panoramic train

Plitvice contains 16 lakes and  
over 90 different waterfalls



# ★ SAXON SWITZERLAND ★

**LOOKING FOR AN ADVENTURE INTO THE WILDERNESS? HIKE, CYCLE OR CLIMB YOUR WAY THROUGH THE MOUNTAINS OF SAXONY**

**S**ituated along the Elbe River and decorating the landscape of eastern Germany along the Czech border is the pristine wilderness of Saxon Switzerland. Made up of imposing woodlands, expansive valleys and sandstone mountains, this national park epitomises the great outdoors.

Get off on the right foot with a visit to the National Park Centre located in the neighbouring village of Bad Schandau just four kilometres (2.5 miles) from the park. Prepare yourself for a day or two before heading out to explore this majestic landscape.

Guided tours provide a great way to experience Saxon Switzerland with local knowledge at hand. You can choose from a number of organised routes, such as the 'Three Stones Tour', which will teach you everything you could possibly need to know about local flora and fauna, rock formations and the surrounding landscape. Alternatively, take a tour around the impressive rock labyrinth in Nikolsdorf, where you can learn about the origins of the rock formations

The Lilienstein table mountain provides a stunning backdrop to dense forests and small villages



that exist and how they came to be this way. Or, why not take a night hike through the wilderness and be guided by moonlight alone? Lasting approximately two to three hours, this hike reveals mysterious figures as the stars shine bright overhead.

For the more active travellers, try your hand at rock climbing – a popular sport within the national park – as there are over 700 summits available. Climb your way up the pillars of Hercules for inspiring panoramic views, then hike your way through endless forests of pine trees and over boulders to explore deeper in Saxon Switzerland.

From Saxony's capital city of Dresden, arriving into the surrounding area is easy enough by public transport or by car. Once in Bad Schandau, hop onto a solar-powered Kirnitzsch Valley Tramway, or travel on a traditional steamboat along the Elbe to reach the park.

The imposing Königstein Fortress should also be on your list of sights to take in when visiting the park. With views of expansive landscapes and an historic walk round the fortress, this is an ideal place to learn about its vibrant history of kings and princes who once resided behind its walls.

You can't visit Saxon Switzerland without taking a stroll along the famous Bastei Bridge – a 76.5-metre (250-feet) man-made landmark that appears to be cast into the towering rocks surrounding it. Entrance is free onto the bridge, and once there you can take in the extraordinary panoramic views over the whole park and the Elbe.

**LOCATION** Saxony ★ Germany

**AREA** 93.5km<sup>2</sup> ★ 36mi<sup>2</sup>

## HIGHLIGHTS

- ★ Enjoy a barbecue at designated public fireplaces
- ★ *Hike along the famous Painter's Way route*
- ★ Cycle the tranquil Elbe River for scenic views

**WEB** [SAECHSISCHE-SCHWEIZ.DE/EN](http://SAECHSISCHE-SCHWEIZ.DE/EN)



The picturesque village of Rathen sits at the foot of the Bastei Bridge

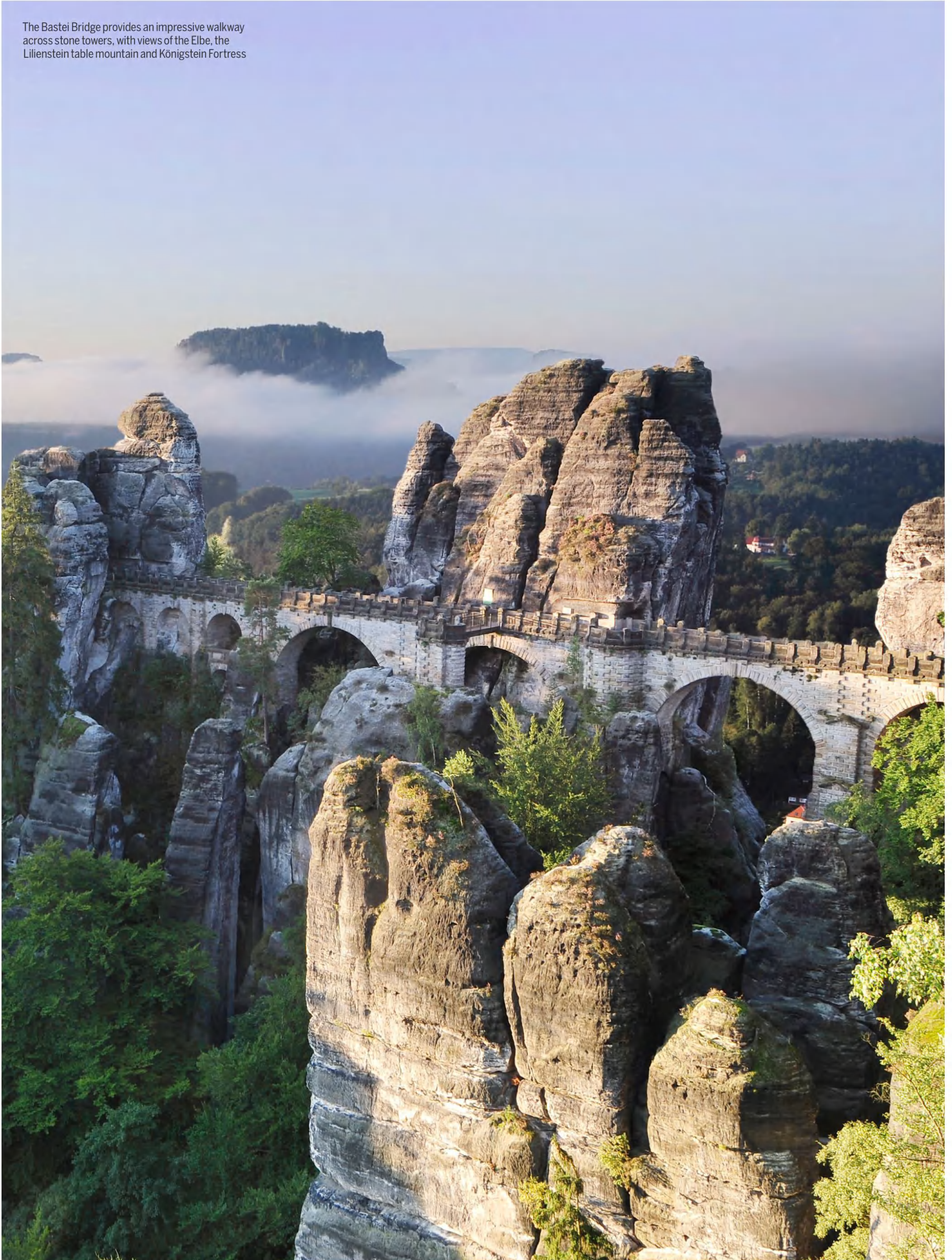
## A NATURALIST'S ESCAPE

This is a nature-lover's dream location. Teeming with wildlife on the ground and in the skies, animals, such as salmon, otters and kingfishers, can be spotted along the Elbe's tributaries as it passes by lush forests and steep mountains. Overhead, hawks and eagle-owls can be seen to roam the skies above the valleys and chalky sandstone cliffs, which date all the way back to the Cretaceous period. You might even be lucky enough to spot a lynx or two roaming deep within the ancient woodlands of this fascinating national park.



The Elbe carves through the landscape past thick forests and hilltop castles, an ideal spot for a steamboat ride

The Bastei Bridge provides an impressive walkway across stone towers, with views of the Elbe, the Lilienstein table mountain and Königstein Fortress



The Vikos Gorge is one of the deepest in Europe

The Vikos Gorge is one of the deepest in Europe

## ★ VIKOS-AOÖS ★

### COME FACE TO FACE WITH WILD BROWN BEARS IN THIS GORGEOUS GREEK SETTING

**N**estled among the Epirus mountains, almost bordering Albania, is Greece's Vikos-Aoös National Park. It's a real hidden gem, and a far cry from the busy beaches and crowded cities one might expect to find in Greece.

The dramatic scenery to be enjoyed within the park includes snow-capped mountains, jaw-dropping ravines, verdant forests and rushing rivers. But among the trees and by the rivers, you'll find something even more unique — one of the only remaining wild brown bear populations in Europe.

Epirus is known for its wilderness and its bandits, so the area around Vikos-Aoös has never been a hub for human settlement. As a result, a wonderful and healthy ecosystem has been able to thrive there. Rare flowers and plants bloom in ancient soil, while endangered animal populations hold onto life within the safety of the park. As well as brown bears, you may be lucky enough to see wildcats, lynxes and a whole host of uncommon birds and reptiles hiding in Vikos-Aoös.

The Vikos Gorge is the park's centrepiece, and at around 900 metres (2,952 feet)

deep, it's a spectacular sight. Shaded by Mount Tymfi, waterfalls cascade down its limestone cliffs and into the Voidomatis River, which runs through the gorge's heart. The Voidomatis ultimately flows into the Aoös River, an important artery for this region. If you're interested in history, you'll also have the chance to see a number of picturesque Ottoman-era bridges that cross the river, as well as beautiful monasteries on its banks that date back centuries.

Between the two rivers sits Mount Tymfi, one of the peaks in the Pindus range. It can be hiked in the summer months, and it offers amazing views of the park from all angles. The mountain is also home to some of the world's deepest vertical caves, some of which are yet to be explored.

Vikos-Aoös National Park may not be well-known to international tourists, but Greeks are seeing its potential. Slowly but surely, ecotourism is being encouraged within the park, attracting responsible visitors and investment, without risking its precious ecosystem. There's never been a better time to discover this untapped natural world.



**LOCATION** : Greece

**AREA** : 12,600km<sup>2</sup> ★ 4,865mi<sup>2</sup>

#### HIGHLIGHTS

- ★ Hike through the stunning Vikos Gorge
- ★ **Watch the sun set over Mount Tymfi**
- ★ Kayak rushing blue waters of Voidomatis River

**WEB** : [VIKOSAOOSGEOPARK.COM/?LANG=EN](http://VIKOSAOOSGEOPARK.COM/?LANG=EN)



# ★ TEIDE ★

## GET A PANORAMIC VIEW OF THE CANARY ISLANDS FROM ONE OF THE WORLD'S LARGEST VOLCANOES

**W**hile some national parks boast stunning flora and fauna, others sparkling blue lakes, few can match the breathtaking majesty of one of nature's most spectacular and destructive forces: the volcano. However, a volcano is the centrepiece of Teide National Park in Tenerife, the largest of the volcanic Canary Islands off the northwestern coast of Africa.

It isn't just any volcano, though – Teide is the third largest in the world, behind Mauna Kea and Mauna Loa in Hawaii. The volcano soars 3,718 metres (12,198 feet) above sea level, but from the sea floor it measures a total of 7,500 metres (24,600 feet). Its distinctive looming peak was used as a navigation point by European sailors on their southbound journeys through the Atlantic Ocean.

You are able to climb to the summit of Mount Teide, with the full guided walk taking around six hours to complete. But if you aren't that keen

on a full day of trekking, you can take a cable car to the base of the summit. From there you can continue the 650-metre (2,130-foot) walk to the mouth of the crater, but you will need a permit for this section as limited numbers are allowed to the top each day.

While it may be a fair old journey, the views from the very top are simply staggering. From there you can gaze upon most of the other Canary Islands, with Gran Canaria, La Palma, La Gomera and El Hierro all visible on a clear day.

Mount Teide is clearly the pièce de résistance of Teide National Park, but also allow time for the quaint town of Vilaflor, surrounded by gorgeous mountainous scenery, while there is also accommodation within the park.

Teide National Park, a UNESCO World Heritage site, is the oldest and largest of the Canary Islands' four national parks and is well worth a visit to understand the true force of nature that created the very land you're standing on.

**LOCATION** Tenerife ★ Spain

**AREA** 190km<sup>2</sup> ★ 1,118mi<sup>2</sup>

### HIGHLIGHTS

- ★ Climb to the summit of Mount Teide
- ★ *View centuries-old lava flows and craters*
- ★ See the legendary trees and forests of Vilaflor

**WEB** [VOLCANOTEIDE.COM/EN/NATIONAL\\_PARK](http://VOLCANOTEIDE.COM/EN/NATIONAL_PARK)



Marvel at the rocky landscape of Tenerife as you trek to the top of Europe's highest volcano

If you're lucky to climb Mount Snowdon on a dry, clear day, the views from the peak are spectacularly breathtaking



# ★ SNOWDONIA ★

## EXPLORE BREATHTAKING HIGHS AND ENCHANTING LOWS IN THE HEART OF THE WELSH COUNTRYSIDE

**S**tanding atop of Mount Snowdon in Wales's northwest region of Snowdonia, you will be blown away by the views it has to offer.

Snowdonia is a gem of Welsh culture, scenery and heritage to be enjoyed by everyone who visits. Named 'Eryri' by the Welsh, deriving from the Latin meaning of 'highlands', its diverse landscape offers so much more than hills, including beaches, castles, valleys, woodlands and a charming town – all of which stretch from the southernmost areas of Cadair Idris, the Tarren range and the Dyfi hills, to the northernmost areas of Moel Hebog, Mynydd Mawr and the Nantlle Ridge.

Across Snowdonia, multiple castles and historic heritage sites offer a bountiful insight into Wales's fascinating history. King Edward I created Caernarfon Castle in the late 11th century and to date, it is one of the most

impressive castles in Wales. The birth of the first English prince of Wales took place inside the castle in 1284. It was also the setting for the 1969 investiture of the current prince of Wales, His Royal Highness Prince Charles – these are just some of the engaging roles the Welsh have played in Great Britain's compelling heritage.

In addition to Caernarfon Castle, Harlech Castle, Conwy Castle and the ruins of Cymer Abbey attract thousands of visitors every year, and are definitely worth a visit for any history buff. Away from architecture, legend has it that the fierce giant Rhita Gawr, vanquished by the gallant King Arthur, is buried among the region's namesake, Mount Snowdon.

Legends aside, Mount Snowdon is the largest mountain in England and Wales. Standing proud at 1,085 metres (3,560 feet) tall, it is a favoured challenge for experienced hikers to sink their teeth into. At the summit of its daring

peak, vistas of beautiful scenery roll across the landscape. Nearby, thrill seekers will find the fastest zip wire in the world, while wildlife enthusiasts can spot the peregrine falcon and ravens nestled along its rugged cliffs in their natural habitat.

After the explorations have come to a halt, visitors will be able to indulge in plentiful traditional Welsh food found around the friendly region. As breathtaking as the views are, the area is one of the wettest places in the entire country, so be sure to pack your waterproofs, wellington boots and umbrellas. Accumulating an average of 4,473 millimetres (176 inches) of rainfall per year for the past three decades, Crib Goch, to the north of the park, has the dubious honour of having been crowned the wettest spot in the United Kingdom.



The 13th-century fortress of Conwy Castle can be found near the northern tip of the park



**LOCATION** Wales ★ UK

**AREA** 2,130km<sup>2</sup> ★ 823mi<sup>2</sup>

### HIGHLIGHTS

- ★ Hike or take the train to the top of Mount Snowdon
- ★ **Visit the magnificent 13th-century Conwy Castle**
- ★ Experience 'real' Wales in the lakeside town of Bala

**WEB** SNOWDONIA.GOV.WALES/HOME

For an easier way up or down the peak, take the Snowdon Mountain Railway



## PARK ORIGINS & WILDLIFE

Snowdonia's stunning national park was the third such conservation area of its kind to be established in Britain (in the 1950s) after the famous Peak District and Lake District. It boasts 2,130 square kilometres (822 square miles) of incredible scenery teamed with 60 kilometres (37 miles) of coastline, including the picture-perfect Cardigan Bay. Snowdonia National Park is also home to more than 1,000 mountain goats, although exactly how these animals came to live there nobody really knows for sure. Approximately a quarter of these enchanting animals can be found around the Beddgelert region. The park's cliffs are decorated with hardy Arctic alpine plants, including the delicate Snowdon lily. Lower down, visitors find themselves surrounded by beautiful woodlands of oak, alder and wych elm.



Snowdonia's wild goats are thought to have roamed the area since the last ice age

## ★ BLACK FOREST ★

**IT'S NOT THE CUCKOO CLOCKS THAT DRAW IN THE CROWDS TO THE BLACK FOREST, THIS IS THE DREAM LOCATION FOR A PERFECT WOODLAND GETAWAY**

**N**estled deep at the base of south-western Germany, the expansive and idyllic Black Forest region dominates with woodlands, lakes and wildlife; this is the first national park to grace the state of Baden-Württemberg. Base yourself in the beautiful spa town of Baden-Baden, approximately 35 kilometres (21 miles) north-east from the Black Forest, and you can kick back in one of the many thermal spas located throughout the city.

Once suitably relaxed, get your provisions together and head out on the road for a forest adventure of a lifetime. Reaching an altitude of 1,493 metres (4,898 feet) above sea level and split into two distinct areas roughly 3.5 kilometres (2.1 miles) apart, the Black Forest is a park brimming with activity and wildlife.

The park features beautiful upland pastures called 'grinden', and there are several moors

located around the Hornisgrinde summit. Discover adventure trails, such as the Lothar, Wilderness and Lynx trails, crossing over bridges, fallen trees and following paths through the forest's dark canopies (this low-light canopy gives the park its name). The trails offer an ideal opportunity to go mountain biking or hiking, as well as visiting waterfalls by the likes of Allerheiligen. Take a moment to discover Wildsee, a small lake in the northern reaches of the park, and then head further south towards the small town of Baiersbronn to get on board a mountain cart track.

In the winter months, visit Ruhestein for one of the park's top ski resorts, offering up a chance to traverse the wilderness in style. For a quieter experience, Skilifte Vogelskopf is the ideal place to enjoy the slopes away from the crowds and to grab a bite to eat while taking in the views and planning your next move.



**LOCATION** : Germany

**AREA** : 100.6km<sup>2</sup> ★ 38.8mi<sup>2</sup>

### HIGHLIGHTS

- ★ Try out rafting down the Murg river
- ★ **Cycle the scenic Panorama Cycle Route**
- ★ Keep an eye out for deer, elk and even buzzards

**WEB** : NATIONALPARK-SCHWARZWALD.DE/EN

# ★ DOLOMITI BELLUNESI ★

## EXPLORE ITALY'S MOST SPECTACULAR NATURAL WONDERS ABOVE AND BELOW GROUND

**D**ream up a mountain paradise fit for a fairy tale and it will probably look something like Dolomiti Bellunesi National Park. Located in the Veneto Region of northern Italy on the southern edge of the Dolomites, this park is heaven for anyone

who loves flowers. It is home to over 1,400 species of plants, some of which might not grow anywhere else in the world. In the meadows and mountain passes you might also catch a glimpse of a lynx, a bear, or one of the park's many other wildlife species.

The region is renowned for its radiant wildflowers, which paint the hillsides in bright colours

It's clear why naturalists have revered this area since the 18th century. The incredible biological diversity is partly down to the great age of the park's ancient forests, and partly due to the wide range of natural habitats that make up its breathtaking scenery. Piercing the sky are epic mountain peaks such as Monte Pavione in the Vette Feltrine range, which tops out at a whopping 2,335 metres (7,661 feet). Lower in elevation, but no less spectacular, are the glacial basins of Van de Zità.

Down in the valleys, meanwhile, the many picturesque rivers, lakes and meadows will have you forever taking photos. You're going to need a flash to capture the park's most extraordinary environment, however: the cave system at Piani Eterni, which has over 30 kilometres (19 miles) of underground galleries

With so much to see, it's best to go to one of the park's three visitor centres to get directions. The one in the city of Belluno, which is about 108 kilometres (67 miles) north of Venice, has information on all aspects of the park and there is the Nature Museum nearby. Moreover, Belluno itself makes for an ideal base as it has hotels to suit all tastes. There are also hostels, B&Bs and guesthouses in the park. To get really close to nature, though, you should book into a rifugio (mountain cabin). When you wake up with lungs full of fresh alpine air, you'll feel like you're living your dream.



**LOCATION** Italy

**AREA** 320km<sup>2</sup> ★ 123.6mi<sup>2</sup>

### HIGHLIGHTS

- ★ Go in spring to see the stunning alpine flowers in all their glory
- ★ **Bring a flashlight to explore the aptly named Piani Eterni caverns**
- ★ Carry binoculars to avoid missing the Val del Grisol's birdlife

**WEB** [DOLOMITIPARK.IT/EINDEX.PHP](http://DOLOMITIPARK.IT/EINDEX.PHP)

Öxarárfoss waterfall flows down in Almannagjá on its way to the lake Thingvallavatn



# ★ THINGVELLIR ★

## ICELAND'S WILD NATURE AND RICH HISTORY COME TOGETHER WHERE TWO CONTINENTS MEET

**T**hingvellir is not only Iceland's oldest national park; it's also at the centre of its vivid history, ranging all the way back to 930 CE. At the foot of the Almannagjá, a path between two jagged cliff faces, the country's – and the world's – first democratic parliament sat for the first time in the summer of 930, less than 60 years after the Norse discovered this large island in the middle of the North Atlantic. Even after the Old Pact of 1262, where Norway assumed control of Iceland, Althingi continued to convene every year until the end of the 18th century. When Althingi was restored in 1844, its venue was moved to the country's capital, Reykjavik, 45 kilometres (28 miles) away.

Thingvellir has religious significance for Icelanders too, as it was here where Iceland

formally switched from Nordic Paganism to Christianity in 1000 CE. Unlike most neighbouring countries, it did so without any bloodshed, and today Thingvellir is considered to be a religious home for both faiths, which live in harmony with each other in the country to this day.

The park itself is a natural marvel, where the aforementioned Almannagjá offers visitors the opportunity to walk inside the rift between two tectonic plates, the Eurasian and North American ones. Iceland marks one of only a few spots on the globe where Mid-Atlantic ridge, the longest mountain ridge on Earth, emerges from the Atlantic Ocean, and here in Thingvellir it takes on an impressive form, as a sharp cliff juts dramatically out of the low hills and surrounding shrubbery before continuing on into the Icelandic highlands to the north. The river Öxará flows over the cliff via the beautiful Öxarárfoss waterfall, which flows through Almannagjá and into Thingvallavatn, Iceland's largest natural lake at 84 square kilometres (32 square miles).

In one of the many fissures you'll find Silfra, filled with astonishingly clear water. Silfra has become a popular location for divers and snorkelers – so popular, in fact, that visitor numbers at it are now limited to ensure safety, meaning you'll have to pre-book before taking a dip there.

Due to its cultural significance to Icelandic history, a national park was founded in 1930 to protect its nature and preserve it for its rich history. In 2004, it was designated a UNESCO World Heritage Site, and is one of the country's most popular tourist destinations today. Concerns have been raised due to the

**LOCATION** Iceland

**AREA** 92.7km<sup>2</sup> ★ 35.8mi<sup>2</sup>

### HIGHLIGHTS

- ★ Walk between tectonic plates in Almannagjá to Lögberg, the site of Althingi
- ★ *Explore the beautiful clear water in Silfra*
- ★ Take in the stunning surroundings from atop Almannagjá

**WEB** [THINGVELLIR.IS/EN](http://THINGVELLIR.IS/EN)



Gulfoss, easily Iceland's most famous waterfall, plunges in two stages at an angle to each other



## DUCK THE CROWDS

The allure of Iceland's untouched nature has led to a drastic increase in tourism. This is especially apparent at Thingvellir, one of the country's most popular destinations. For some, the crowded scenes at Thingvellir have impacted the experience and satisfaction of a visit to this beautiful place. However, the way around this is to avoid the peak summer months and instead travel in winter or early spring. While you won't see green shrubbery or long summer nights, the stark beauty of Thingvellir in winter – especially if covered in a blanket of snow – is second to none. Also, there will be far fewer orange parkas.



Öxará river running through Almannagjá in winter

volume of tourists and their effect on the park's delicate nature, but in recent years, investment in paths, viewing platforms and non-destructive access to the park have done much to allay those fears.

Thingvellir National Park sits in a picturesque rift valley in southern Iceland, where the Eurasian and North American tectonic plates meet



# ★ TRIGLAV ★



## HOME TO SLOVENIA'S HIGHEST MOUNTAIN, LARGEST GLACIAL LAKE AND A SLEW OF ADVENTURE SPORTS

**W**hen it comes to the must-sees of Slovenia, Lake Bled tends to steal the limelight. Its picture-perfect church on a picture-perfect island surrounded by picture-perfect turquoise water adorn the covers of many a travel guide. As lovely as Bled is, don't be blinkered by it. Lying just beyond the town's borders is Triglav – the country's largest national park – which is brimming over with natural delights.

Encompassing the Julian Alps range, the reserve is dominated by forest-draped mountains, limestone karst ravines and outcrops, plus an array of jaw-dropping water features. One of the top picks is Pericnik waterfall in the north-east of the park. You can take pictures from the road, but the rock-scrambling climb to the top repays you with the rare opportunity to stand behind the curtain of water as it cascades from above.

Rising above it all is the 2,864-metre (9,396-foot) Triglav Mountain, Slovenia's highest point. While it's possible to conquer the peak

in a day, for a more leisurely experience (and the chance to experience sunrise from the summit), spread it over two days, staying a night in one of the mountainside huts. In either case, it's recommended to take a trek with a local guide.

As far as beautiful lakes go, Bled faces stiff competition from its nearby neighbour, Bohinj, located in the park's southern section. More than double the size of Lake Bled, it's impossible not to be blown away by the crystal-clear waters and epic backdrop. After a refreshing swim (changing huts are available) or completing the 12-kilometre (7.5-mile) loop trail, drink in the view with a beer and pizza (one is enough to feed a small family) in the lakeside Kramar restaurant.

As you'd expect, outdoor activities are the main draw for most visitors to Triglav. Kayaking, rafting, caving, climbing and canyoning are all up for grabs, but one of the region's adrenaline-pumping highlights has to be its ziplines. Some lie within the park proper (such

as a short but scenic offering at the Vogel ski centre near Bohinj), but for more complex courses, you'll need to venture just outside the borders of the park. Ucja Canyon to the west boasts the largest zipline park in Europe, with some four kilometres (2.4 miles) of wires to be ridden; expect to pay around £50 (\$65/€57).

**LOCATION** Slovenia

**AREA** 880km<sup>2</sup> ★ 340mi<sup>2</sup>

### HIGHLIGHTS

- ★ Scale Slovenia's highest peak
- ★ **Zipline over rivers and gorges**
- ★ Stand behind a waterfall

**WEB** [TNP.SI/EN/VISITV](http://TNP.SI/EN/VISITV)



Triglav National Park is characterised by the rugged Julian Alps, blue-green glacial lakes and vast virgin forests of spruce and larch



The Valbona river swells when the snow of winter melts, before settling once more

## ★ VALBONA VALLEY ★



### EXPLORE THE UNTOUCHED MOUNTAINS OF ALBANIA'S NORTHERNMOST NATIONAL PARK

**I**f you're looking to get well off the beaten track, there are few places more far-flung than the Valbona Valley. Tucked away in the mountains in northern Albania, the river valley is slowly growing more popular with hikers and other visitors. Those seeking stunning views and tough routes will find plenty of options, and because the valley is so remote, the landscape has barely felt the impact of human contact. As such, the park is rife with wildlife.

The valley is home to brown bears and wolves – so watch out if you're going well off the beaten track – but if you reach the higher altitudes, you'll find alpine meadows that bloom beautifully in summer and welcome dozens of butterfly species. For the most part, the wildlife and plant life in the valley has gone undocumented by scientists, which makes it a perfect for anyone with dreams of exploring an almost untouched land.

The main draw of the valley is hiking, and there are over 200 kilometres (125 miles) of hiking trails around the town that shares the valley's name. Ambitious trekkers will find the Peaks of Valbona route a test – a seven-day journey that takes you to the highest peaks in the area. You'll need to pack a tent, though, as the distances between the remote villages will mean camping in the wild.

For slightly less adventurous explorers, the three- or four-day Gjarper Mountain Loop will take you first from Dragobi to the village of Cerem, then down south around Gjarper, via an impressive viewpoint. You'll stay the night at Stani i Arif Kadris, a working sheep farm, before following the river back to Valbona.

However you plan to explore the park, it's a good idea to contact one of the local hotels for advice, or visit [journeytovalbona.com](http://journeytovalbona.com), a locally run website packed full of useful information and travel tips.

**LOCATION** Albania

**AREA** 80km<sup>2</sup> ★ 30.9mi<sup>2</sup>

#### HIGHLIGHTS

- ★ Hike to the village of Theth, across the Verbona Pass
- ★ **Explore and camp at the peak of Mount Verbona**
- ★ Spot eagles in the Gashi Nature Reserve

**WEB** [ALBANIA.AL/DESTINATION/20/ALPET](http://ALBANIA.AL/DESTINATION/20/ALPET)

# ★ PYRENEES ★

## A WALKER'S MOUNTAIN PARADISE TUCKED BETWEEN THE SOUTH OF FRANCE AND SUNNY SPAIN

**F**amed for its rich diversity of plant and animal life, this park contains the highest peaks of the French Pyrenees mountains. These hills were created by a collision of two different landmasses between 80 and 20 million years ago. A drifting chunk of ground called the Iberian landmass careered into Eurasia, forcing the meeting point upwards. The Pyrenees have transformed into a living, breathing wilderness since their formation all those millions of years ago, and are now home to thousands of organisms from blossoming wildflowers to the sure-footed chamois.

The high-altitude ecosystem is ideal for birds of prey, though they can be tough to spot. Golden eagles spend entire days sitting perfectly still on their perches before selecting their ideal prey. Egyptian vultures visit in the summer to beat the heat in their North African wintering grounds. Peregrine falcons, the fastest

animals on Earth, plummet to the ground at 390 kilometres (240 miles) per hour, so blink and you'll miss their superfast skydives. Birdwatchers come from miles around to get views these magnificent creatures. The national park is also home to finches, creepers and owls along with the big flying carnivores. Bird enthusiasts should flock to the Hecho and Anso valleys to spot spectacular species.

Winter snow makes the Pyrenees an ideal place to ski. So much snow falls in some years that lifts can be buried under metres of fluffy flakes. All of this fresh fall is irresistible for alpine adventurers of any age. There are plenty of resorts to choose from depending on your budget and personal taste. Many are tailored specifically for families. Grand Tourmalet is the biggest ski area in the French Pyrenees and it features an amazing observatory almost 3,000 metres (9,843 feet) above sea level. Stargazers can enjoy dinner while studying the night sky

before beginning the sunrise hike back down the mountain.

If you prefer life at a slightly slower pace there are countless walking trails all over the park. One of the most stunning is Cirque de Gavarnie, a valley surrounded by an enormous rock face – once described by poet Victor Hugo as the 'colosseum of nature' – sculpted by glaciers as the heavy ice moved over the ground. The great depth of Cirque de Gavarnie was caused by repeated scraping of glaciers over thousands of years. Visitors can now explore what was once buried in ice and see the region's impressive geology for themselves.

### HIGH-ALTITUDE SEMI-AQUATIC MOLES

The Pyrenean desman is basically the European duck-billed platypus. They are excellent swimmers and prefer fast-flowing mountain streams that aren't too deep. Desmans are nocturnal and eat insects, but will sometimes settle for their larvae. They forage in the water, utilising their sensitive nose hairs to sense the dark environment. These animals can even close their ears and nostrils at will to prevent water from seeping inside.

American mink released by misguided animal rights activists are causing a real problem for the Pyrenean desman. The introduction of a non-native predator has had a significant effect upon the number of vulnerable desmans who only had birds to contend with before. They also face habitat loss as humans are claiming rivers as prime fishing spots. The species as a whole is suffering continual decline, so visitors should go and look for the desman while they still can.



Desmans breed up to three times a year, but adult animals are aggressive outside of mating season



Winter snow provides a crucial water supply to the region when it melts in the glorious spring sunshine.

**LOCATION** France

**AREA** 457km<sup>2</sup> ★ 176mi<sup>2</sup>

### HIGHLIGHTS

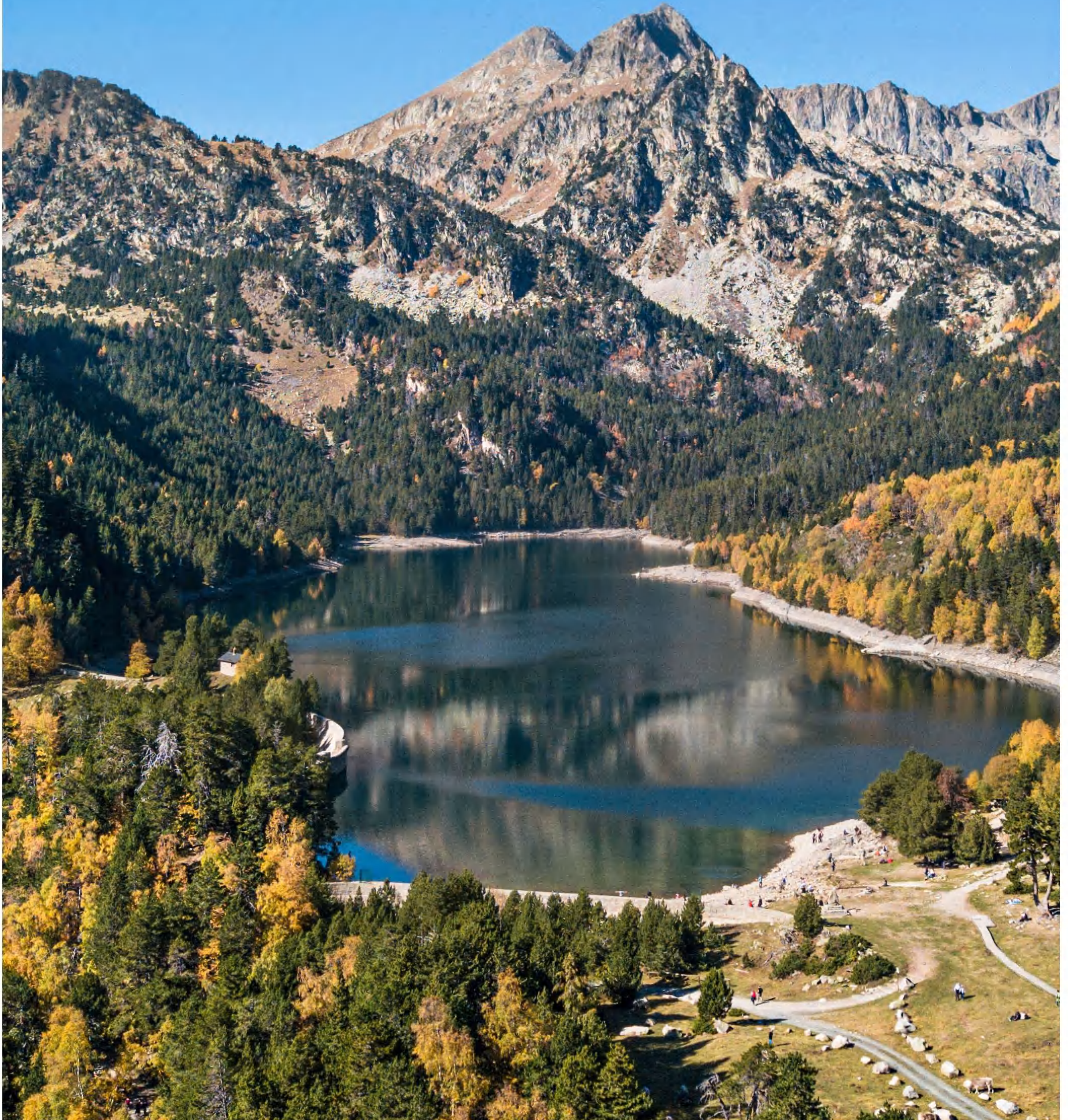
- ★ Take a ride on Europe's highest train track
- ★ *Wander through the medieval town of Sauveterre-de-Béarn*
- ★ Ride horses through the meadows of Ossau

**WEB** PYRENEES-PARC NATIONAL.FR



Europe's highest railway adorns the Pyrenees and visitors can enjoy the scenery from a miniature mountaintop train

There are more than 230 sky-high lakes in the Pyrenees created by long-melted glaciers



# ★ OULANKA ★

## SEEK OUT A RARE ORCHID WHILE ENJOYING FINLAND'S STUNNING WATERY NATIONAL PARK

**T**he far north of Europe is stunning for many reasons. Fjords, snowy landscapes and dramatic mountains are all synonymous with the Scandinavian region, but one thing you wouldn't expect to find in the freezing climes of Finland is a breed of orchid. These flowers generally prefer warm, tropical environments, and the Calypso orchid is no different, most commonly found in North America. But they have also made their way to northern Europe, becoming the symbol of Oulanka National Park in Finland. The park measures a vast 270 square kilometres (107 square miles) and has numerous trails for you to go walking or cycling to try and spot this spectacular flower, its rich purple colouring a distinct contrast to the white snow and icy blue water that dominate Oulanka.

Oulanka is a water-lover's paradise, with two huge rivers cutting straight through the park – perfect for canoeing and kayaking through the Oulanka river valley, a vast canyon formed over 11,000 years ago. If you don't fancy getting your feet wet, you can use one of the nine beautiful hanging bridges that traverse the Oulankajoki river, taking you to some of the most spectacular waterfalls in the country. There are hiking trails for all abilities throughout the park, ranging from a few hundred metres to 82 kilometres (51 miles) in length.

The life-giving water, coupled with the protection of the forest's trees, also makes this national park a haven for wildlife. Moose and reindeer roam freely around the park, while it is also home to 7,000 insects and, if you're lucky, you may be able to spot a lynx, wolf or wolverine – but preferably from a safe distance!

Oulanka really is a dream location for a day trip – or longer. It is bursting with activities for all ages to enjoy, has beautiful scenery, animals to spot and, most importantly, that

gorgeous orchid to hunt down. Oulanka truly is an incredible natural holiday park that is well worth a visit for anyone who has a love of the untouched outdoors.



**LOCATION** Finland

**AREA** 270km<sup>2</sup> ★ 107mi<sup>2</sup>

### HIGHLIGHTS

- ★ Hunt down the rare Calypso orchid
- ★ *Canoe down the Oulankajoki river*
- ★ Cross the nine hanging bridges of Oulanka

**WEB** NATIONALPARKS.FI/  
OULANKANP

© Alamy

In spring, Oulanka's ice and snow melts to reveal a lush landscape with sandy riverbanks

The Western Rhaetian Alps provide a picturesque backdrop to the park, whether snow-capped in winter or sun-baked in summer



— EUROPE —



## ★ SWISS ★

### ENJOY THE ALPINE SCENERY OF A PARK THAT'S DEDICATED TO THE CONSERVATION OF LOCAL WILDLIFE

**E**stablished as one of Europe's earliest national parks and the oldest in the Alps, Swiss is categorised as a strict nature reserve by the International Union for Conservation of Nature. While that means you cannot roam freely and must stick to the designated paths for visitors, it affords a great opportunity to observe wildlife in the most unspoiled environment possible. It is also Switzerland's only national park.

A trip to Swiss, then, is a must for animal and nature lovers although the primary purpose of making it a reserve is scientific rather than touristic. Golden eagles and bearded vultures soar majestically through the air and you'll also come across chamois, marmots, red deer and ibexes among many others. Visitors are forbidden to interact with the animals (and dogs are banned, as is horse riding and cycling), but you'll be sure of some lovely photographs as you hike, pausing for breath to take in the

amazing alpine views of the magnificent green-brown shaded mountains topped with snow.

Hiking is the only thing you are allowed to do in Swiss National Park but there are many trails to follow and the one you'll choose will depend on how well equipped you are and your level of skill. Blue alpine trails are the trickiest because you'll end up climbing and encountering glaciers while red mountain trails require hiking boots and go across land that can be dangerous. Yellow regular trails are the most popular and they'll pose no real challenges for the vast majority of people.

As you embark on your trip, you'll see pine forests, walk past streams and relax in specially-designated areas. You can't visit during the winter so bear that in mind if you fancy extending a skiing holiday to make a detour to the park. But make a special trip to the Swiss National Park and you'll enjoy truly being at one with wildlife and come back with a new-found respect for your surroundings.

**LOCATION** Switzerland

**AREA** 172km<sup>2</sup> ★ 66mi<sup>2</sup>

#### HIGHLIGHTS

- ★ Catch the red deer rutting period in September/October
- ★ *Explore the National Park Panorama Trail*
- ★ Go on an alpine safari to see Graubünden's own Big Five

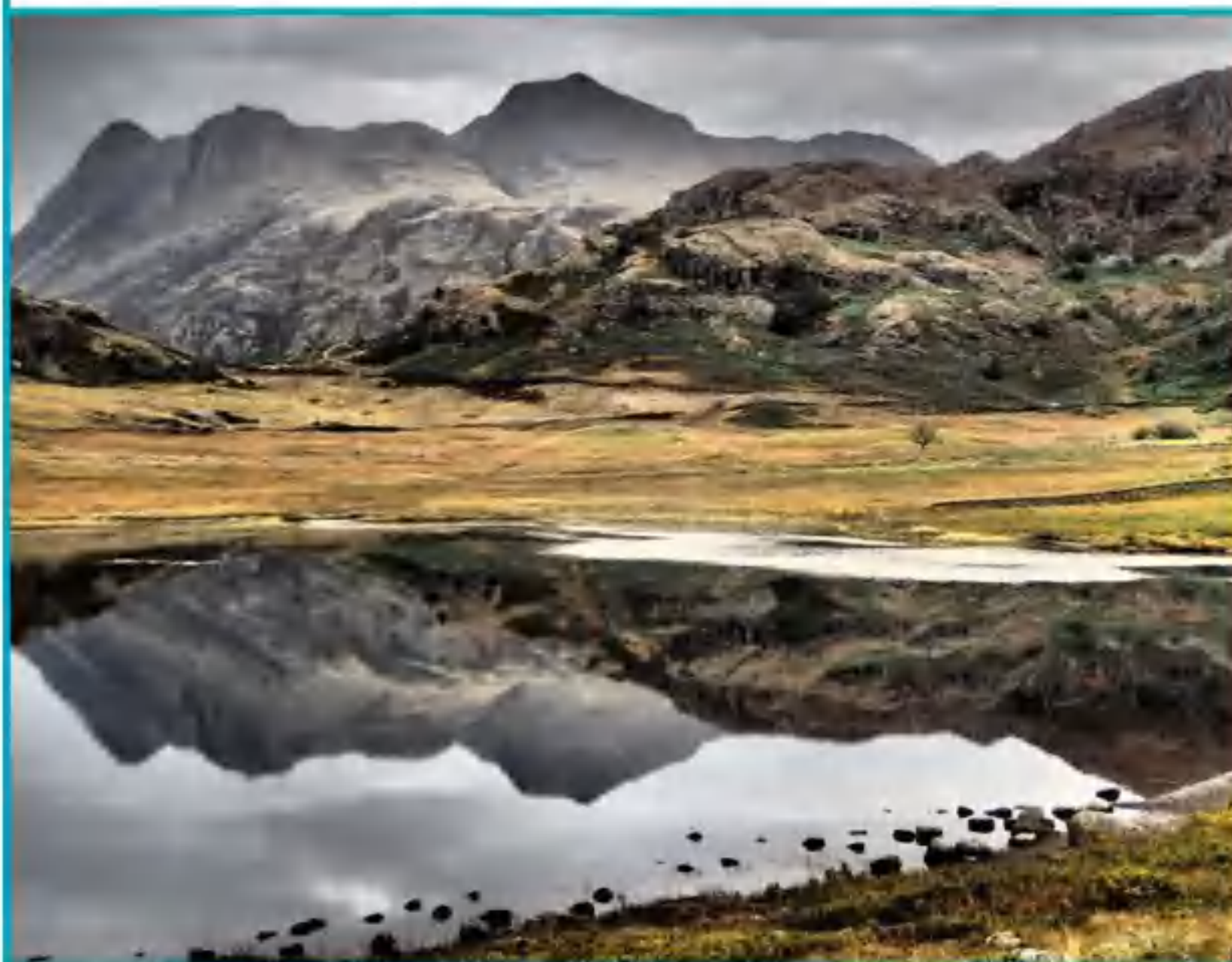
**WEB** NATIONALPARK.CH/EN

# ★ LAKE DISTRICT ★

**BOASTING ENGLAND'S DEEPEST LAKE, HIGHEST MOUNTAIN, AND LONGEST LAKE, A HOLIDAY HERE PROMISES NATURE ON A TRULY MONUMENTAL SCALE**

## WRITTEN IN THE ROCKS

The distinctive lakes and mountains of the Lake District reveal secrets about the park's ancient past. The smooth, black rocks of the mountains in the northern part of the park contain sediments from the bottom of a 500-million-year-old sea. The tall crags of Scafell, Helvellyn and Langdale Pikes are the remains of volcanic eruptions that happened 450 million years ago. The limestone at Whitbarrow Scar contains the fossils of 320-million-year-old tropical sea creatures. This mix of rock types, along with 400-million-year-old granite and 420-million-year-old sandstone, has shaped the landscape that we see today.



The rocks and mountains of the Lake District reveal millions of years of history

**F**or a Great British getaway, look no further than the Lake District. This undulating patchwork of high mountains and mirror-topped lakes is a World Heritage Site, and the largest of England's national parks. With stunning scenery and so much wilderness, it's the perfect place to lose yourself in the sheer majesty of the natural world.

Head into the brisk fell air, trace the glassy edges of the lakes, or dive out of the sunlight and into the woodland trees. Armed with a map – or an app – the Lake District is a walker's paradise and there's a route for everyone. Choose one of 48 buggy and wheelchair-friendly 'Miles Without Stiles' walks, book an official guided tour for a small fee, or create a custom route of your own. If you want to pick up the pace, there are no shortage of cycling trails too – just rent a bike from Coniston Boating Centre and get pedalling.

The weather can be unpredictable and the terrain uneven, so it's best to dress in layers and wear proper walking boots. On average, temperatures reach around 20 degrees Celsius (68 degrees Fahrenheit) in the summer and drop to 1 degree Celsius (34 degrees Fahrenheit) in the winter. Though far from extreme, the Lakes can be wet and windy, especially out in the fells. In fact, the Lake District hamlet of Seathwaite is the wettest inhabited place in England, but the view makes the risk of rain more than worthwhile.

If you're a keen-eyed wildlife enthusiast, your efforts may even be rewarded with a rare

animal sighting. Grizedale Forest is home to red deer and red kites, while Derwentwater has otters and peregrine falcons – the fastest animals on the planet. Meanwhile, Whinlatter Forest and Dodd Wood hide some of England's last remaining red squirrels. For travellers more inclined to learn about the long history of the Lake District, there are thousands of archaeological sites within the park boundaries too, including 283 scheduled ancient monuments that you can visit.

Round out your trip by venturing onto one of the 16 lakes that give this glorious national park its name. Book a leisurely guided cruise, or rent your own boat from Coniston, Windermere, Derwentwater or Ullswater. Rowing boats, motor boats, paddle boats or canoes – the choice is yours. Get out on that glinting water and lose yourself in the view.

Rent a boat and head out onto the glassy water



Wake up to a view like this in one of the Lake District's campsites



**LOCATION** : England

**AREA** : 2,362km<sup>2</sup> ★ 912mi<sup>2</sup>

### HIGHLIGHTS

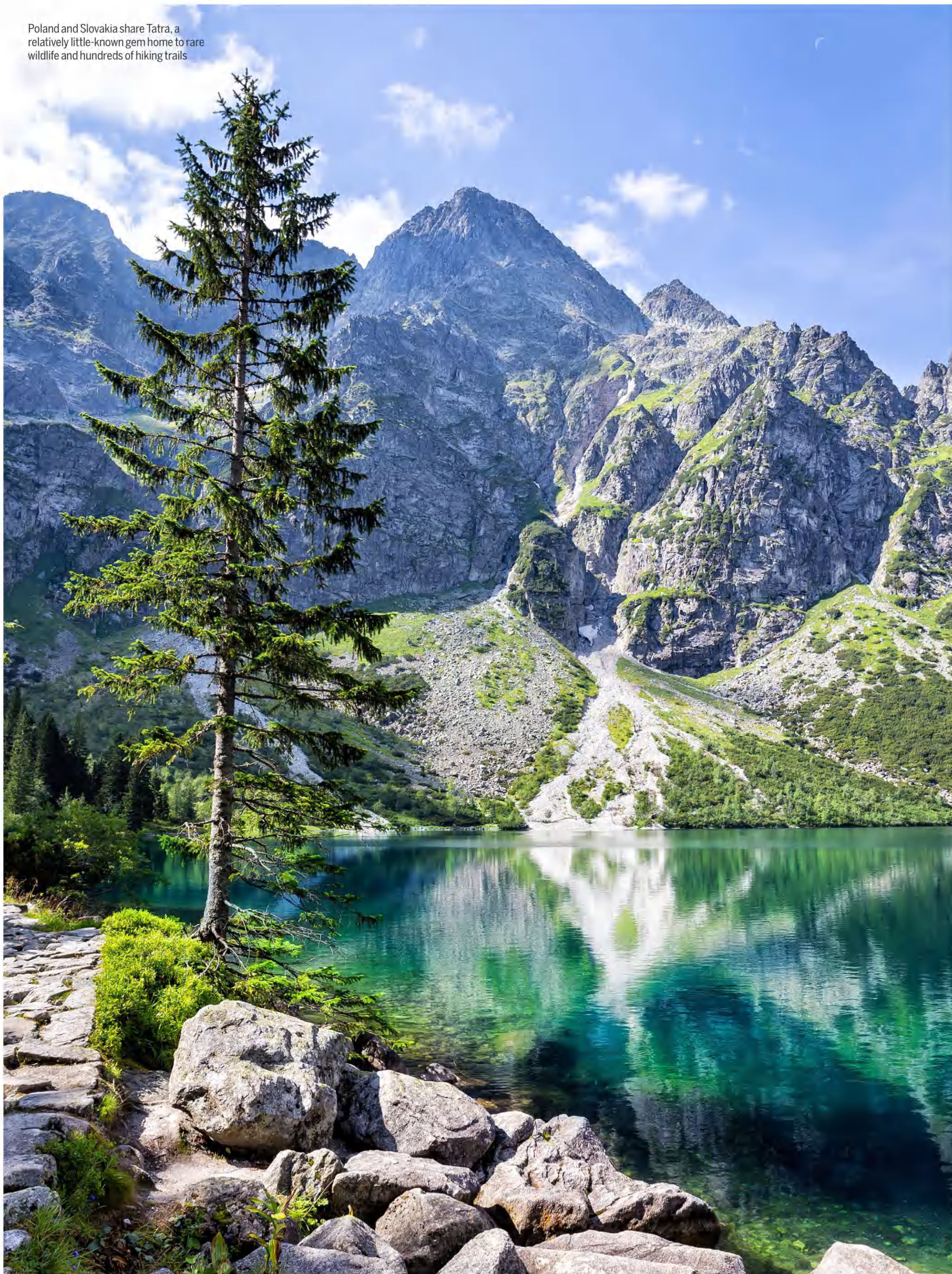
- ★ Climb England's highest mountain
- ★ *Swim in England's deepest lake*
- ★ Row across England's longest lake

**WEB** : [LAKEDISTRICT.GOV.UK](http://LAKEDISTRICT.GOV.UK)

The postcard-perfect scenery of England's Lake District promises breathtaking views and stunning holiday photography



Poland and Slovakia share Tatra, a relatively little-known gem home to rare wildlife and hundreds of hiking trails





# ★ TATRA ★

## WHETHER PEACEFUL OR ACTION-PACKED, A VISIT TO TATRA'S MOUNTAINS IS AN ESCAPE FROM THE ORDINARY



**R**unning along the border between Poland and Slovakia, the Tatra Mountains are famed for their rugged beauty. Away from the bustle of Warsaw, Krakow and Bratislava, the pair of national parks encompassing the mountains and surrounding area are a haven for those looking to get closer to nature and satisfy their need to explore. The range is filled with jagged peaks, sprawling forests and glistening lakes, making it an unmissable destination for hikers, photographers and nature lovers.

The tallest mountain in the parks, straddling the border between Poland and Slovakia, is Rysy. The highest of its peaks is 2,503 metres (8,212 feet) above sea level and can be reached from both sides. The mountain is busy in summer as, although sections are steep and challenging, the climb is manageable for brave beginners. Pack for all conditions as the weather changes quickly in the mountains. For those who don't feel up to the last scramble to the peak, stop at viewpoints part of the way up and enjoy the views of lakes and other mountains before heading back down.

Signs at the entrances to wooded areas warn visitors to stay on paths and leave by nightfall to avoid meeting any bears wandering through the parks. Bears usually avoid humans if they sense them approaching, but listen carefully and you might hear their calls echoing off the mountainsides. As well as brown bears, animal residents include deer, wolves, marmots and European lynxes. Alpine forests and plants flourish here; the Chochołowska Valley, the longest valley in the Tatras, is a popular destination in spring as thousands of crocuses burst into bloom on its meadows.

Hiking is the main appeal of the parks for three seasons of the year, but in winter few people visit to see the mountains on foot; they go to ski. Zakopane is known as the winter capital of Poland, with thousands of people arriving with the snow. Cross-country trails run through the surrounding forests, cable cars and lifts take skiers to the start of downhill routes, and the Wielka Krokiew ski-jumping stadium regularly hosts the Ski Jumping World Cup. Even in summer Zakopane, on the Polish side, is the go-to destination for visitors staying in the parks. The town is popular with both international tourists and Polish holidaymakers, and can be reached from Warsaw and Krakow by car, train and coach.

After hiking, climbing or skiing, many visitors head to the hot baths to soothe their muscles. Baths are dotted throughout the park, accessible by car or bus. Heated by natural hot springs, the water has an interesting aroma,



Thousands of people flock to Zakopane each winter for the ski season

but it's not enough to put bathers off from a soothing soak. Relaxed and revived, it's then off to one of the many restaurants in the area for a hearty traditional Polish or Slovakian meal.

**LOCATION** Poland & Slovakia

**AREA** Poland 212km<sup>2</sup> • 82mi<sup>2</sup>  
Slovakia 738km<sup>2</sup> • 285mi<sup>2</sup>

### HIGHLIGHTS

- ★ Pack your walking boots and hit the trails
- ★ **Keep an eye out for the critically endangered Tatra chamois**
- ★ Head out early to watch the Sun rise over the mountains

**WEB** TPN.PL ★ TANAP.ORG



Walks through the Chochołowska Valley are especially scenic in spring

## MORSKIE OKO

Morskie Oko – which translates to 'the eye of the sea' – is considered to be one of the most beautiful lakes in the world. Situated close to Rysy in the Polish park, the lake is encircled by mountains. In winter dedicated walkers make the journey to see it frozen, but it's in summer that the lake is at its busiest; during the holiday months, you'll need to arrive as early as possible to get the best view.

To reach Morskie Oko, visitors must first get to Zakopane. From there, buses costing around £2 (\$2.50) leave every 15 minutes and wind up to the beginning of the trail. From the drop-off point it's either a two-hour uphill hike, mostly on a paved road, or a carriage ride and a 20-minute walk. The route itself is beautiful, and few would say the walk was a waste of time when they turn the final corner and spot the lake for the very first time.



It's not hard to see why the lake has become such a popular spot

AFRICA



**SERENGETI**

*TANZANIA*

**90**

-

**NAMIB-NAUKLUFT**

*NAMIBIA*

**94**

-

**KRUGER**

*SOUTH AFRICA*

**95**

-

**VICTORIA FALLS**

*ZAMBIA & ZIMBABWE*

**96**

-

**WHITE DESERT**

*EGYPT*

**98**

-

**WADIRUM**

*JORDAN*

**99**

**MASAIMARA**

*KENYA*

**100**

-

**KAKUM**

*GHANA*

**102**

-

**TSINGY DE BEMARAHA**

*MADAGASCAR*

**104**

-

**KILIMANJARO**

*TANZANIA*

**105**

-

**BWINDI IMPENETRABLE**

*UGANDA*

**106**

# ★ SERENGETI ★

## THE THUNDERING MIGRATION OF 1.5 MILLION WILDEBEEST IS ONLY PART OF THE ATTRACTION OF THIS PARK

**V**ery little can prepare you for the sheer size of Africa's largest national park. Look around and you'll see flat open grasslands and woodlands peppered with swamps and small hills rising gently from the veld – a relentless, overwhelming landscape that stretches from north Tanzania to south-western Kenya.

It's no surprise, then, to learn that Serengeti means 'the place where the land runs on forever', a word derived from the Maasai language and proving as apt a description as any. A trip here is certainly one of natural beauty. When the United Nations gathered in 1972 to determine the first set of World Heritage Sites, Serengeti topped the list.

**LOCATION** Tanzania

**AREA** 14,763km<sup>2</sup> ★ 5,700mi<sup>2</sup>

### HIGHLIGHTS

- ★ Consider splitting your stay between the tourist hotspots and quiet parts
- ★ ***The Great Migration is at its peak between June and October***
- ★ Bring binoculars for close-up views of the animals

**WEB** SERENGETI.COM

### DISCOVER THE ORIGIN OF HUMANS

Located in the eastern Serengeti plains in Tanzania, the Olduvai Gorge contains the oldest evidence of human evolution. It is where the early human species, *Homo habilis*, is believed to have resided and where British archeologist Mary Leakey discovered a skull fragment dated at about 1.75 million years old.

An early stone tool culture was also unearthed here and you can read all about it at a museum located on the edge of the 48-kilometre (30-mile) long, 90-metre (295-feet) deep gorge. It contains many drawings, photographs and artefacts and there is also a hall dedicated to the Leakey family, who founded the museum in the 1970s. A platform gives you a stunning panoramic view of the gorge.



The remains of the first *Paranthropus boisei* – an early hominin – were found in the Olduvai Gorge

Tanzania's population of lions is the largest in Africa, and you'll see plenty in Serengeti



Today, these sun-scorched endless plains form an impressive wildlife sanctuary thanks to work which began almost 100 years ago. Part of Serengeti was sectioned in 1921 as a partial game reserve to protect the lions from hunters. It became a full conservation area eight years later and a national park in 1951.

The animals are Serengeti's key attraction and the area offers some of the best wildlife viewing opportunities on Earth. Perhaps the most magnificent sight is that of 1.5 million

Elephants can be spotted at the Ndutu Safari Lodge in the Ngorongoro area of the park



Black hippopotamus call the Grumeti River home



— AFRICA —

migrating wildebeest thundering across the plains as they chase the rain in a circular 1,900-kilometre (1,180-mile) trek towards the green pastures of the Masai Mara Game Reserve. It's the largest movement of animals in the world.

This migration for pasture and water begins in December in the southern part of the Serengeti in Ngorongoro. The wildebeest are

Many tourists visit Serengeti each year for the safari trip of a lifetime



joined by thousands of zebra and Thomson's gazelle, which each eat different parts of the desired grass. They are hotly pursued by predators and, while it's dangerous for the animals – the World Wildlife Fund for Nature suggests that 250,000 wildebeest die each year through exhaustion, thirst, hunger, predation and drowning – it is nevertheless a truly jaw-dropping spectacle.

Exactly why the wildebeest decide to get up and go is still a mystery, though, since they often leave areas that still have an abundance of food. It is said that the animals possess 'swam intelligence', which means they effectively move as one and figure out the challenges that lay ahead of them together. But do they act on instinct or are they displaying some sort of leadership? When watching the snake-like structure of the frontrunners, it's great fun to speculate.

It can also be a tense time. Laying in wait for them are lions, cheetahs and leopards, with Serengeti proving to be the perfect location to see animal instinct at its rawest. Migrating animals that stray alone are easy pickings but there's potential danger for them all. The Grumeti River is famous for its large crocodiles and Eastern black hippopotamus. Nile crocodiles also lay in wait in the Mara river, using their strong jaws to twist flesh from the animals they swiftly catch.

In many respects, Serengeti is a who's who of animals. There are Masai giraffes, warthogs, spotted hyena, golden wolves, species of antelope, mongoose and otters. There are

## SPOT AND LEARN ABOUT BLACK RHINO

It's not easy to spot the black rhino on the African continent because illegal poaching for their horns has depleted their numbers significantly. However, if you head for Moru Kopjes, you'll be in luck, as this is where you will find the park's remaining population, along with the visitor centre for the Serengeti Rhino Project.

Over the years, strong efforts have been made to return black rhinos to Serengeti. They are also under intensified surveillance and fitted with tracking devices to ensure that they are well protected. It has been a real success story and here, in the isolated wilderness of Moru Kopjes, you can learn more about those conservation strategies while taking in other sights, such as Gong Rock and nearby Lake Magadi, home to pink flamingoes.



Black rhino are classified as critically endangered, but they are protected at Serengeti

also more than 500 species of bird, as well as chameleons, black mambas and puff adders. Even if you don't want to see the mammal migration, these animals alone would make a trip to the Serengeti National Park worthwhile. And that's without mentioning the other two members of the 'big five': the African bush elephants and African buffalo.

As you can likely gather, one of the biggest decisions will be where you should base yourself and when you should go given the area is so huge. Take into account that Serengeti is not strictly just the protected national park but the entire ecosystem of game reserves and parks that surround it, and you can easily become overwhelmed.

***“One of the biggest decisions will be where you should base yourself and when you should go”***

Much depends on what you actually want to see and how you wish to do so. The national park is home to many great trips, from traditional game drives to night tours and walking tours. You can take an aeroplane or a hot air balloon and get a stunning overview from above. Just be sure to avoid the heavy rains of April and May.

It may be worth starting a trip at the Serengeti Visitor Centre in Seronera, a small settlement in Tanzania that is home to a small airstrip. It's in the centre of the national park, the most popular part where you'll find yourself surrounded by huge numbers of tourists and where most of the accommodation is based. It is a key location for a reason: most of the wildlife that you'll want to see is viewable around this part and the Centre has a video room, cafe, information about the park and an elevated walkway should you wish to explore that section of the park's history and ecosystem without a guide.

The others areas are not as well catered, but they should nevertheless be considered. The southern plains are accessible and great during the calving season, although less so during the dry season. The northern section merges with the Masai Mara Reserve and it, too, is more remote. Fewer tourists gather here but you can see the Great Migration crossing the Mara river during the dry season, view big cats in Lobo Valley and spot rare oribi antelope. Lions, elephants, giraffes and hippos are in abundance and it's certainly an area to consider if you want to stray away from the beaten track and explore parts of Serengeti's landscape that are largely left to animals.

A final corridor-like section lies over to the west, around the Grumeti River and with hills to the north and south. Spot the colobus monkeys

and topi antelopes, as well as the large herds of giraffe and elephants. You'll find lodges in each of the areas, as well as guided tours.

Dotted around Serengeti are Maasai villages close to many of the game parks. You can visit them and experience their traditions, culture and lifestyle, watching their ritual dances and

their skill at making fire. You'll be encouraged to get involved and be invited into homes to see how the tribes live. But be prepared to splash some cash, with high prices often charged for crafts. Good bartering skills may be required and yet it's all part of the fun and experience of this unique, life-affirming part of planet Earth.

Thousands of wildebeest cross the Mara river, braving the crocodiles as they make their annual journey



There's an incredible wealth of wildlife to see at Serengeti

The trees at Deadvlei reach up out of the sand as if clawing at the sky

— AFRICA —

## ★ NAMIB-NAUKLUFT ★



**THE OLDEST DESERT IN THE WORLD IS ALSO ONE OF THE MOST ACCESSIBLE**

**I**n the world's oldest desert, the landscape moves. The shimmering golden dunes shift as winds blow and seasons pass. In Sossusvlei, the dunes rise an incredible 300 metres (1,000 feet) above the underlying rock – making them the largest on Earth.

It might be called a desert (the Nama word Namib means 'vast, dry plain'), but this place is anything but barren. Thousands of plant and animal species survive here, from strange insects and tiny geckos to large antelopes and even leopards.

Visitors come to explore the dunes – and it can be a real adventure. Jump in a 4x4 or hike across the sands on foot for a multi-day trail and you'll soon find yourself deep in the Namibian wilderness. You'll need a permit and doctor's letter to take on the longer hikes, but one-day hikes give anyone a chance to see

more of the Namib. Try the Waterkloof Trail, a 17-kilometre (10.5-mile) loop that takes you past a frog-infested weir, beside pools that are ideal for a quick dip, and up a ridge for incredible desert views.

For those that want to embark on a somewhat more eerie trip, a drive out to Deadvlei takes you to one of the most incredible landscapes on Earth. This white clay pan is full of dead trees, frozen in time. After the Tsauchab river flooded, this pan was filled with shallow pools which helped trees to grow. As the sands shifted and a drought hit, the trees died. It's thought that they've stood here for more than 600 years, turning black as the sun scorched them. Now, against the backdrop of white clay, orange sand and a blue sky, they create one of the most iconic images in Africa. If you visit the Namib, a trip to Deadvlei should be an essential part of your stay.

**LOCATION** Namibia

**AREA** 49,768km<sup>2</sup> ★ 19,216mi<sup>2</sup>

### HIGHLIGHTS

- ★ See the skeletal trees at Deadvlei
- ★ *Hike to and swim in the Naukluft River*
- ★ Visit the NamibRand Nature Reserve and join a safari

**WEB** [WWW.MET.GOV.NA/NATIONAL-PARKS/NAMIB-NAUKLUFT-PARK/224](http://WWW.MET.GOV.NA/NATIONAL-PARKS/NAMIB-NAUKLUFT-PARK/224)



# ★ KRUGER ★



## HEAD OUT INTO THE SOUTH AFRICAN WILDERNESS FOR THE ULTIMATE SAFARI EXPERIENCE



An African safari is the ultimate wildlife holiday, and there's no better place to visit than South Africa's Kruger Park. This sprawling 2 million-hectare (5 million-acre) ecosystem is home to 17,000 elephants, 9,000 rhinos, 1,500 lions, 1,000 leopards and 48,000 buffalo. Its coarse grasslands swing between bone dry winters and torrential summers, bursting into life and then fading into dust. An adventure to this part of the world is guaranteed to bring you face to face with some of Earth's most incredible animals.

The best way to see the park is by car. You can rent your own from most of the nearby airports and explore solo, but it's worth booking a place on a guided tour. Under the protection of an expert guide, you'll ride through the park at dawn, dusk, or during the night, when many of the animals are at their most active.

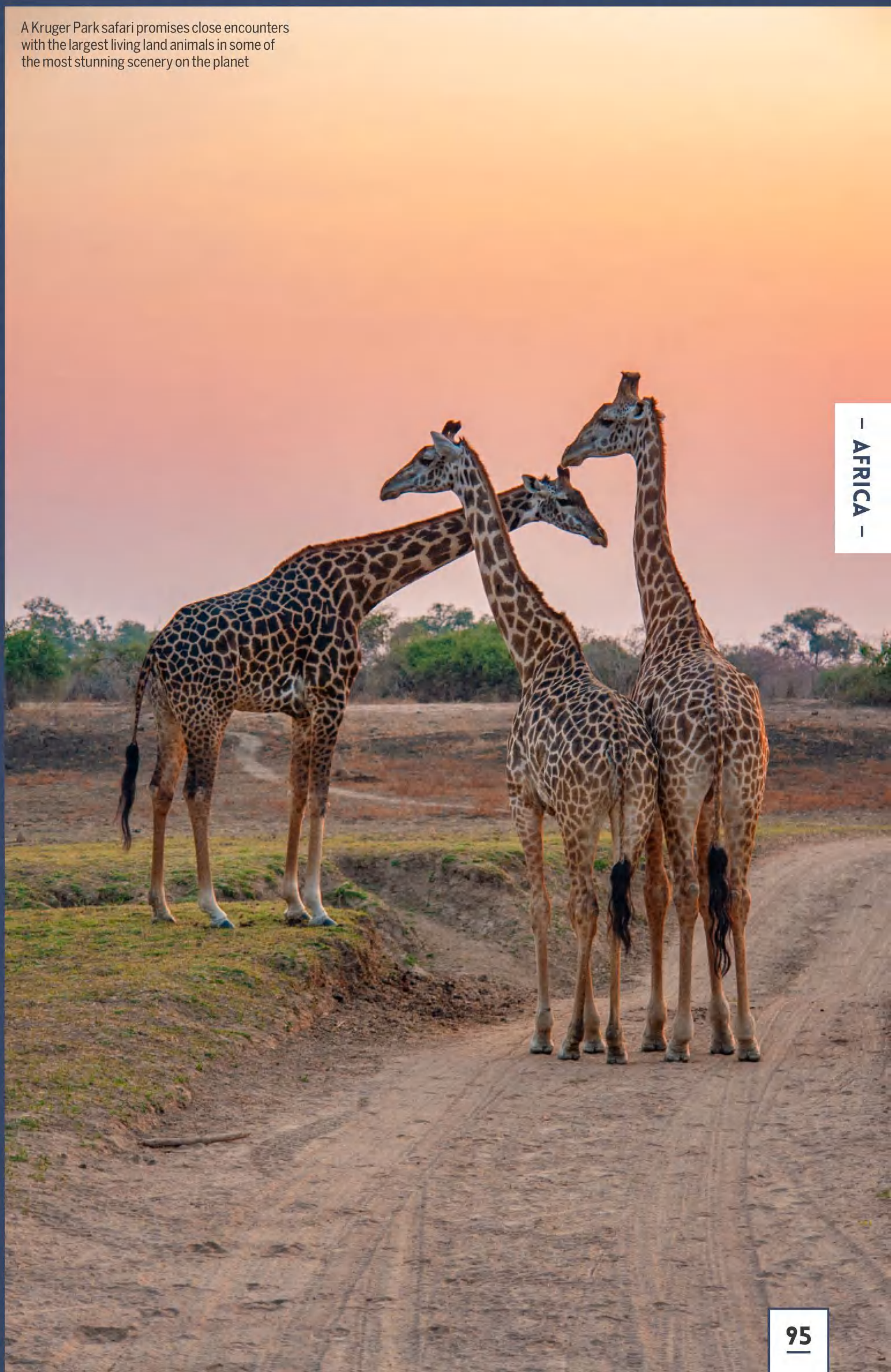
With a park this large, it's worth considering a multi-day visit so that you can really slow down and take in the scenery. Kruger has accommodation to suit everyone, from basic tent pitches to five-star lodges. From one of these safe bases, you can set off on a guided walk in the company of an armed guide, giving you the chance to get even closer to the bushveld fauna.

Book accommodation and tours in advance with SANParks, especially if you're considering a trip during the summer (October to January). At this time of year, warm rains transform the park into a beautiful green sea of vegetation. But don't despair if your chosen lodge is full.

The lush summer foliage can make animals harder to see, and in some ways a winter trip can be even better. Bare branches expose summer hiding spots and dwindling rains bring

animals together at watering holes. Winter days are still warm, and the park is quiet and serene. Whenever you choose to visit, a trip to Kruger Park is an adventure you'll never forget.

A Kruger Park safari promises close encounters with the largest living land animals in some of the most stunning scenery on the planet



- AFRICA -

**LOCATION** : South Africa

**AREA** : 20,000km<sup>2</sup> ★ 7,722mi<sup>2</sup>

### HIGHLIGHTS

- ★ Go on an evening or night safari to see a different side of the park
- ★ **Take a guided walk at sunrise for magical animal encounters**
- ★ Visit in winter when bare trees reveal hidden creatures

**WEB** : [SANPARKS.ORG/PARKS/KRUGER](http://SANPARKS.ORG/PARKS/KRUGER)

# ★ VICTORIA FALLS ★

## TAKE THE PLUNGE IN SOUTHERN AFRICA AT THE WORLD'S LARGEST WATERFALL



**B**efore you even reach Victoria Falls – the spectacular 108-metre (354-foot) waterfall on the Zambezi River in southern Africa – you will see huge columns of spray rising some 500 metres (1,640 feet) into the sun-kissed air. You'll also hear the incredible thunder of the water as it cascades over the lip of a large basalt plateau. Little wonder the original name for this unique sight was Mosi-oa-Tunya, which literally means 'the smoke that thunders'.

Victoria Falls got its current, most widely used name thanks to the Scottish missionary and explorer David Livingstone back in 1855, in honour of Queen Victoria. It straddles the border between Zambia and Zimbabwe, where it is bound by low sandstone hills, and it turns what is a generally placid river into a pounding torrent as more than 500 million cubic metres (17.6 billion cubic feet) of water plunges into the gorge. This natural wonder is located within both the Mosi-oa-Tunya National Park on the Zambian side and Victoria Falls National Park (plus a small strip of Zambezi National Park) on the Zimbabwean side.

It's something of a natural foaming monster that oozes beauty not only in its own inherent splendour, but also in the rainbows that it forms thanks to the dazzling sunlight. It can be a little frightening in its scale, but there are inviting spots close by for the brave, particularly on the Zambian side near to the 'devil's cascade', where you can enjoy a crystal-clear, natural swimming pool. There is also a jaw-dropping bungee-jumping location, where adrenaline junkies can leap from the British-built steel road and rail bridge overlooking the waterfall,

**LOCATION** : Zambia & Zimbabwe

**AREA** : 68.8km<sup>2</sup> ★ 26.5mi<sup>2</sup>

### HIGHLIGHTS

- ★ See the falls from every angle along the parks' many trails
- ★ *Get your adrenaline fix with a bungee jump, gorge swing, white water rafting and more*
- ★ Walk with lions at the Lion Encounter Zimbabwe wildlife rehabilitation centre

**WEB** : [ZAMBIATOURISM.COM/DESTINATIONS/WATERFALLS/VICTORIA-FALLS](http://ZAMBIATOURISM.COM/DESTINATIONS/WATERFALLS/VICTORIA-FALLS)  
[ZIMBABWETOURISM.NET/LISTING/VICTORIA-FALLS](http://ZIMBABWETOURISM.NET/LISTING/VICTORIA-FALLS)



The falls stretch across 1,700m (5,577 ft) and drop 110m (361ft)

cutting through the magical mists as you hurtle towards the Zambezi River, saved only by the rebound of the cord.

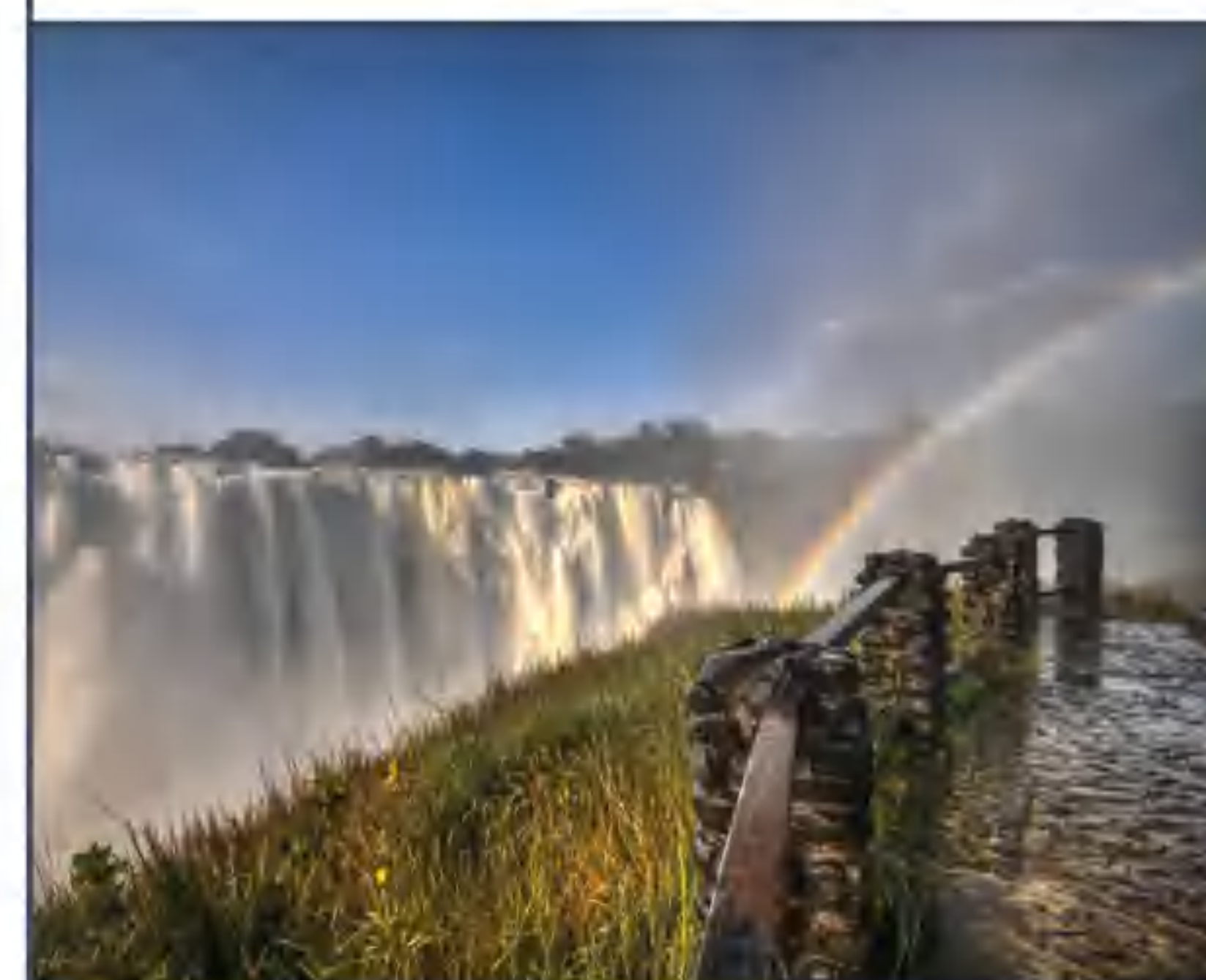
If bungee-jumping isn't for you, perhaps wander along a path that cuts along the forest edge, pausing at the Knife Edge Bridge for a perfect view of the Eastern Cataract – and experience of the upward shooting spray. A raincoat is a useful accessory, as is a head for heights since you'll be 128 metres (420 feet) above the river. Meanwhile, in the dry season, there is a chance to walk along the top of the Eastern Cataract and enjoy the same view Livingstone had way back when. For the rest of the year, there is no such opportunity, as the water roars at its splendid best.



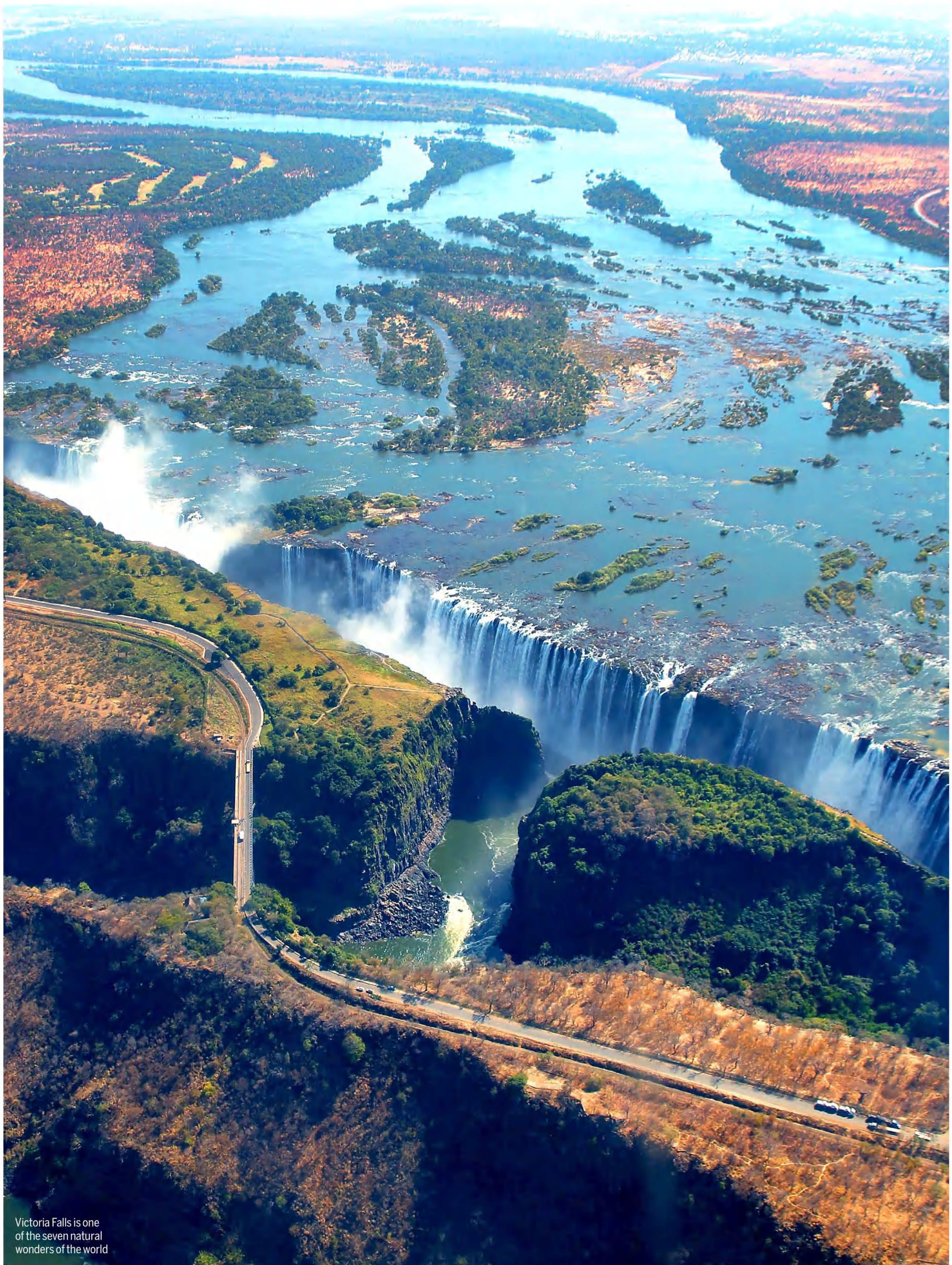
Local wildlife can be spotted along the banks of the Zambezi, including hippos and crocodiles

### ABOVE AND BELOW

Hike down the gorge, underneath the Victoria Falls Bridge, and you'll be able to see the cascading water from the base – a spectacular viewpoint, although it's certainly not a journey for the unfit since it takes you across some hazardous terrain, and involves some swimming and rafting. A good alternative is to take a helicopter ride to see the falls in their glory from above or visit the various museums to get a sense of history in the area. The Victoria Falls Field Museum reveals the formation of the falls and the heritage of the region, while the David Livingstone Museum houses a huge range of memorabilia, from maps to diaries.



Head down into the gorge or view the falls from the air for some majestic views



Victoria Falls is one of the seven natural wonders of the world

The White Desert's bizarre rock formations are the relics of an ancient sea

## ★ WHITE DESERT ★

### NOTHING WILL PREPARE YOU FOR THE OTHER-WORLDLY EXPERIENCE OF SEEING EGYPT'S INCREDIBLE NATURAL SCULPTURES

**I**f you want a trip that is truly out of this world, you'll be hard pressed to find a destination that feels more alien than Egypt's White Desert National Park. A four-hour drive southwest of the country's capital, Cairo, this extraordinary area looks like the surface of another planet because of the bizarrely shaped geological formations, called ventifacts, that decorate its otherwise-barren surface.

The many odd shapes of these formations are the result of an almost unbelievable history. This area was once the bottom of a shallow sea occupied by millions of creatures with calcium carbonate shells. Over millions of years, the shells of these animals accumulated on the sea floor, forming sedimentary rocks. When the sea dried up, it was replaced by a lush landscape that eventually disappeared also, leaving the sun-drenched desert that exists today. Wind and sand then went to work eroding the softer rocks and leaving only columns of harder material that many more

years of weathering have molded into a range of different shapes.

The easiest way to get to the White Desert is on a bus tour from Cairo. For the full experience, choose one that includes an overnight stay at Bahariya Oasis and visits to the quartz ridge at Crystal Mountain and the Black Desert. The highlight, though, will be a prearranged camp-out under the stars surrounded by the White Desert's rock sentinels. At sunset and sunrise these take on a magical orange glow before turning an eerie ghostly white under the moon. If you are lucky, you might also see the endangered slender-horned gazelles that live in the area.

If you prefer something more private, there are several operators who will drive you to the location and either give you a 4x4 tour of the desert or set you up with local Bedouin guides. Whichever way you choose to explore the park, though, you'll find it hard to come back down to Earth after experiencing the White Desert's unique landscape.



**LOCATION** Egypt

**AREA** 300km<sup>2</sup> ★ 116 mi<sup>2</sup>

#### HIGHLIGHTS

- ★ Get up in time to see the landscape at sunrise
- ★ **Take binoculars to look for the area's rare gazelles**
- ★ Take a tour by camel for an authentic experience

**WEB** [EGYPT.TRAVEL/ATTRACTIONS/THE-WHITE-DESERT](http://EGYPT.TRAVEL/ATTRACTIONS/THE-WHITE-DESERT)

# ★ WADI RUM ★



**MADE FAMOUS BY THE FILM LAWRENCE OF ARABIA, WADI RUM'S MARTIAN LANDSCAPE IS AS MESMERISING AS THEY COME**

**S**tark, unforgiving and Mars-like, the beautifully desolate badlands of Wadi Rum have captured imaginations for decades. Known as the Valley of the Moon, it sprawls across southern Jordan, at the edge of the Arabian Desert. Though this vast ocean of undulating sand dunes and colossal red-rock formations seems uninhabitable, Stone Age petroglyphs and lingering Bedouins testify to 12,000 years of human history in the area.

From razor-toothed mountains to wind-sculpted canyons, Wadi Rum's ancient trails link one massif to another. Climbing 1,854 metres (6,083 feet) skyward, the fierce sandstone and basalt peaks of Jebel Um ad Dami, Jordan's highest mountain, offer uninterrupted views of the Gulf of Aqaba and Saudi Arabia. Rising in the east is Jebel Umm Al Ishrin – the Mother of Twenty. According to local legend, the 20-domed mountain was named after a woman who killed nineteen suitors, before being outwitted by the twentieth, whom she married. Nearby, the weatherworn Jebel Al

Mazmar erupts unexpectedly from the flat sand – its seven hulking pillars evidence of aeons of torture by the elements. Further south, Al Hasany's dunes unfurl in striking shades of red. Elsewhere, the monolithic Jebel Ramm, colonnaded Jebel Qatar and seemingly impenetrable Jebel Rum continue to lure climbers – the rising sun casting shadows over their serrated peaks. Deep in the isolated north, Abu Hawl is a sight to behold, with larger-than-life carvings of figures, their stumpy appendages outstretched.

Over 25,000 petroglyphs, 20,000 inscriptions and 150 ancient archaeological sites, dating back 12,000 years, offer a glimpse into Wadi Rum's storied past and mankind's earliest beginnings. Remnants of the great Nabatean and Thamudic civilisations, images of fierce warriors, caravans, native animals and mysterious shapes are etched onto boulders and cliff faces. Engravings of camels – some suckling their calves – can be seen at Jebel Anfishiyyeh, while Jebel Khazali is adorned with the carving of a woman in childbirth.

Though jeep tours offer a tantalising taste of Wadi Rum, richer experiences are to be had hiking timeworn trails, on camelback or camping beneath vast desert skies seared with unblinking stars, just like the Bedouin who call this land home.

**LOCATION** Jordan

**AREA** 740km<sup>2</sup> ★ 286mi<sup>2</sup>

## HIGHLIGHTS

- ★ Spot fierce warriors and camel caravans at the Alameleh Inscriptions
- ★ ***Escape the desert and wander through Abu Khashaba***
- ★ Don't miss the 35m (115ft) high Burdah rock bridge

**WEB** WADIRUM.JO

Wadi Rum is sandwiched between Rift Valley and the steep Jordanian plateau



# MASAI MARA

## MARVEL AT ENDLESS PLAINS, ABUNDANT WILDLIFE AND THE ANNUAL GREAT MIGRATION

**S**itting in southwestern Kenya, the Masai Mara National Reserve spans 1,510 square kilometres (589 square miles) of unspoiled wilderness. Here, vast oceans of golden grassland link murky swamps and riverine forests. A fragile haven for thousands of animals, the Mara, as it's known to locals, is home to gazelles, topi, zebras, impalas, buffaloes, giraffes and wildebeests. But its most famous residents are the much-heralded Big Five: lions, leopards, elephants, black rhinos and buffaloes.

Offering the best game and bird viewing not just in Kenya, but the entire continent, the national park bleeds into several community-



Early-morning hot air balloon rides are a novel way to track animals over large distances

**LOCATION** Kenya

**AREA** 1,510km<sup>2</sup> ★ 589mi<sup>2</sup>

### HIGHLIGHTS

- ★ Look out for the Big Five and migrating beasts while on safari
- ★ *Visit a local Maasai village to learn about their culture*
- ★ Take a hot air balloon ride at dawn to track wildlife from above

**WEB** [MASAIMARANATIONALPARK.ORG](http://MASAIMARANATIONALPARK.ORG)

owned conservancies and the ancestral lands of the indigenous Maasai people.

Aside from the Great Migration, the compact boundaries of the Masai Mara offer prime safari territory all year round. Overflowing with wildlife, the park has recorded more than 100 mammal, amphibian and reptile species within its bounds.

Of course, no trip to the Masai Mara is complete without an intoxicating cultural excursion to a local Maasai village. Here, manyattas – huts made of grass, mud and cow dung – are clustered together, protected by a traditional thorn-bush fence. It's a place where pastoral pride is still in play and time-honoured traditions reign. The red-robed Maasai, with tightly braided ochre-dyed hair, begin the ipid – a centuries-old dance, which sees the village warriors leap into the air with effortless ease – each attempting to jump higher and remain straighter than the others.



Skirting the western edges of the Masai Mara National Reserve, the Mara Triangle is home to large numbers of lions



## THE GREAT MIGRATION

A wildlife-laden land of sheer natural beauty, the Masai Mara National Reserve sets the stage for one of the most spectacular shows on earth: the Great Migration. Each year, from July to October, about 1.5 million hungry wildebeests thunder 1,000 kilometres (621 miles) from Tanzania's Serengeti to Kenya's Masai Mara National Reserve in search of rich, red oat grass to graze on. Although the wildebeests are undoubtedly the stars of the show, almost 1 million zebras and 500,000 Thomson's gazelles join the mass exodus.

While the exact time of this natural wonder is determined by rainfall and grass growth, the entire period is one of never-ending action and relentless movement. Predators are plentiful and kills are common, especially during the early morning, late afternoon and under the cover of nightfall, while a soundtrack of groaning gnus, cackling hyenas and barking zebras fills the air.



Both the big and small screens have made valiant attempts to do this spectacle justice, but safaris are the only way to truly appreciate it

For a more immersive experience, homestays offer a chance to live and work alongside the Maasai. Gaining a genuine insight into their culture and traditions, visitors tend to cattle, repair huts and fetch water, before feasting on traditional plates of ugali, cornmeal porridge drowned in meat and vegetable stew. Once dusk falls, the lowing of cattle and warm crackling fire are adequate comforts, as are the countless glimmering stars.

Elsewhere in the park, you can take a hot air balloon tour before dawn. As you float quietly over the plains, wildebeests, buffaloes, lions and rhinos below can be stalked undisturbed.

Maasai Warriors jump, as part of the ipid dance, each trying to leap higher than the others



There are few better sights in the world than a rainforest from 30m (100ft) in the air





# ★ KAKUM ★

## SEE GHANA FROM THE AIR IN A TRUE HAVEN FOR WILDLIFE

**Y**ou may not initially associate the Ghana with lush, green rainforest, but Kakum National Park truly is an oasis compared to the scorching hot, dry regions of the country's northern regions. Some 35 per cent of Ghana's land is under threat from desertification, which is one of the reasons why Kakum was upgraded from a reserve to a protected national park in 1992. The 350-square-kilometre (135-square-mile) park is teeming with trees, animals and plants, which encouraged the Ghanaian Government to make it the country's first protected area. The national park is found 20 kilometres (12 miles) north of Ghana's Cape Coast.

So what is it about Kakum that makes it so special? Firstly, Kakum boasts over 200 species of bird and 550 species of butterfly, as well as forest elephants, leopards, antelope, flying squirrels and many other monkey species. Kakum is one of the few places in the world where you can enjoy spotting two of safari's Big Five at the same time as seeing some of the more traditional jungle inhabitants. It is recommended that you get to the park as early as possible; that way, you'll have the best chance of encountering animals with an entire day of critter watching.

Risk-takers may be inclined to head out of the park after your day of fun to Hans Cottage Botel – 22 kilometres (14 miles) south of Kakum. There you can enjoy a spot of lunch while petting crocodiles. Yes, that's right – tame crocodiles like to hang around the hotel and allow you to give them a stroke... provided they've had something to eat first.

Back to the park, however, and what better way to enjoy the sights of the glorious greenery than by taking a stroll along the treetop canopy walkway. There are over 300 metres (1,000 feet) of elevated bridges that span the park, made up of seven sturdy bridges built 30 metres (100 feet) in the air. The walkways blend beautifully into the natural surroundings so you feel enveloped by flora as you stroll along. The hardwood trees, can stretch up to 65 metres (213 feet) into the sky – a truly awe-inspiring sight.

There are so many reasons to visit the stunning country of Ghana, with its beaches and Atlantic surf, but Kakum National Park should really be up there with the best of those reasons. It is beautiful, peaceful, stuffed with wonderful wildlife and pretty plants and should be a key destination on any national park lover's itinerary

**LOCATION** Ghana

**AREA** 350km<sup>2</sup> ★ 135mi<sup>2</sup>

### HIGHLIGHTS

- ★ Traverse the rainforest at treetop height
- ★ *See two of safari's Big Five*
- ★ Take a hike to spot over 200 species of bird

**WEB** [KAKUMNATIONALPARK.GHANA-NET.COM/INDEX.HTML](http://KAKUMNATIONALPARK.GHANA-NET.COM/INDEX.HTML)

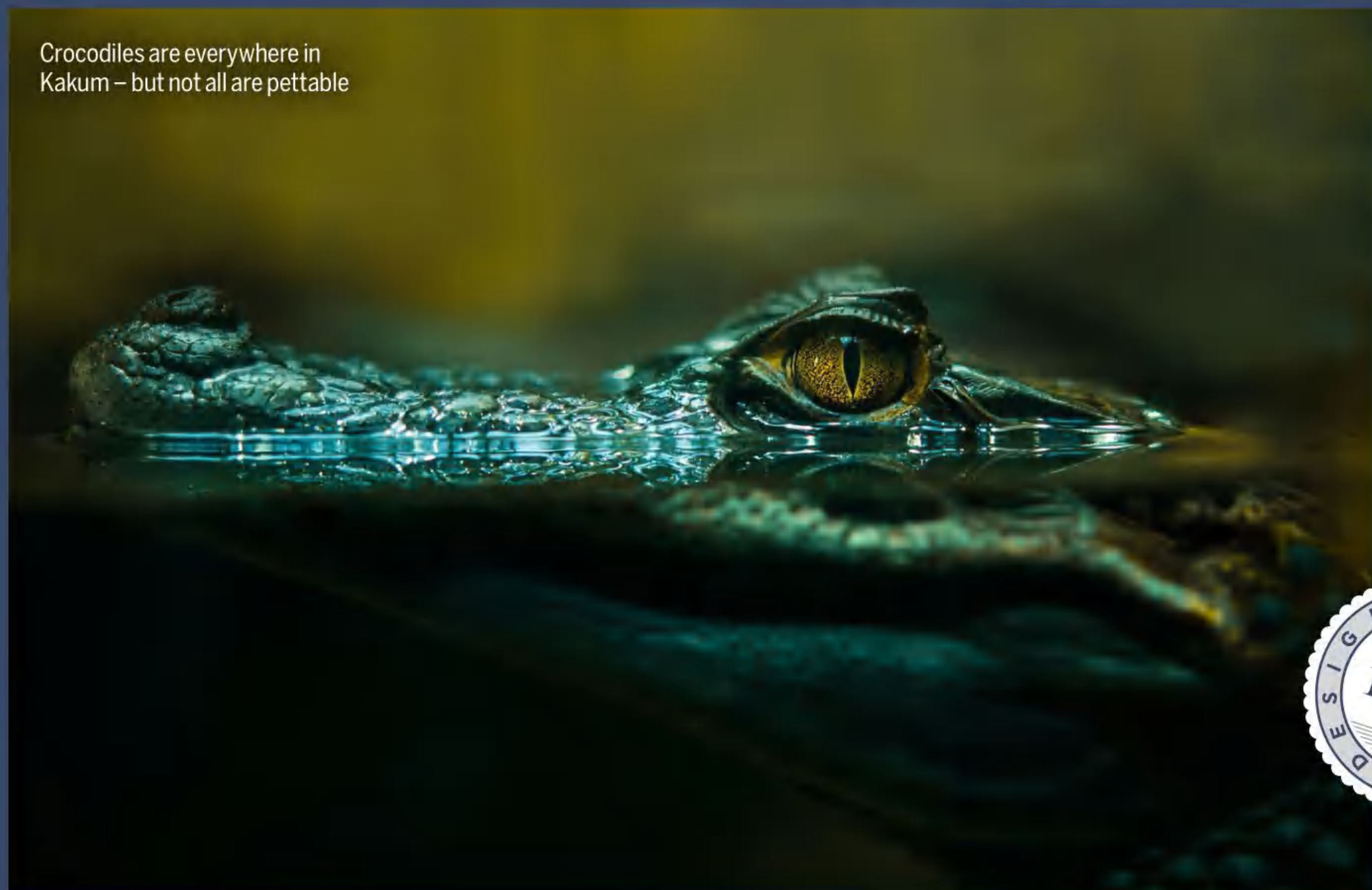
### SPOT SOME ENDANGERED ANIMALS

The Kakum rainforest is so dense and thick, it provides a superb, safe environment for a number of otherwise endangered or vulnerable animals. The forest elephant, smaller than the savanna elephant, roams freely around Kakum and is an essential part of the circle of life here – many trees rely on the elephants eating their seeds and depositing them elsewhere in order to germinate. Kakum is also home to the bongo, the largest forest antelope. These magnificent creatures are on the near threatened list, as they are a big target for illegal hunters due to their horns that can grow up to one metre (three feet) in length.



There are just a few places in the world where you can spot African forest elephants

Crocodiles are everywhere in Kakum – but not all are pettable



The lesser spot nosed monkey is just one of many monkey species in Kakum



Madagascar has earned the nickname 'the eighth continent' due to having an array of weird and wonderful wildlife



## ★ TSINGY DE BEMARAHA ★

### MADAGASCAR'S STONE CATHEDRALS ARE A MARVEL OF NATURE AND A METROPOLIS OF MAGNIFICENT CREATURES

**E**ven by Madagascan standards, Tsingy de Bemaraha National Park is an oddity. Of the country's diverse landscapes, this is the most unusual; a forest of stone, characterised by limestone 'cathedrals', beneath which some truly remarkable animals thrive. The karsts are dubbed 'tsingy', which roughly translates to 'a place where one cannot walk barefoot', or 'walking on tiptoes'. Formed from shells and corals 200 million years ago, the limestone formations rose from the seabed, before being eroded by rainwater 5 million years ago – resulting in a vast terrain of pointed, jagged and sharp stone towers interspersed with trees.

The UNESCO World Heritage site is so impenetrable that most of it could not be accessed until the 1990s. The Antsika Association worked with Malagasy to install a via ferrata network of steel cables, pegs and ladders, training locals to safely guide visitors.

Located in the country's west, the park spans nearly 100 kilometres (62 miles) in length and is just over 40 kilometres (25 miles) wide. With only ten per cent of Madagascar's forests remaining, Tsingy de Bemaraha provides a safe haven to its endemic species. The park hosts more than ten species of lemur, 50 reptiles, 90 birds and hundreds of plants.

The journey to the park is a long and bumpy ride on dirt roads. Visitors are ferried across the crocodile-infested Tsiribihina and Manambolo rivers, before driving through the Avenue of the Baobabs, Madagascar's most famous tree. True explorers may opt to canoe over the mangrove-lined Tsiribihina River. Hours of scrambling later, the pinnacles form a fortress of stone, 140 metres (459 feet) high. The rocks stretch to the horizon, like alien temples; trees sway against the stoic formations, while lemurs hop from steeple to steeple. This is Madagascar at its purest; unexpectedly magnificent.

**LOCATION** Madagascar

**AREA** 1,520km<sup>2</sup> ★ 587mi<sup>2</sup>

#### HIGHLIGHTS

- ★ Take a hiking circuit through the towering limestone labyrinth
- ★ ***Spot the 11 different local lemur species***
- ★ Be aware: the park is only open during the dry season (April-Nov)

**WEB** [PARCS-MADAGASCAR.COM](http://PARCS-MADAGASCAR.COM)

# ★ KILIMANJARO ★

## TANZANIA'S MIGHTY MOUNT KILIMANJARO IS A FRIENDLY GIANT EVEN NOVICE HIKERS CAN CONQUER

**S**tretching 5,895 metres (19,340 feet) above sea level, not only is Mount Kilimanjaro Africa's tallest peak, it's the highest free-standing mountain on Earth. Located within Kilimanjaro National Park, the instantly recognisable,

solitary snow-capped massif erupts suddenly from the flat Tanzanian plains, looming strikingly high above the surrounding acacia forests and scrubland.

Kilimanjaro has been seducing travellers for decades. Since no technical skill is required to

Kilimanjaro's summit, Uhuru Peak, is the highest point in Africa, and one of its most spectacular sights



**LOCATION** : Tanzania

**AREA** : 1,668km<sup>2</sup> ★ 644mi<sup>2</sup>

### HIGHLIGHTS

- ★ Scale Africa's highest mountain on a guided trekking tour
- ★ *Go on safari to see elephants, buffalo, leopards and more*
- ★ Get great views of Mt Kilimanjaro from the nearby town of Moshi

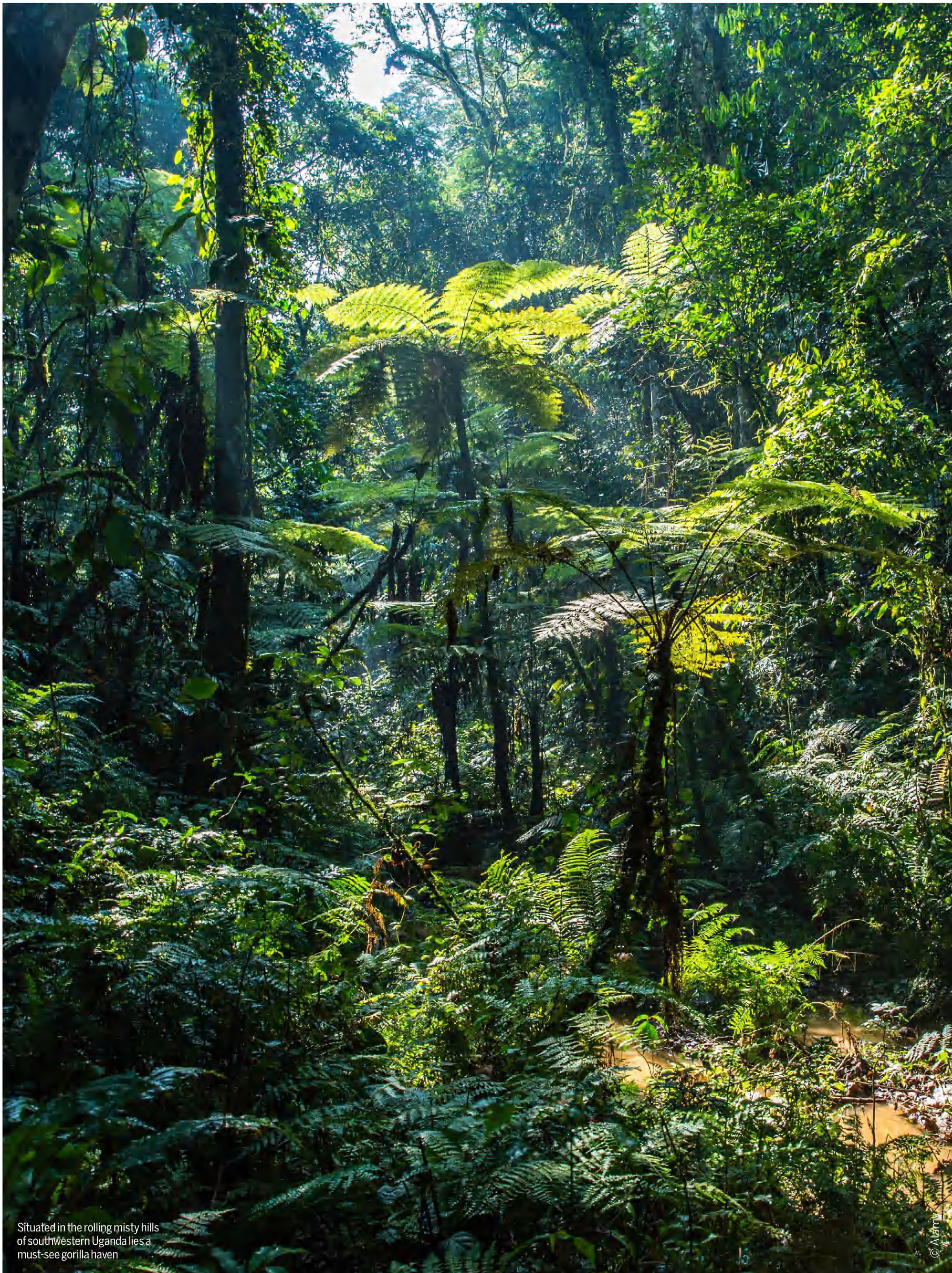
**WEB** : [WWW.TANZANIATOURISM.GO.TZ/EN](http://WWW.TANZANIATOURISM.GO.TZ/EN)

get to its peak, it gives uninitiated climbers the extraordinary opportunity to reach one of the world's seven summits. To the soundtrack of birdsong, trekkers voyage from the emerald-green forests, overflowing with ferns, sycamore trees and junipers. The changing landscape takes explorers through five different ecosystems, and an evolving display of exotic flora and fauna. Blue monkeys, olive baboons, leopards, mongooses and elephants call the mountain home, but – given the foot traffic – sightings are extremely rare. Ascending, the wildlife diminishes, replaced with loose scree, rock walls and glaringly blue glaciers, until the otherworldly moonscapes of Kilimanjaro's highest point, Uhuru Peak, are in sight. Standing on the summit before the iconic sign, there's only the briefest of moments to bask in the whipping winds, carrying the pink morning clouds ever closer.

Every adventurer worth their salt dreams of standing on the Roof of Africa. More than 20,000 attempt to conquer its summit each year, using one of its seven routes – Marangu, Machame, Rongai, Lemosho, Shira, Umbwe and Mweka – though not all are recommended to tackle.

The oldest and most direct of all Kilimanjaro routes, the 35-kilometre (22-mile) Marangu passes through vast grasslands and cacti fields before winding across alpine meadows, set against dramatic mountain peaks. It's the only route with hut accommodation (others require you to take your own tent), but given the limited acclimatisation period it has lower success rates.

Popular, despite being longer and more arduous than Marangu, the Machame route encourages gradual acclimatisation – giving trekkers longer to adapt by climbing high and sleeping low. The 40-kilometre (25-mile) route is steep, but remarkably scenic.



Situated in the rolling misty hills of southwestern Uganda lies a must-see gorilla haven

© Alamy

# ★ BWINDI IMPENETRABLE FOREST ★

IF YOU GO DOWN TO THE WOODS OF UGANDA,  
YOU'RE SURE OF A GORILLA SURPRISE

**N**estled in the southwestern corner of Uganda is forest so prestigious, it is often referred to as one of the best national parks in all of Africa. Positioned on the misty hills of Bwindi, dense rainforest spans over 300 square kilometres (184 square miles) and is home to a wealth of wildlife. Appropriately named the impenetrable forest because, with its army of around 160 species of towering trees in addition to some 100 species of fern, stepping into the forest feels like entering planet Earth at its most pure. Surrounded by a cacophony of calls from endemic birds, elephants and monkeys, the forest is a truly immersive experience in nature. However, the stars of the show in these forests are certainly the local mountain gorillas. With more than 60 per cent of the world's population of mountain gorilla calling Bwindi park home, the forest is filled with opportunities to see them interacting with their natural habitat. With the help of the numerous travel guide providers, visitors of the park can watch these majestic creatures as they go about their daily lives and behold their nest building skills, childish play and camaraderie.

As inherently breathtaking as this spectacle of African wildlife is, gazing upon its seemingly endless grandeur from the comfort of your personal swimming pool or communal campfire is a view like no other. Dotted along the edges of this forested fortress are countless local lodgings spanning the entire spectrum in hospitality and luxury. From sleeping beneath the stars at a backpackers campsite to the extravagance of an open balcony overlooking the lush green canopy at a private lodge, Bwindi can accommodate any explorers journeying through the park. Timing is key when planning a trip the Bwindi National Park, as it is recommended that gorilla expeditions are booked a year in advance, due to limited availability. The most opportune months for seeing these mountain apes is June through to September, avoiding the countries two rainy seasons between March to May and ending in October and November. Tracking gorillas, however, does come at a cost – around £475 (\$600) for the experience. This one-off fee is to obtain a gorilla tracking permit separate from the cost of a guide and is necessary to join an expedition. As a UNESCO World Heritage site, the national park is managed by the Uganda Wildlife Authority, who seek to ensure the safety of both travellers and the species that dwell within the park. To reach the park, it's a seven- or eight-hour drive from Entebbe International Airport to Bwindi, but planes can also be chartered from Entebbe to Bwindi.

**LOCATION** Uganda

**AREA** 321km<sup>2</sup> ★ 124mi<sup>2</sup>

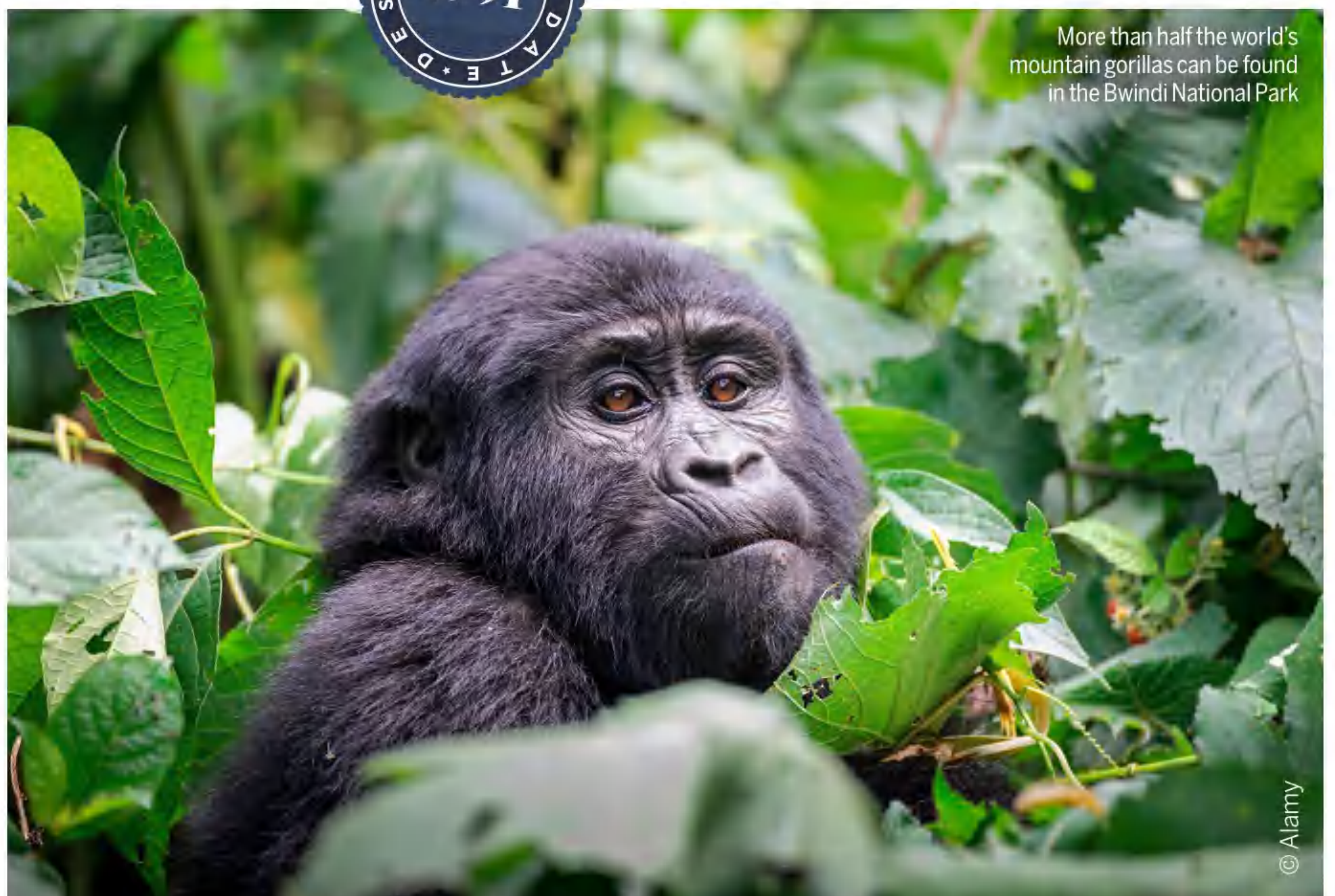
## HIGHLIGHTS

- ★ Snap a shot of swinging colobus monkeys
- ★ **Take binoculars to spot foraging forest elephants**
- ★ Hire a canoe and sail on lake Bunyonyi in September

**WEB** [BWINDIFORESTNATIONALPARK.COM](http://BWINDIFORESTNATIONALPARK.COM)



Jackson's three-horned chameleons are some of the many reptiles that call Bwindi home



More than half the world's mountain gorillas can be found in the Bwindi National Park

## BIRD WATCHING IN BWINDI

Renowned for its mountain gorilla residents, Bwindi Impenetrable Forest National Park is also an excellent site to see some of Uganda's vast and vibrant bird species. Soaring through the sky and nimbly navigating through the dense forest, more than 350 species of birds journey through the national park year round, including 23 species endemic to the area. From warblers to sunbirds, bee-eaters to shoebills, the best places to catch sight of the countries feathered friends is at the Ivy river trail, Bwindi swamp trail and Buhoma waterfall trail. To ensure your success in surveying the parks many birds, the best time to get your binoculars is during the African dawn chorus, first thing in the morning.



The scarlet-chested sunbird is one of hundreds of species of birds found in the forest

**GUILIN AND LIJIANG RIVER**

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★ **ASIA & OCEANIA** ★

# ★ GUILIN AND LIJIANG RIVER ★

**UNIQUE MOUNTAINS AND BEAUTIFUL RIVERS MAKE THIS STUNNING LANDSCAPE LOOK LIKE A WATERCOLOUR PAINTING COME TO LIFE**

**W**ith its unique verdant peaks reflected in the glistening jade river, it's no wonder the Guilin and Lijiang River National Park has been described as "the best under heaven." Situated in the northeast of the autonomous Guangxi Zhuang region and with jaw-dropping views round every bend, it is one of the most scenic places to visit in China. Its distinctive landscape is unlike anything you've ever seen before. Over 300 years of weathering and erosion has formed a dynamic topographical mix of shapes and patterns.

This area of outstanding natural beauty, which covers over 2,000 square kilometres (772 square miles), was one of the first batch of national parks in the country and is unlike

most. There's no entrance fee, but you'd definitely pay to see its dramatic limestone peaks and watery scenery – it's even been nominated as a UNESCO World Heritage Site (quite frankly, it's surprising it isn't already one). The park boasts 157 rock hills, 21 main karst caves and hundreds of smaller ones. It covers 83 kilometres (52 miles) of river between Guilin and Yangshuo, taking in picturesque scenes of rural China that have inspired artists and poets for centuries.

One of the best ways to see the area is by taking a Li River cruise. The jade green Li River has been listed as one of the top ten watery wonders by *National Geographic* and is a photographer's dream.

The cruise boat starts at the wharf south of Liberation Bridge in Guilin and takes four to five hours depending on the water level and current. Travel down the river to Yangshuo, past quaint fishing villages, limestone cliffs, deep caves and lush green hills each with their own peculiar name and legend.

UNESCO World Heritage site Guilin is the perfect starting point as it has an airport and train station, as well as lots of options in terms of accommodation and restaurants. The city's name translates as 'Forest of Sweet Osmanthus' because of a high volume of the fragrant trees. Dating back over 2,000 years, Guilin is a beautiful contrast of natural wonders and urban Chinese architecture. A perfect example of this is the Sun Pagoda, the world's highest bronze pagoda, lit up at night and reflected in the water on the Two Rivers and Four Lakes scenic spot where Guilin's waterway system begins. Uniquely shaped

**LOCATION** China

**AREA** 2,860km<sup>2</sup> ★ 1,104mi<sup>2</sup>

## HIGHLIGHTS

- ★ Try and find all nine horses at Nine Horse Fresco Hill
- ★ **Take a bamboo raft so you can go ashore at Yellow Shoal dock**
- ★ Pack good walking shoes to climb Moon Hill for views over Yangshuo

**WEB** [NATIONALPARKOFCHINA.COM/GUILIN.HTML](http://NATIONALPARKOFCHINA.COM/GUILIN.HTML)

## BEST TIME TO VISIT

April to June is probably the best time to visit the region, as this is when the river is at its deepest so boats can travel further and the landscape is at its most luscious. It is wet and humid at this time of year, however, this also means beautiful misty views over the peaks. The average temperature is around 19 degrees Celsius (66 degrees Fahrenheit). July to October is ideal for sunny days and views along the river. The temperatures are at their highest in July and August and it's rainy season, but these are just short spells. This is also the busiest period for visitors. During September and October the weather is warm and dry and it is less crowded, except during the national holiday (1-7 October)

Avoid visiting from November to March. Cruises are shortened at this time, as the water levels are low. Although there are sunny days, winter is generally colder and can be dangerous if you're hiking.



Misty views of the Li or Lijiang River can be just as beautiful as on a clear day



Guilin and Lijiang national park is one of China's best-known scenic areas

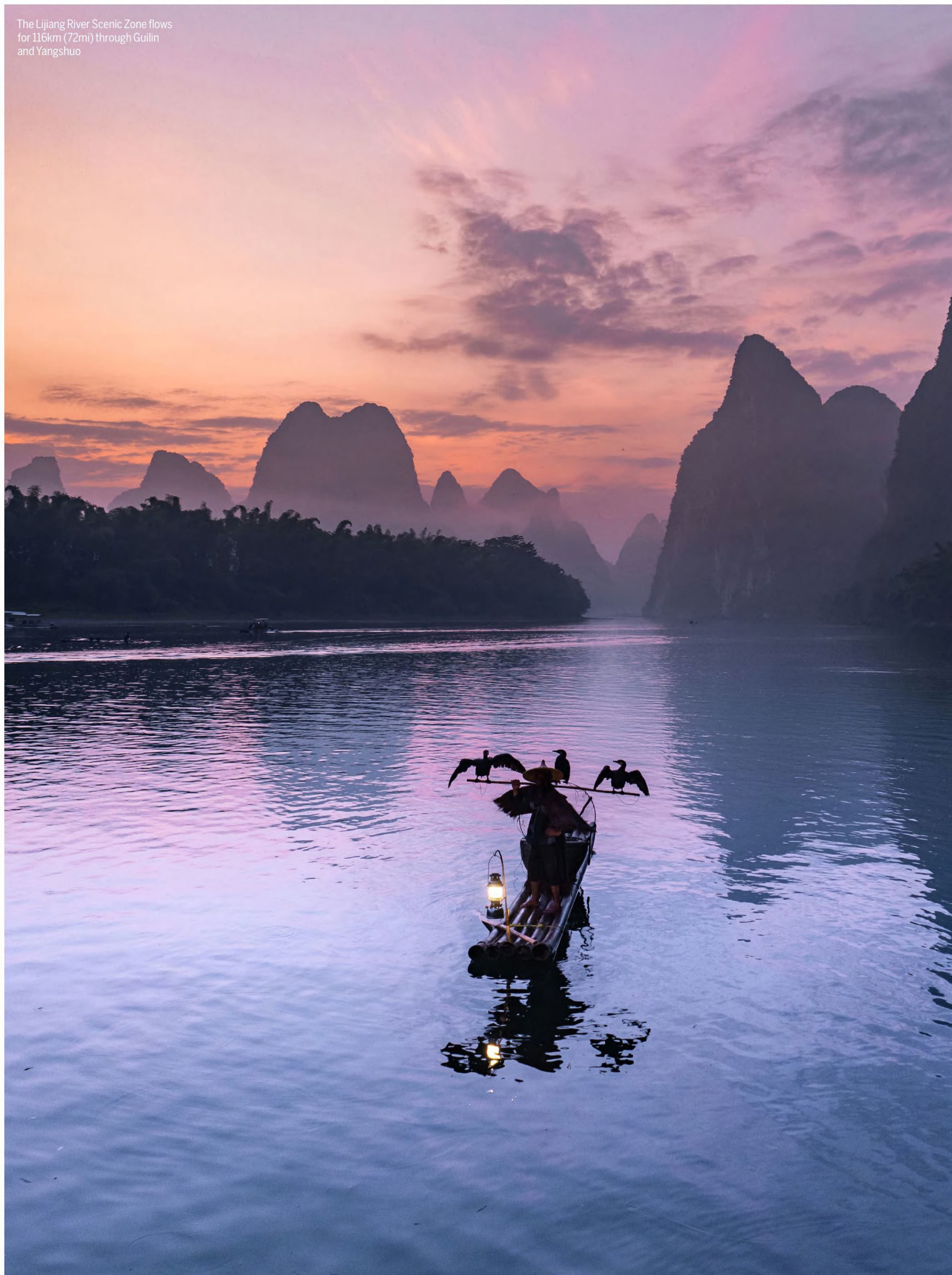


A highlight in Yangshuo is Moon Hill with its crescent-shaped hole





The Lijiang River Scenic Zone flows for 116km (72mi) through Guilin and Yangshuo



## EAT LIKE A LOCAL

If you're taking the Li River Cruise, you'll be served a buffet on board, but it's definitely worth trying local specialities in Guilin, Yangshuo and in fishermen villages along the way. You'll be eating Cantonese and Huanese food here so a lot of stir-frying and steaming. Guilin is known for its sweet and spicy food. Try Guilin rice noodles, Lipu taro and pork, Ginko stewed with duck or stewed chicken and gecko. Specialities from the river include Li River fish soup, stuffed Li River snails and fish. Yangshuo is known for its beer fish. If you've got a sweet tooth you'll want to taste water chestnut cake and horse-hoof shaped cake. There are also sweet dumplings called Tangyuan made with Osmanthus and the delicious Yangshuo Stuffed Bun, which is filled with peanuts and sesame paste and steamed with pomelo leaves.

To drink, San Hua jiu, made in Guilin, is a rice wine, which dates back over 1,000 years and uses spring water from the region.



Yangshuo pomelos or grapefruits are sweet and juicy; the leaves are used to make stuffed buns

Karst hills such as Solitary Beauty Peak (Duxiu Fend), Folded Brocade Hill (Diecai Hill) known for its stone carvings and Fubo Hill – half on water, half on land – rise unexpectedly in the middle of the city like friendly, green giants. The hills even inspired a scene in the movie *Star Wars: Episode III*.

Also worth a visit in Guilin is the Diecai Mountain or Mountain of Splendid Hues named after the varied colour tones in the rock, and the Reed Flute Cave (Ludi Yan), a 240-metre (787-foot) long underground grotto. The incredible colours and stalagmite and stalactite formations have earned the cave the nickname 'palace of the arts'.

The Guilin to Ox Gorge section of the cruise takes you to Elephant Trunk Hill or Xiangbishan (shaped like an elephant drinking water from the river), the picturesque Chuanshan Park where you'll find Cockfighting Hill, and Daxu Ancient Town, known for its quaint streets, ancient temples, historic market and the striking Wanshou or Longevity Bridge.

South of the Ox Gorge, a long, narrow valley whose surrounding mountains look like nine

Watch traditional cormorant fishermen fish with their birds on bamboo rafts



oxen, Wangfu Rock, which looks like a woman looking into the distance, is just one of the unique sights. The 12-kilometre (7.5-mile) Crown Cave or Guanyan Cave is a spectacular karst cave with lighting and sound, which can be viewed a number of ways including by foot, light rail or boat. Further south, Ban Bian Du is known as Half Side Ferry because the huge rock descends into the water cutting off the footpath and visitors have to take a ferry to cross over on the same side of the river.

The peaceful village of Yangdi, meaning sheep hooves, lies 50 kilometres (31 miles) south of Guilin and is set against a backdrop of twin peaks that look like sheep hooves. This is where the real highlight of the cruise begins. If you don't have time for the full Li River cruise, we would recommend focusing on the section between Yangdi and the Xingping. The views along this stretch are unparalleled. As you wind down the river, you'll be mesmerised

***“Karst hills – half on water, half on land – rise unexpectedly in the middle of the city like green giants”***

by the lush green bamboo groves and jagged limestone peaks looming over the majestic water. Experience the tranquility of the authentic rural Chinese countryside as you pass by water buffaloes cooling themselves in the river and the traditional cormorant fisherman on their rafts.

Mural Hill or Nine Horses Fresco Hill is not to be missed. This 30.5-metre (100-foot) cliff face looks like a mural with nine horses etched into it, although most people can only see two. The hill has five peaks and comes in a beautiful palette of colours, including yellow, grey and green.

Further downriver is one of the most spectacular sights in this section: the Yellow Cloth Shoal. The yellow flagstone below the clear water makes it look like a cloth lying on the riverbed. The shoal is so impressive that it is now the background image on the CNY 20 banknote. It's said that one hundred miles on the Li River is like “one hundred miles of art gallery” and this spot has one of the prettiest reflections on the water. Legend has it that the seven peaks overlooking the shoal were once seven fairy maidens from heaven who came to bathe in the river. The Jade Emperor commanded them to return to heaven but they were so enchanted by the river that rather than leave, they transformed themselves into peaks so they could stay forever.

If you have time, take a trip up Xianggong Mountain located between Mural Hill and Yellow Cloth Shoal. This is the best photography spot for pictures of the Li River and its unforgettable scenery. The nearby Xingping Fishing Village dates back nearly 500 years. Learn all about provincial life as you wander through the stone streets and take in the architectural styles of the Ming and Qing Dynasties.



Folded Brocade Hill (is a popular attraction in the park, featuring magnificent stone carvings

The final section of the Li River Cruise is from Water-Dropping Village to Yangshuo. Highlights of this section include a waterfall used to make wine in Water-Dropping Village, picturesque Snail Hill, which (you guessed it) looks like a snail, and the smallest peak, Shutong Hill.

Green Lotus Peak (Bilian Peak), which resembles the flower's bud, is the last stop on the cruise. Here you can explore a park, which boasts a Riverside Pavilion, Old Banyan Tree and Jianshan Temple. Disembark at Shuidongmen Wharf or Fu'an Wharf near the Shutong Hill.



The Reed Flute Cave has been called the 'Palace of Arts'



The Sun and Moon twin pagodas lit up at night

To end your journey, discover the UNESCO World Heritage site of Yangshuo, where you can explore over 1,000 years of the area's history. This ancient city has just as much to offer as the rest of your trip with picture-postcard countryside, strange-looking hills, the bamboo-lined Li and Yulong Rivers, acres of emerald green rice paddies and orchards growing deliciously sweet pomelos and kumquats. Visit West Street, Yangshuo's oldest road, for a taste of city life from the ancient architecture to shops and restaurants. Or climb up the 800 stairs to reach the top of Yangshuo's iconic Moon Hill, a giant rock with a crescent-shaped hole in its centre.

As well as the River Li Cruise, visitors can explore the area by bicycle, foot and bamboo raft. One of the most popular biking trail runs on the Shili Scenery Gallery View Road from central Yangshuo to the scenic bridge over the Yulong River. If you enjoy hiking, the seven-kilometre (4.4-mile) trail between Xingping and Jiumahua Hill and the five-kilometre (three-mile) route from Jiumahua Hill to Xingping are recommended. A relaxing alternative to the cruise boat is a bamboo raft, which is an experience in itself.

No matter how you choose to travel, as the saying goes, art is long and life is short. Don't miss out on this natural masterpiece.

The hills in Guilin were used during the filming of *Star Wars: Episode III*



Borneo's jungles offer plenty of variety for those that don't want to climb. There's something for everyone here

## ★ KINABALU ★

### EXPLORE MALAYSIA'S FIRST UNESCO WORLD HERITAGE SITE AND TAKE IN SOME INCREDIBLE VIEWS

**M**ount Kinabalu lies at the heart of this national park – it's Borneo's tallest mountain, standing at an impressive 4,095 metres (13,435 feet). British colonial Hugh Low made the first recorded ascent in 1851, fighting through the jungle at its base with the help of local guides. Despite never actually reaching the highest peak on the mountain, it bears his name – meaning the tallest point in Borneo is, ironically, known as Low's Peak.

Travellers typically travel to the park to climb the mountain, and it's not an easy hike. Every step is uphill, and challenging weather can make it tough for all but the fittest climbers. To make the most of the trip, meet your guide early on your first day to reach camp in good time. A 2am start on your second day will give you enough time to experience an awe-inspiring sunrise from the summit. The very early rise will be worth it.

The way down is just as fun. Try out the Mountain Torq route and you'll be safely strapped on as you descend the mountain on a series of rungs, tightropes and planks. It's not for the faint-hearted, but every step is completely secure, and there are astonishing views everywhere you look. Plus, it's easier on your knees than going back the way you came.

While the mountain may be the reason for most visits, Kinabalu has plenty of other activities for those less interested in climbing. Eight nature trails wind around the park – ideal for those that want to experience the wildlife. Thrill seekers will enjoy the Canopy Walkway, which allows you to wobble through the treetops on boarded rope trail. And for visitors that missed out on seeing a particular specimen during their expeditions, an Orchid Conservation Centre, a butterfly farm and the Rafflesia Garden put some of the island's rare species at your fingertips.



**LOCATION** Malaysian Borneo

**AREA** 754km<sup>2</sup> ★ 291mi<sup>2</sup>

#### HIGHLIGHTS

- ★ Catch a glimpse of the Philippines from the summit of Mount Kinabalu
- ★ **Relax and rejuvenate at Poring Hot Springs**
- ★ Discover some of the rarer plant life at the Botanical Garden

**WEB** [SABAHTOURISM.COM/DESTINATION/KINABALU-NATIONAL-PARK](http://SABAHTOURISM.COM/DESTINATION/KINABALU-NATIONAL-PARK)

# ★ YALA ★

## BIG CATS AND BOLD ELEPHANTS AWAIT IN SRI LANKA'S WILDLIFE HAVEN

**Y**ala National Park should be on the bucket list of anyone excited by exotic wildlife. Located near the south-east coast of Sri Lanka, the park is part nature reserve and part tourist destination. Only some of it is open to the public but the accessible areas provide the perfect opportunity to see this country's colourful animals in all their glory.

One of the most exhilarating creatures you could encounter is the Sri Lankan leopard. The park claims to have the highest density of leopards in the world so the odds are good that you'll spot this unique big cat prowling through the vegetation or up in a tree.

Other iconic fauna that forage in the hot jungle, grassland and wetland habitats the park protects include around 90 species of birds, along with tapirs, crocodiles, sloths, and elephants. In fact, you might literally run into the last of these on the park's main road because

they've been known to stand in the middle of it until motorists buy them off with fruit.

Animals aren't the only pleasures this park has to offer, though. Also within its grounds are the fascinating remains of a long lost civilization. Anthropologists believe that around 2,000 years ago about 12,000 Buddhist monks lived at a rock temple called Sithulpawwa, which translates as 'hill of the quiet mind'. Nearby is Magul Maha Viharaya, another popular historic site worth visiting.

Your experience can go beyond just seeing the park's sights, too, by staying among them. 'Wildlife bungalows' can be pre-booked in the park and camping is also an option, although sites are limited and available only for short stays. Wherever you sleep, though, once you're up and about, you can take a safari and get a guided tour. That way you'll have the best chance of seeing Sri Lanka's fantastic beasts and knowing where to find them.

**LOCATION** Sri Lanka

**AREA** 979km<sup>2</sup> ★ 378mi<sup>2</sup>

### HIGHLIGHTS

- ★ Take binoculars and go in search of the elusive leopard
- ★ **Explore Sithulpawwa**
- ★ If you like luxury, visit the KumbukRiver eco-lodge

**WEB** [YALASRILANKA.LK](http://YALASRILANKA.LK)



Yala National Park has the highest density of leopards in the world



# ★ GÖREME ★

WITH A MARS-LIKE LANDSCAPE, FAIRY CHIMNEYS AND UNDERGROUND HOMES, THERE'S NOWHERE ELSE LIKE GÖREME

## THE FORMATION OF FAIRY CHIMNEYS

Unlike most other national parks, Göreme has no lush greenery; here the forests are made of rock. Millions of years ago, areas of the park were covered with ash from erupting volcanoes. This volcanic ash gradually solidified into a soft rock known as tuff, before being covered in layers of solidified lava. Over time wind, rain and rivers wore at the landscape, carving out valleys and cliffs and sculpting tall pillars. The strange shape of the fairy chimneys results from the fact that hard volcanic rock erodes at a slower rate than tuff, leaving the roof-like caps protecting the formations. It's the softness of the tuff that made it possible for people in the region to flee underground, carving into the ancient ash to create homes, tunnels and churches.



Unique conditions have shaped this region over millions of years

**C**arved into the rock of Cappadocia, a region in the very centre of Turkey, is the town of Göreme. Beyond the town is a national park of the same name, covering almost 10,000 hectares (24,710 acres) of volcanic rock, hills and river valleys. Looking like the set of a science fiction film, both the town and the park are popular with travellers seeking a landscape unlike anything they've experienced before.

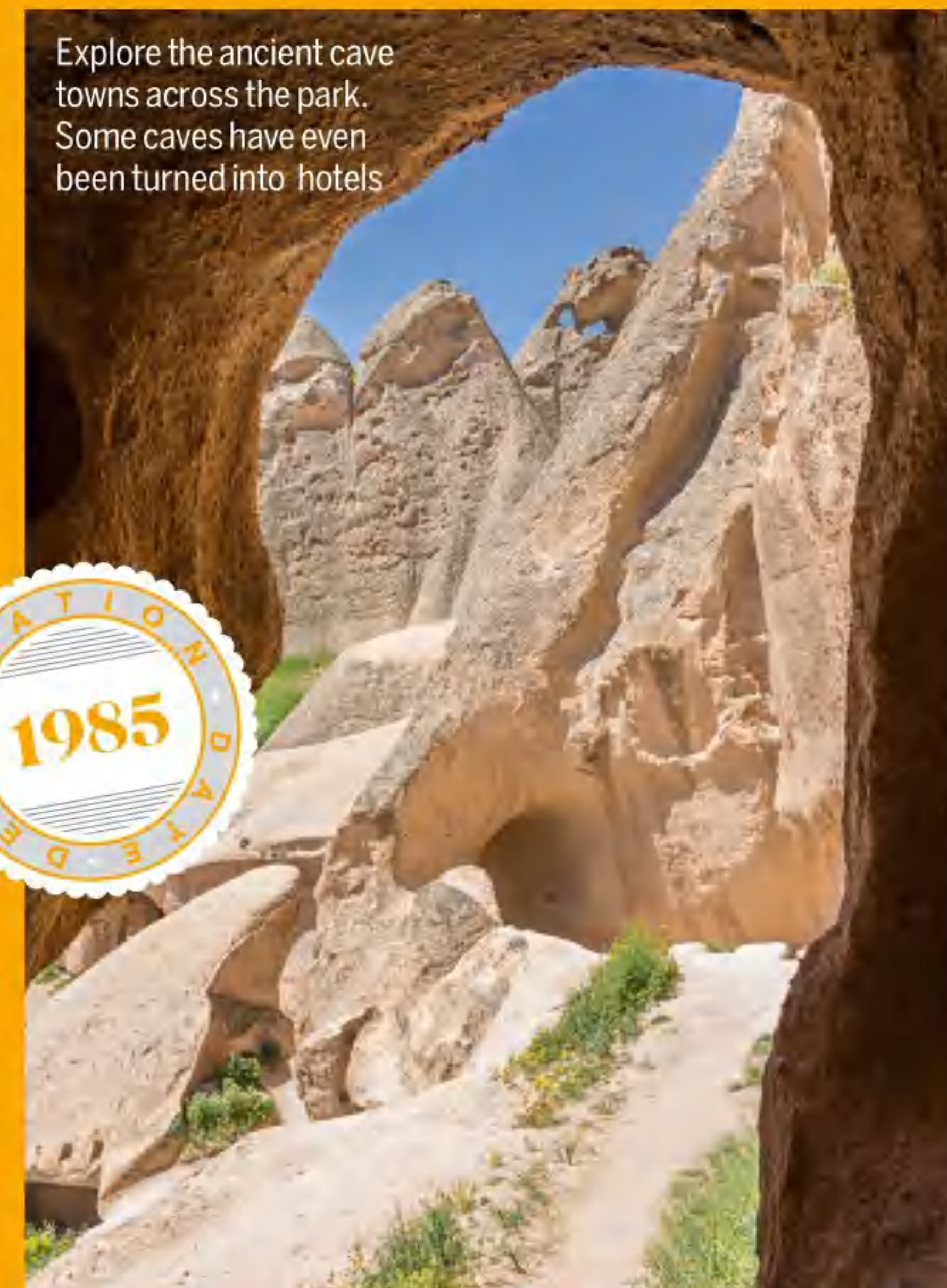
No-one knows for sure when the first people settled in Göreme, but the area was definitely inhabited by 1800 BCE. For hundreds of years conflicts raged between rival groups in the region, with Göreme often right in the middle of their warzones, so the residents of the town gave up life on the surface and burrowed deep into the rock to stay away from all the fighting and marauding. Visitors can explore settlements connected by tunnels, and discover the many 10th- and 11th-century rock churches carved after Christians brought their religion to the area in the time of the Roman Empire. Right in the centre of the region is the Göreme open-air museum, home to rock monasteries and the most impressive of the carved churches. Entrance is 25 lira – around £3.40 (\$4.30).

Göreme National Park is as amazing above ground as it is below, full of curious structures known as fairy chimneys or hoodoos. The natural rock formations, once believed to be home to mythical creatures, are the region's most recognisable feature – make sure you have plenty of space on your camera or phone before you visit, because there are photo opportunities everywhere you go.

There are a multitude of ways to see the park. Tour buses will take you to the popular

sights and viewpoints, while guided horse treks venture off the beaten track and are perfect for adventurous visitors. If you want to explore at your own pace, set out on foot and follow the paths weaving through the valleys and between the fairy chimneys. To see the landscape in its full glory, head up in a hot air balloon; this has become one of Göreme's must-do activities, and you'll see balloons dotting the sky all year round.

Once you've had your fill of the settlements and the landscape, turn your attention to culture and cuisine. A stay in Göreme is the perfect opportunity to try Turkey's food and wine, and to learn about the multitude of empires and societies that have called the area home. A popular traditional local meal is the testi (or pottery) kebab, a meat and vegetable dish cooked slowly in a sealed clay pot.



Explore the ancient cave towns across the park. Some caves have even been turned into hotels



**LOCATION** Turkey

**AREA** 99km<sup>2</sup> ★ 38mi<sup>2</sup>

### HIGHLIGHTS

- ★ Take in the view from a hot air balloon
- ★ *Immerse yourself in history at the open-air museum*
- ★ Trek on horseback to the places tour buses can't reach

**WEB** NATIONALPARKSOFTURKEY.COM



Göreme's landscape and history make it a top destination for inquisitive travellers

Balloons drift over  
Göreme's extraordinary  
landscape all year round





Gyoko Lakes are the world's highest freshwater lake system



# SAGARMATHA

## TESTAMENT TO THE ENDURING RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN MAN AND MOUNTAIN, SAGARMATHA WHISKS ADVENTURERS TO A LAND OF GIANTS

**A** skyline of snow-capped peaks pierce the cloudless sky, their razor-sharp ridges so recognisably Himalayan. Colourful flags and cups of salty butter tea change hands in ancient villages humming with activity. Home to the highest point on Earth, this is Sagarmatha National Park – a legendary realm of cavernous gorges, glaciated peaks and flowering rhododendron forests. While 14 mountains erupt from this 124,400-hectare (307,399-acre) park in northeastern Nepal, Everest dominates both sky and imagination – its 8,848-metre (29,029-foot) high pyramidal summit escaping above a tangled maze of Khumbu ice.

Amidst the drama, Sagarmatha gently nudges travellers through countless ecosystems. Prayer

wheel-lined trails wind through aromatic forests of blue pine, birch, and silver fir – peppered with alpine flowers and fierce lakes. Red pandas curl up atop bamboo branches, their long, bushy tails wrapped around white-eared heads. Sharing the forests are 118 species of birds, musk deer, Himalayan black bears and langur monkeys. Ascending higher, flora and fauna are replaced by craggy valleys and glaringly blue glacial lakes – stalked by skulking snow leopards come dusk and dawn. In the park's highest reaches, snow and ice blanket origami-fold ridges.

Rugged, mystical and remote, but by no means isolated, over 20 villages and 6,000 Sherpas call Sagarmatha home, just as their ancestors did for centuries before them. Guardians of the park, and the backbone of conservation, they protect not only the land and its wild inhabitants – hunting and slaughter are prohibited – but their ancient culture and religion too. Monk-filled monasteries, whitewashed stupas and curtains of fluttering prayer flags are testament to the enduring communities who inhabit this remote patch.

The grandest of all nature's playgrounds, Sagarmatha can only be explored one way: on foot. For those destined to stand at the feet of giants, the Everest Base Camp (EBC) Trek is most popular, leading hikers straight to the most iconic mountain known to man. Away from the beaten track, a network of alternative trails dissects the park.

A detour from the traditional EBC route, the Gokyo Lakes Trek snakes up through the Dudh



The highest mountain on Earth, Everest straddles the border of Nepal and Tibet

### EVEREST BASE CAMP TREK

While the icy peaks of Everest are out of reach for most, the trail to base camp delivers travellers straight to the heart of the high-altitude Himalaya. Though the 14-day trail begins just outside park limits, it quickly breaks through Sagarmatha's bounds – rolling alongside the creamy-green Dudh Kosi, or 'River of Milk', across rope bridges, before the horseshoe-shaped Sherpa town of Namche Bazaar reveals herself. After a day or two of rest and acclimatisation, the trail climbs to Tengboche, home to unrivalled views of the Ama Dablam range and the park's largest, and most beautiful, monastery. From here, it wanders through Lobuche and Gorak Shep. For those overnighing at the latter, a hike to Kala Patthar should not be missed. As the circuit finally breaks into base camp and the world's tallest mountain comes within touching distance, Everest's peaks remain just as elusive, bathed in pink and cloaked in cloud.



Tengboche Monastery is the largest in Sagarmatha National Park



Donkeys carry food and supplies up to Sagarmatha's villages

Koshi and Khumbu valleys to Gokyo. From here, views of the gigantic grey tongue of Ngozumpa Glacier are matched only by a string of six spectacularly blue lakes, considered sacred by Buddhists and Hindus alike. A steep ascent up Gokyo Ri culminates in an awe-inspiring, 360-degree panorama of the highest peaks on Earth, including Everest, Cho Oyu, Lhotse and Makalu – four of the world's only 14 mountains above 8,000 metres (26,000 feet).

For the truly adventurous, the high-altitude Three Pass Loop is the most challenging in the entire park, propelling hikers into the granite and limestone mouths of the Cho-La, Kongma-La and Renjoy-La passes – each one standing over 5,300 metres (17,500 feet) high.

**LOCATION** : Nepal

**AREA** : 1,244km<sup>2</sup> ★ 480mi<sup>2</sup>

### HIGHLIGHTS

- ★ Nangkar Tshang rewards experienced climbers with views over the Khumbu Valley
- ★ **Spin prayer wheels as you pass them**
- ★ Novice climbers should head to Island Peak

**WEB** : SAGARMATHANATIONALPARK.GOV.NP



Though resembling karst, the pillars are actually made of quartz sandstone and formed via physical erosion

## ★ ZHANGJIAJIE ★

### THIS MOUNTAINOUS PARADISE IN CHINA IS A FEAST FOR THE EYES

**A** natural wonderland perfect for a fantasy-inspired getaway, Zhangjiajie National Forest Park is a jaw-droppingly stunning mountainous region with views to die for. Located in northwest Hunan in China, it was recognised as the country's first national forest park in 1982. Once you set eyes on it, you'll understand why. This subtropical dreamscape is filled with dense, lush forests, verdant valleys, beautiful streams, crystal-clear waterfalls, incredible rock formations, endless caves and sheer cliffs. The park's landscape has not only filled the imaginations of Chinese painters over the centuries, but its towering, quartz-sandstone pillars also inspired *Avatar's* Hallelujah Mountains. The most magnificent of them all is the 1,080-metre-high (3,543-foot-high) pillar called the Southern Sky Column.

Hike up to Huangshi Village early in the morning to reach the mythical stone pillars. Though the thousands of stone steps might be a slog, seeing the pillars rising slowly out of the rolling mist is well worth the exercise! Take a cable car back down for an easy descent.

Then, head down below in the east of the park and you'll end up on the route of the Golden Whip Stream. Spanning 7.5 kilometres (4.6 miles), it is also called 'the most beautiful valley of the world'. With its serene, quiet and winding waterway surrounded by waterfalls and cliffs, it's easy to see why.

Here, you can also be awed by the 3,000 plant species that make up the forest, which covers 98 per cent of the park. You can seek out the wild macaque monkeys, Chinese water deer, and clouded leopard, among other creatures that call the park and the surrounding UNESCO World Heritage Site Wulingyuan Scenic Area home.

For those after an adrenaline hit, the impressive Zhangjiajie Glass Bridge spans two mountains in the park. It has the world's highest bungee jump, at 300 metres (984 feet) above the ground! Brave the heights and you'll be treated to an amazing bird's-eye view of the canyon below. If that's too much excitement, the Bailong Elevator may be a better fit. At 326 metres (1,070 feet) high, this glass lift is the highest and heaviest outdoor lift in the world.



**LOCATION** China

**AREA** 48km<sup>2</sup> ★ 18.6mi<sup>2</sup>

#### HIGHLIGHTS

- ★ Visit the Avatar Hallelujah Mountain that inspired James Cameron's blockbuster
- ★ **Ride the impressive Bailong Elevator to descend into the valley**
- ★ Cross the Zhangjiajie Grand Canyon Glass Bridge

**WEB** [WWW.ZJJ PARK.COM](http://WWW.ZJJ PARK.COM)

# ★ KOMODO ★

## HEAD TO THIS UNIQUE PARK TO DISCOVER INDONESIA'S INCREDIBLE LAND OF DRAGONS

**I** come to the world's largest lizard, the Komodo dragon, Komodo National Park is made up of 29 islands in the centre of the Indonesian archipelago.

Established with the idea of protecting the island's eponymous Komodo dragon, this national park has grown to protect many other marine and land animals, including buffalo, deer, wild boar, monkeys and rats.

The park's three main islands of Komodo, Rinca and Padar make ideal destinations for snorkellers and keen scuba divers, as the surrounding coral reefs support a vast amount of marine diversity. With over 1,000 species of tropical fish, 260 species of coral, and countless marine animals, this is an ideal spot to swim with sharks, manta rays, whales, dolphins and more. This is a world-class location for diving, so if you're visiting Komodo you'll surely want to get on board.

Travelling to Komodo National Park can be done either by catching a ride on an overnight boat, or by an internal flight (the faster option). Fly direct into Labuan Bajo Airport and grab a few nights in the main town before exploring the other islands, beaches and numerous lookouts located throughout the park. Padar viewpoint will blow you away with stunning panoramic views across Komodo. And no visit to the park is complete without seeing the beautiful Pink Beach, a picture-postcard setting featuring clear blue waters, pink sand and pristine coral reefs.

Discovering this park's surreal landscape and its famous 'living dinosaur' reptiles feels almost as though you've travelled back to prehistoric times. Day trips around Komodo start at around £75 (\$95), whereas scuba diving packages can include both diving and hiking options, which offer great value for money when visiting this one-of-a-kind park.

**LOCATION** Indonesia

**AREA** 1,733km<sup>2</sup> ★ 669mi<sup>2</sup>

### HIGHLIGHTS

- ★ Hike up Lawa Darat Gili for breath-taking scenic views
- ★ **Swim with manta rays at Manta Point**
- ★ Photograph Komodo Dragons on Rinca

**WEB** [KOMODONATIONALPARK.ORG](http://KOMODONATIONALPARK.ORG)



The rugged terrain of Komodo is unmistakable, with many viewpoints looking over sandy beaches and islands





Sitting in the country's southwest, Naejangsan sprawls 8,160ha (20,189ac) across forests, valleys and mountain ridges

# ★ NAEJANGSAN ★

## UNTAMED RIVERS AND ANCIENT TEMPLES DOT KOREA'S MAPLE-LEAF PARADISE, WHICH BURSTS INTO COLOUR EVERY AUTUMN

**H**idden within Naejangsan National Park's ruffled panorama of maple forests and mountain passes lie ancient temples and crystalline waterfalls. Deep in the southwest corner of South Korea, the park's namesake mountain rises from the ground like a city skyline, cloaked in verdant forests of ginko, giant dogwood, elm and alien oak. But come autumn, maple trees are the undisputed stars of the show, when they burst into a kaleidoscope of fiery hues.

More than 1,880 animal species call this pocket of wild greenery home, including the black and gold yellow-throated marten and occasional wild boar, depending on the season. This ever-changing Korean hinterland finds constancy in its 11 ancient temples – a living reminder of the area's storied past. Peeking out from behind a curtain of nutmeg and bija trees, the majestic 7th-century Baegyangsa Temple nestles organically between mountain and valley.

Protected within its bowels are gilded Buddhas and blue-faced Heavenly Kings. Here, before sunrise each day, 50 or so monks and nuns gather for prayer, chanting in the moonlight as they have done for centuries. Offering temple stays, Baekyangsa gives guests a glimpse of monastic life – a lucky few may even sample temple cuisine prepared by the monastery's most famous resident, the Zen Buddhist monk Jeong Kwan. Dubbed 'the philosopher chef', she's garnered attention from Michelin-star names the world over for her exceptional vegan food.

Further north, a crown of towering peaks encircles the colourful Naejangsa Temple. Once a sprawling complex with more than 50 buildings, it was destroyed during the Japanese invasion of 1597 and again in the Korean War, and largely reconstructed in the 1970s. Nearby, a stunning blue and green pavilion floats atop a fish-filled lake. According to local legend, the pavilion once grew wings, and flew to heaven.

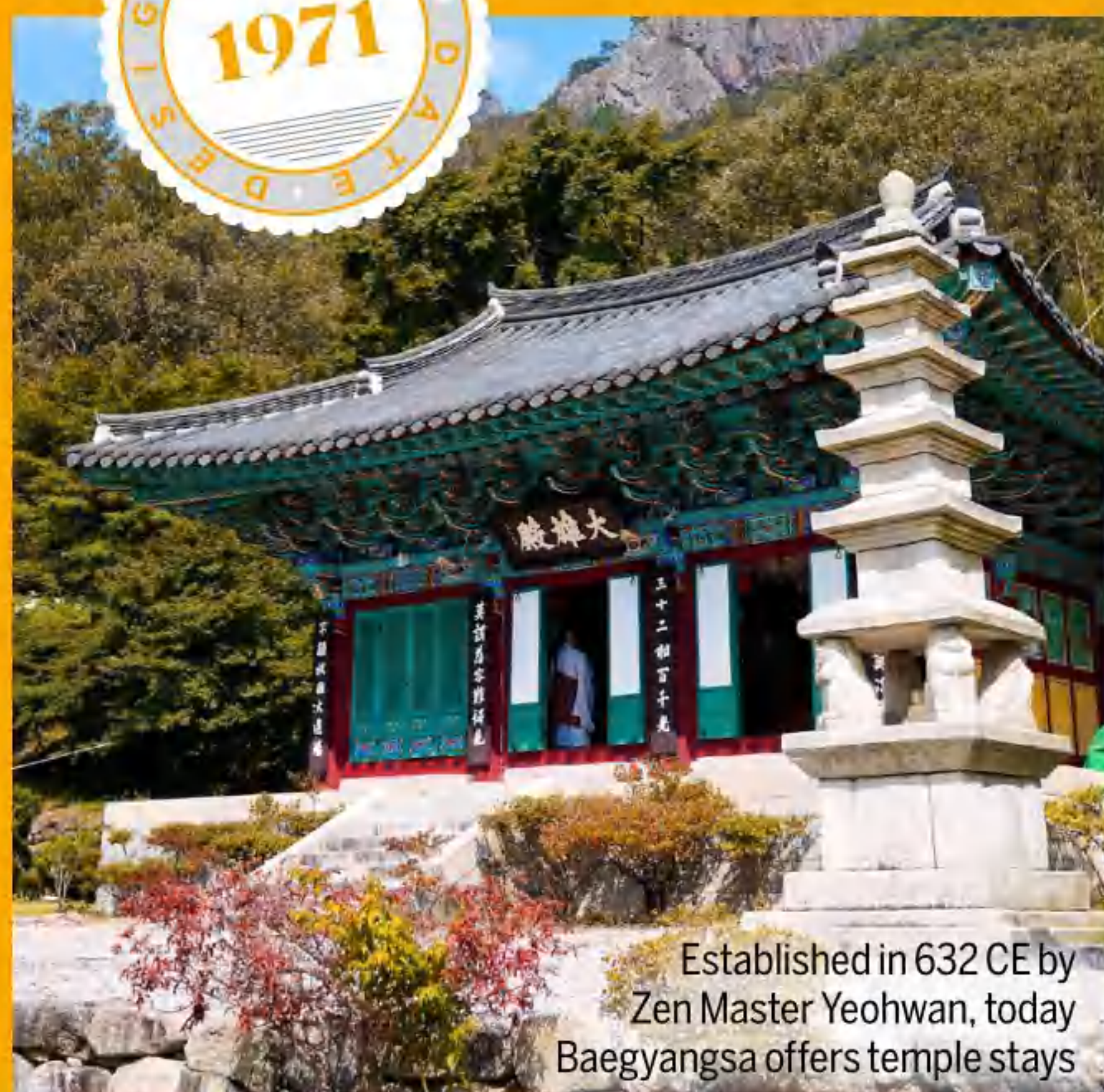
Linking temples, mountains and waterfalls, a number of trails snake through the park. Not for the faint of heart, the punishing Ridge Circuit traces Naejangsan Mountain's almost-circular rim, taking in all eight of its peaks. At 11 kilometres (seven miles) long, it rewards with magnificent views over the lush valley below.

Alternatively, the Baekyangsa Walking Trail begins at Baekyangsa Temple, before passing through Yeongcheongul Cave. A steep ascent leads hikers to Naejangsa Temple and the summit of Sangwangbong, in the less travelled south of the park. A spider's web of shorter routes, like the Geumseon Gorge and Nature Observation trails, mean smaller sections of the circuit can be done if time is limited. Geumseon Falls, where the gods are said to have bathed, and 108 Danpung Tunnel, a path lined with 108 maple trees, should not be missed. Alternatively, the fastest way to see large swathes of the park is by cable car, which whisks guests to Yeonjabong Peak's observatory.

Roughly 1,880 animal species call Naejangsan home, including the yellow-throated marten



© Alamy



Established in 632 CE by Zen Master Yeohwan, today Baekyangsa offers temple stays

**LOCATION** South Korea

**AREA** 81.6km<sup>2</sup> ★ 31.5mi<sup>2</sup>

### HIGHLIGHTS

- ★ Learn to cook with Jeong Kwan at Baekyangsa Temple
- ★ **Stand atop Sinseongbong for unrivalled views of the valley**
- ★ Discover the ancient art of shinrin-yoku, or forest bathing

**WEB** ENGLISH.KNPS.OR.KR

## AUTUMN IN NAEJANGSAN

Considered one of the most magical places to witness the leaves change, Naejangsan's red carpet event happens each year from late October to mid November, when the forest's leaves turn shades of crimson, turmeric and mustard. Crowds will be heavy and the atmosphere merry, as friends share plates of steaming pork and cups of makgeolli, local rice wine. Travellers should make a pitstop at Naejang Village, close to the park entrance, to stock up on snacks, drinks and delicious local food like bibimbap, a rice dish topped with vegetables, a raw egg, chilli, soy sauce and fermented soybean paste.



Naejangsan is particularly popular from late October to mid-November, when its peaks are painted red and orange

# ★ SUNDARBANS ★

## A NATURE RESERVE THAT BRIDGES LAND AND SEA, THE WORLD'S LARGEST MANGROVE FOREST IS ONE OF THE LAST REMAINING BASTIONS FOR TIGER ROYALTY

**M**angroves may not get as much attention as other under-threat ecozones, such as rainforests and coral reefs, but they are nevertheless vital, providing a safe haven for all manner of animals and also acting as both a buffer and filter between land and ocean. The largest single expanse of coastal mangrove on Earth is the Sundarbans, which borders the Bay of Bengal.

Best visited between November and February, when temperatures are more bearable and the monsoon rains have let up, people flock here for the rich biodiversity. Forget the traditional jeep or hiking boots – the only way to navigate this vast delta is by water. Single-day and multi-day boat safaris can be boarded on the Rupsha River, which runs through the Bangladeshi city of Khulna – one-day cruises start from around 8,400 takas (£80/\$100) per person, or slightly less for groups. If visiting from the Indian side, make your way to the island of Sajnekhali where you can purchase permits from the Forest Department office; entrance passes cost 200 rupees (£2.30/\$2.90) per day. To venture into the park, you're also obliged to hire a guide. Don't leave Sajnekhali before enjoying some of its famed birdlife, including kingfishers, lapwings, sea eagles and pelicans.

Undoubtedly at the top of everyone's Sundarbans wildlife-spotting wish list is the Royal Bengal tiger – the poster-star of the park. Just be aware that declining numbers, along with their incredible camouflage, mean that sightings require a dash of luck. Be consoled by the fact that the tigers share their realm with saltwater crocodiles, river dolphins, sea turtles, macaques, fishing cats, a wealth of avifauna and much more besides.

Scattered across the reserve are several strategically placed watchtowers where you can give your sea legs a break. Burirdabri is accessed via bridges and a stepping-stone cage trail (enabling you to see mud-based critters, such as crabs, up close), and its elevated platform overlooks the India-Bangladesh border. The site of the more-frequented Netidhopani tower boasts the added bonus of the ruins of a temple dedicated to the Goddess of Snakes, dating back more than four centuries.

About six hours' boat ride away from Sajnekhali, just beyond the boundary of the national park in the mouth of the Bidyadhari River, is Bonnie Camp. Offering a real Robinson Crusoe feel, there's a small lodge where you can stay overnight (book in advance via India Beacons Sojourn: [www.sunderbans.in](http://www.sunderbans.in)). With no electricity at the camp (only solar lights), and surrounded by water and mangrove forest, it's a

**LOCATION** Bangladesh & India

**AREA** 10,000km<sup>2</sup> ★ 3,861mi<sup>2</sup>

### HIGHLIGHTS

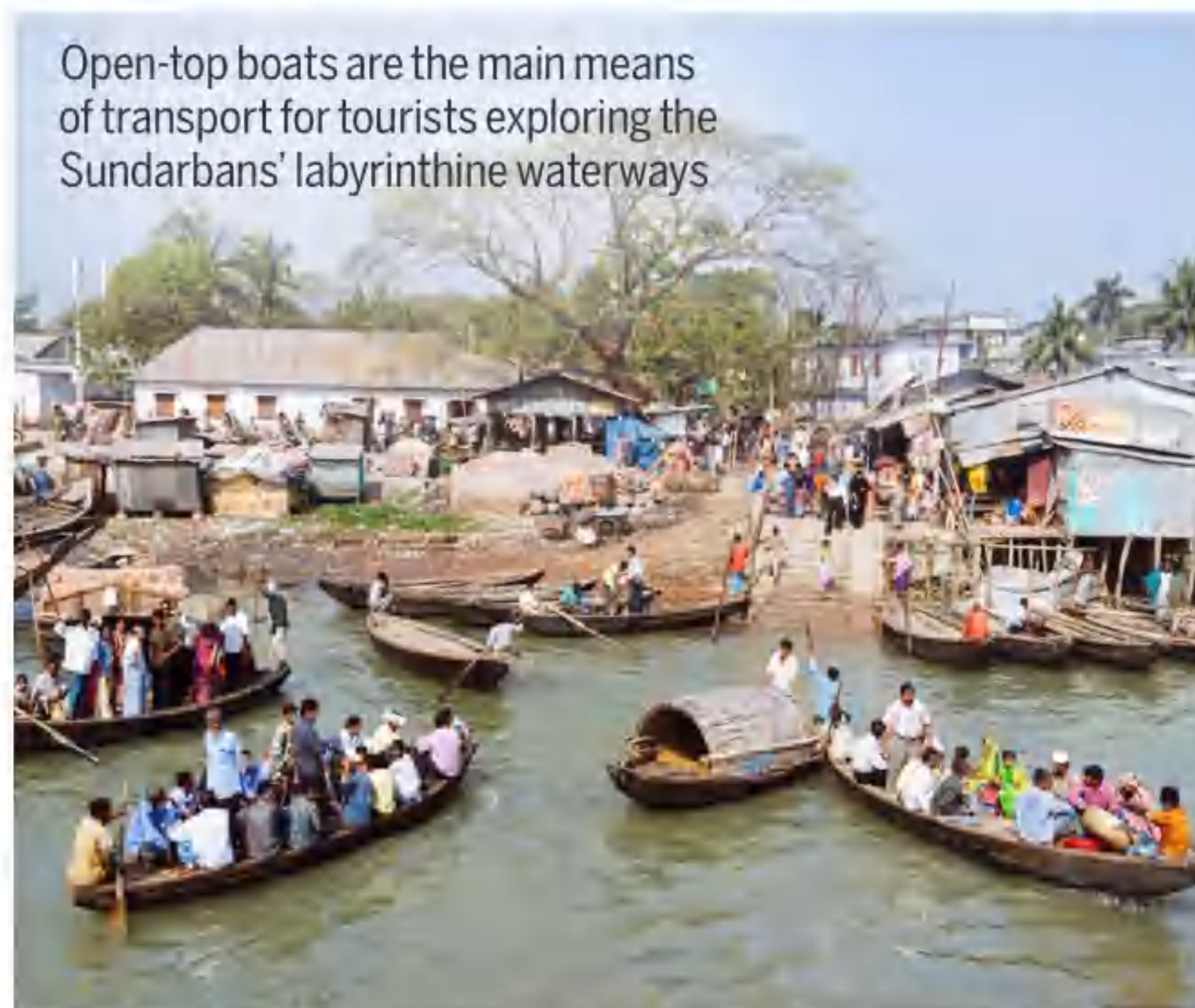
- ★ Go on a mangrove boat safari
- ★ *Discover a long-lost temple*
- ★ Join pilgrims at a holy festival

**WEB** [SUNDERBANS-NATIONAL-PARK.COM](http://SUNDERBANS-NATIONAL-PARK.COM)

total escape. It lays claim to the tallest of all the area's watchtowers too, standing in excess of 15 metres (50 feet) high.

No trip to the Sundarbans would be complete without experiencing that awe-inspiring sunset over the Bay of Bengal, so set aside at least one evening on a beach like Kotka or Jamtola to capture that Instagram-moment showstopper.

Open-top boats are the main means of transport for tourists exploring the Sundarbans' labyrinthine waterways



Sundarbans National Park is a vast delta made up of swathes of mangrove forest, creeks, beaches, grassland and mudflats

### HOLY WATER

The Sundarbans isn't all about wildlife. If you're visiting around mid-January, you must attend the Gangasagar Mela. The annual event, conducted on the day of Makar Sankranti in honour of the Hindu sun god, sees hundreds of thousands of devotees descend on Sagar Island. Overseen by holy men known as sadhus, the pilgrims bathe in the shallow waters of the revered River Ganges to wash away their sins and bring good fortune for the coming year. The sheer scale of this festival is hard to comprehend – indeed, it's the second-largest gathering of people anywhere on the planet, second only to the Kumbh Mela pilgrimages that also take place in India, except they only occur every 12 years.



At the 2019 Gangasagar Mela, some 900,000 people were estimated to take part in the spiritual cleansing in the Ganges estuary



In total, there are estimated to be just over 200 Bengal tigers living in the Sundarbans, so spotting one requires patience, a sharp eye and a bit of good fortune!



# ★ PHONG NHA-KE BANG ★

**STEP INTO THE WORLD'S LARGEST UNDERGROUND CAVES AND WITNESS AN EXTRAORDINARY MAZE OF RIVERS AND GROTTOS**



**Y**ou'd be forgiven for thinking this was something from a science-fiction film set. Phong Nha-Ke Bang has a combined distance of more than 120 kilometres (62 miles) of underground river systems and caves, making its impressive limestone karst ecosystem one of the largest protected landscapes in all of Southeast Asia.

Located in the Quang Binh Province of central Vietnam, on the border to Laos, this ancient ecosystem was said to have formed roughly 400 million years ago. With approximately 300 caves and grottos making up this vast national park, Phong Nha-Ke Bang is not to be missed. A massive system of eroded limestone stalactites and stalagmites, some 50 metres (164 feet) in height, adorn many of the cavernous spaces found underground here. Exploring these epic cave systems is best undertaken by boat as part of a guided tour.



Accessible by boat, the national park's caves and grottos hide under several tall mountain peaks

## BOOK A CAVE ADVENTURE

When it comes to booking yourself onto a cave adventure, specialist tour operators will take care of everything. For gigantic caves, such as Son Doong, expeditions are run by Oxalis Adventure Tours ([oxalis.com.vn](http://oxalis.com.vn)). Half a dozen porters, guides and safety advisors will join you and a group of others in exploring and camping inside the enormous mouth of Son Doong. Trips can include two to three nights camping in the caves and 30 kilometres (18.6 miles) of trekking and cave exploration. This park's otherworldly cave systems, with hidden passages, rock formations and its jungle interior, are fascinating, memorable and surreal. With limited spaces throughout the year, it's a must-see location when visiting Vietnam.



Cave exploration is best done in groups with guides and special equipment close at hand

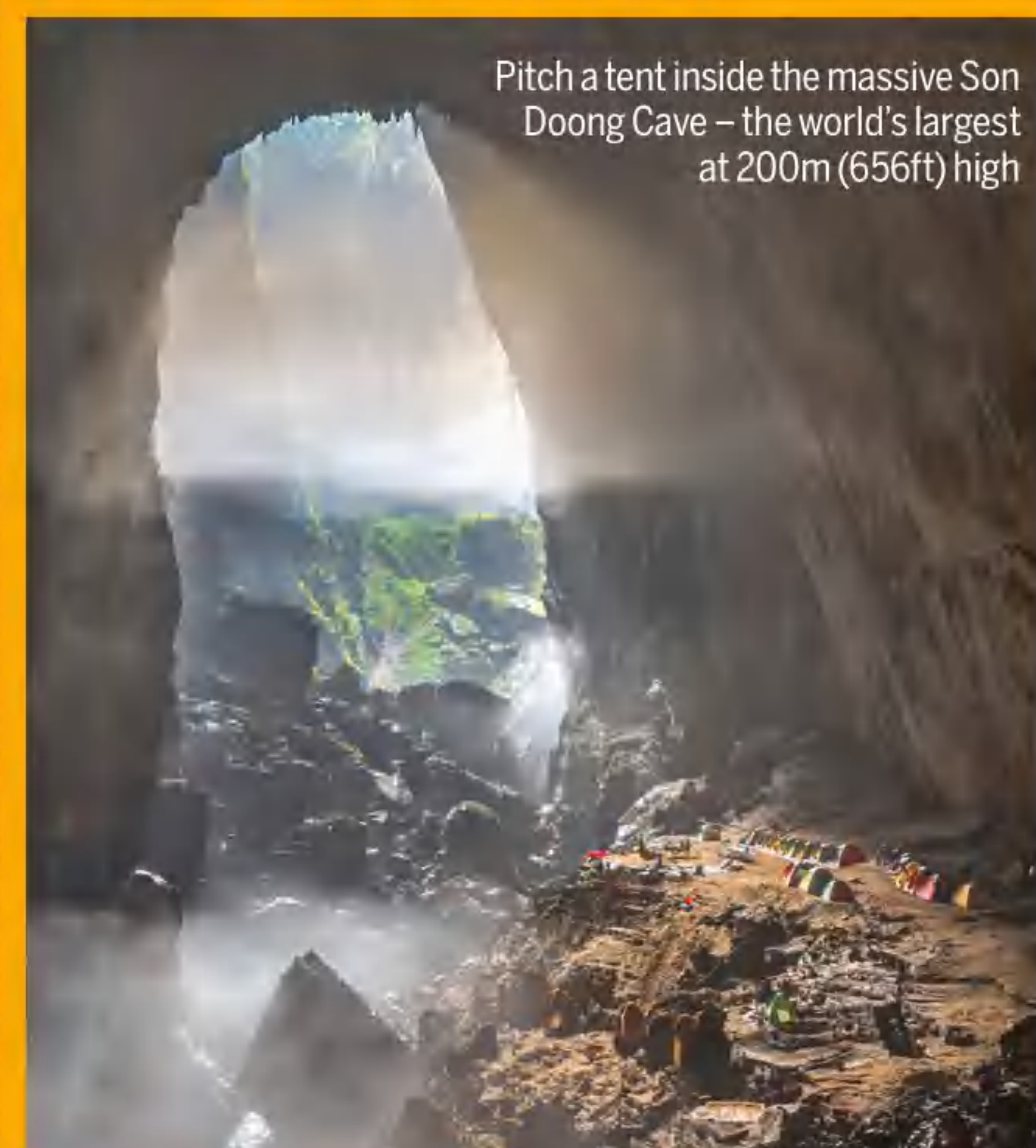
The main attraction in the park is the Son Doong Cave, only relatively recently discovered in 2009 by the British Cave Research Association and Vietnamese explorers. This epic cave takes the title as the world's biggest, and camping down in the cave is the best way to experience its enormity firsthand. Joining an organised tour group is the only way to safely descend into this unfathomably large space.

The Phong Nha Cave, spanning over 7.5 kilometres (4.6 miles) in length, is home to one of the world's longest underground rivers, flowing in total 20 kilometres (12.4 miles) south towards the Pu Pha Dam Mountain. With 14 grottos to explore in total – including the Dark Grotto, which stretches out for five kilometres (3.1 miles) and to a height of 83 metres (272 feet) – this impressive cave system is a sight to behold.

Thien Duong, also known as Paradise Cave, is much larger than others. Featuring towering stalactites and stalagmites and totalling a staggering 31 kilometres (19.2 miles) in length, you will only see the first kilometre or two of the cave. The colossal open spaces are absolutely mind-boggling.

Springs, streams and waterfalls in the park such as Gio waterfall, Madame Loan waterfall, Moc stream and Tra Ang stream are also main attractions. Jungle plants thrive in the cave's unique climate, and when you're not exploring caves, head out on an expedition through the Ke Bang Forest to discover local wildlife. If mountain climbing is more your idea of an adventure, then strap on your boots and gear up to traverse the sloping mountain edges rising to more than 1,000 metres (3,280 feet). To reach Phong Nha-Ke Bang, day tours frequently run out of the city of Hue, located

210 kilometres (130 miles) south of the park. Flights run out of Hanoi to the small airport situated in nearby Dong Hoi, set up to cater for the influx of tourists to the park.



Pitch a tent inside the massive Son Doong Cave – the world's largest at 200m (656ft) high

**LOCATION** Vietnam

**AREA** 857km<sup>2</sup> ★ 331mi<sup>2</sup>

### HIGHLIGHTS

- ★ Look out for inscriptions on the walls made by settlers circa 200 CE
- ★ **Book on to a swim-and-lunch tour through the caves**
- ★ Visit Ban Doong, an ethnic minority village

**WEB** [PHONGNHAKEBANG.VN/HOME](http://PHONGNHAKEBANG.VN/HOME)



Views over the stunning countryside of Vietnam's Phong Nha National Heritage area



## ★ KHAO SOK ★

### JOURNEY INTO ONE OF THE WORLD'S OLDEST RAINFORESTS



**I**t may be Thailand's rainiest spot, but that's the secret behind Khao Sok's lush rainforest, waterfalls, limestone cliffs and emerald-coloured lake. The region is one of the oldest ecosystems in the world, dating back 160 million years, with an incredible array of wildlife, from Malayan sun bears and clouded leopards, to mouse deer and elephants. It's also famous for the Bua Phut – the flower with the world's largest bloom, measuring up to 100 centimetres (39 inches) in diameter.

Khao Sok is a nature lover's dream, and while it's possible to explore the jungle along the bamboo-lined trails, it's better to hire a local guide who will share their knowledge of the magnificent flora and fauna around you. There's even more to see and hear at night, as the jungle comes alive with nocturnal critters. You might spot a shy mouse deer, the smallest

hoofed mammal in the world; the flicker of a firefly or one of the park's many bat species, including the flying fox which has a wingspan of 1.5 metres (4.9 feet).

In the middle of the park is the beautiful Cheow Lan Lake, surrounded by awe-inspiring mountains. You would never believe these glistening waters were actually formed in 1987 after the construction of a dam caused the area to flood. Stay the night in one of the floating bungalows – authentic Thai raft houses where you can wake to the call of exotic birds, take a dip in the tranquil waters and hear the calls of gibbons from the rainforest. Then board a Thai longtail boat for a day trip around the lake and have dinner on a floating restaurant. There are also several limestone caves to explore including Tham Si Ru, which was once used as a hideout by communist insurgents, and Tham Khang Khao, an ancient bat cave.

**LOCATION** Thailand

**AREA** 739km<sup>2</sup> ★ 285mi<sup>2</sup>

#### HIGHLIGHTS

- ★ Go on a nighttime safari tour to see the jungle come alive
- ★ ***Kayak down the river (and take a camera with you)***
- ★ Experience a jungle cooking class with a Thai family

**WEB** [KHAOSOK.COM](http://KHAOSOK.COM)

# ★ FUJI-HAKONE-IZU ★

## NATURE AND CULTURE COLLIDE IN FUJI-HAKONE-IZU NATIONAL PARK, WHERE BEACHES, VOLCANOES AND ART GALLERIES RUB SHOULDERS

**S**tudded with natural hot springs, glittering lakes, must-see museums and volcanic islands, Fuji-Hakone-Izu National Park is a scenic and varied wonderland. Sitting southwest of Tokyo, the 122,700-hectare (303,198-acre) park unfolds across five distinct areas: Mount Fuji, Fuji Five Lakes, Hakone, Izu Peninsula, and the Izu Islands.

Notoriously shy and often cloud-covered, Mount Fuji, or Fujisan, reveals herself only to a lucky few. Immortalised by poets and artists for centuries, the volcanic peak can be climbed in July and August, during official climbing season. However, the gruelling scramble to the top, through an apocalyptic, barren landscape, is not for everyone. For grandstand views of the iconic peak without the climb, travellers head to Fuji Five Lakes. With lakeside activities like fishing and kayaking, and hiking trails aplenty, it's a brilliant base from which to explore the park.

Famed for its onsen hot springs, Hakone is home to a number of thermal spas. A cultural phenomenon, guests spend the day hopping between steaming baths and outdoor pools set among manicured gardens. Easily accessible, the area also offers popular day trips where convenience is king: a cable car glides up hillsides and over steaming craters while pirate-style boats ferry tourists across Lake Ashi, for the chance to spot Mount Fuji.

For a dose of culture, the Hakone Open Air Museum presents a collection of sculptures and installations by Japanese artists, as international names like Rodin and Miró, scattered across its gardens. When it rains, the Picasso Pavilion – housing more than 300 of his works – is an ideal wet-weather escape.

Further south, jutting into the Pacific Ocean, Izu Peninsula unfolds in a landscape of white-sand beaches, lava cliffs, waterfalls and scalloped coves – etched out over millions of years of erosion. While the sea calls water babies to swim, scuba dive and surf, trails, temples and onsen resorts offer plenty of activities to entice the landlubbers.

Just off the coast, the mostly-dormant peaks of submerged volcanoes pierce the tropical blue water. The archipelago, known as Izu Islands, is home to fresh seafood, high-octane water sports, dramatic scenery and giant forests. Drawing divers, hikers and whale watchers alike, nine of the islands are inhabited, with Oshima the most accessible.



Japan's highest peak, Mount Fuji draws about 200,000 people to its summit each year

— ASIA & OCEANIA —

**LOCATION** Japan

**AREA** 1,227km<sup>2</sup> ★ 473.7mi<sup>2</sup>

### HIGHLIGHTS

- ★ Eat a black egg in Hakone for a longer life
- ★ **Climb Mount Kintoki for panoramic views of Fujisan**
- ★ Visit Enoura Observatory, a mixed-use arts complex overlooking Sagami Bay



**WEB** FUJIHAKONEIZU.COM

In autumn the forests  
are awash with colour  
as the leaves turn



# ★ JIUZHAIGOU VALLEY ★

## DISCOVER THIS HAVEN OF TIBETAN CULTURE AND NATURAL BEAUTY IN THE HEART OF CHINA



**O**n any list of the world's most beautiful places, China's Jiuzhaigou Valley National Park shouldn't be far from the top. Located in Sichuan Province in southwestern China – about 450 kilometres (280 miles) from the nearest city, Chengdu – its blend of natural beauty, tranquillity and simplicity makes it the perfect place to come down from the hustle and bustle of modern life.

Also called the Jiuzhai Valley, the area gets its name from the presence of nine Tibetan villages that are inside the park. Seven of these are still occupied and well worth visiting in themselves to get a glimpse of life in rural China.

The only thing that can be an ordeal is getting to Jiuzhaigou. If you choose to go by bus, it is an 11-hour ride from Chengdu. That journey can be cut down to 40 minutes, though, by flying from Chengdu into Jiu Huang Airport, which is only about 88 kilometres (55 miles) from the valley. You can also fly in from other major Chinese cities, and a train line is due to open in 2019 offering journeys from Chengdu to Jiuzhaigou in two hours.

Still, once you arrive at the park, the wondrous sights will more than make up for the effort you put into the journey. Aside from its traditional villages, Jiuzhaigou Valley is renowned for magical waterfalls that range from the charmingly bucolic to the spectacular. The lakes are equally amazing, particularly Five Flower Lake, which has crystal-clear turquoise water through which you can easily see dead trees lying on the bottom. The park's forests, meanwhile, are lush and resplendent, especially in the autumn when the leaves turn a dazzling array of colours.

Yet, despite its unspoiled beauty, the park is well set up for tourists. There are comfortable



The park is renowned for its forests, lakes, mountains and magical waterfalls that will make you feel like you are in a fantasy world

and convenient accommodations ranging from quaint inns to luxury 5-star hotels not far from the entrance. The park is easy to get around too thanks to the tourist buses. Going it alone is possible but is not recommended unless you are confident in your navigation and completely fluent in Tibetan.

Something else to be aware of is the risk of altitude sickness due to the high elevations. The entrance is about 2,000 metres (6,562 feet) above sea level. That's around 700 metres (2,297 feet) higher than the summit of Ben Nevis. Thanks to the stunning mountain vistas that make the valley what it is though, the only way your visit will take you is up.



Five Flower Lake is one of the highlights of the park

### TIMELESS TIBET

The Tibetan people who live in the villages of the park are hanging on to their traditions despite the influx of tourists. Most still speak the Tibetan language and practise a form of Tibetan Buddhism. Parts of the park are sacred, and according to traditional belief its dazzling lakes were once pieces of a mirror that shattered after it was dropped to Earth by a goddess. Yet, alongside these ancient customs and beliefs the locals have welcomed the outside world. In the villages of He Ye, Shu Zheng and Ze Cha Wa they have taken to selling snacks to hungry travellers or making crafts that tourists can buy as souvenirs.



In English the name of the park means 'Nine Village Valley'

**LOCATION** China

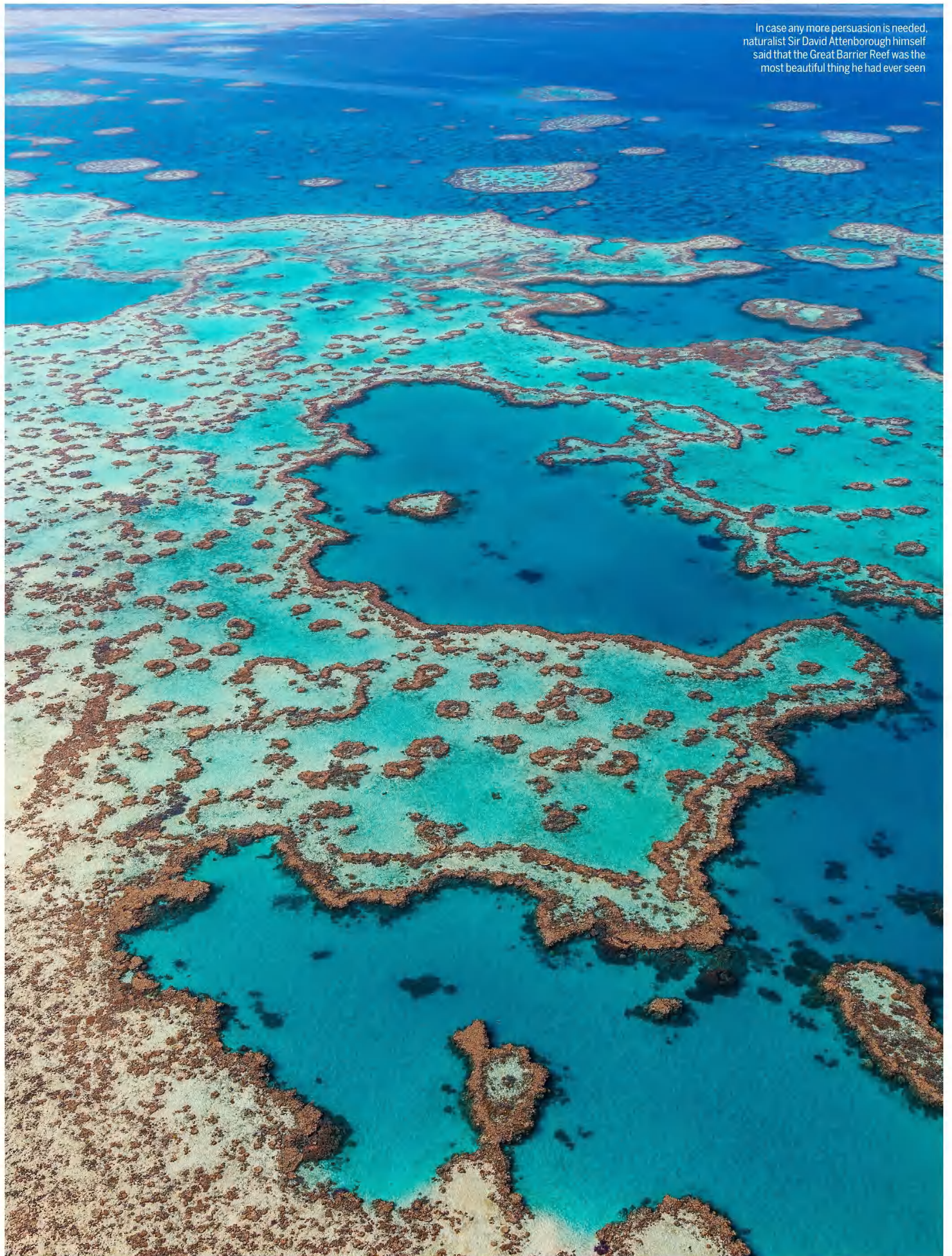
**AREA** 720km<sup>2</sup> ★ 278mi<sup>2</sup>

### HIGHLIGHTS

- ★ Come in September or October to see amazing autumn colours
- ★ **Bring a camera as you might spot a giant panda**
- ★ Pick up some local handicrafts in the Tibetan villages

**WEB** EN.JIUZHAI.COM

In case any more persuasion is needed, naturalist Sir David Attenborough himself said that the Great Barrier Reef was the most beautiful thing he had ever seen



# ★ GREAT BARRIER REEF ★

## AUSTRALIA'S NATURAL WONDER IS EQUALLY STUNNING FROM ABOVE AND BELOW THE WATER

**T**he Great Barrier Reef is the largest living structure on the planet, and the only one visible from space. It stretches over 2,300 kilometres (1,429 miles) off the coast of Queensland, Australia, from Cairns up to the Daintree rainforest, and is made up of 3,000 coral reefs and hundreds of islands. Legendary in its reputation, this wonder of the natural world attracts more than 1.5 million visitors a year.

There's such a huge diversity of marine species in and around the reef that it was named a World Heritage Site in 1981 for its scientific significance, and a large area is protected by the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park. Whether you're viewing it from a glass-bottomed boat or through a snorkel, the life on the reef is breathtaking. 2,000 species of fish dart between bright anemones and lurk on the seabed; sharks drift over the branching coral; and manta rays glide serenely through the

**LOCATION** Australia

**AREA** 343,966km<sup>2</sup> ★ 132,806mi<sup>2</sup>

### HIGHLIGHTS

- ★ Go snorkeling or scuba diving to meet some of the reef residents up close
- ★ **See the reef from above on a plane or helicopter tour**
- ★ Explore some of the region's famous shipwrecks

**WEB** GBRMPA.GOV.AU

water. Seabirds like pelicans fly overhead, and lucky travellers can spot dolphins and whales leaping from the waves.

Experienced divers are spoilt for choice, with seemingly endless reef to explore. The Yongala, a steamer sunk by a cyclone in 1911, now lies 28 metres (92 feet) below the surface and is considered one of the best wreck dives in the world. Those not so used to life in a wetsuit needn't feel left out – snorkeling in the crystal-clear waters is an exhilarating activity available to anyone comfortable in the water. Even visitors happier just looking at the water can experience the reef close up; ReefHQ is the largest living reef aquarium on the planet, with the coral ecosystem replicated on land.

Of course, the best way to see the whole reef is from the air. Helicopters and light aircraft leave from Cairns and Airlie Beach airports to offer breathtaking views of the whole coast. For the daredevils, there's the opportunity to leave the comfort of the plane and skydive over the Whitsunday Islands.

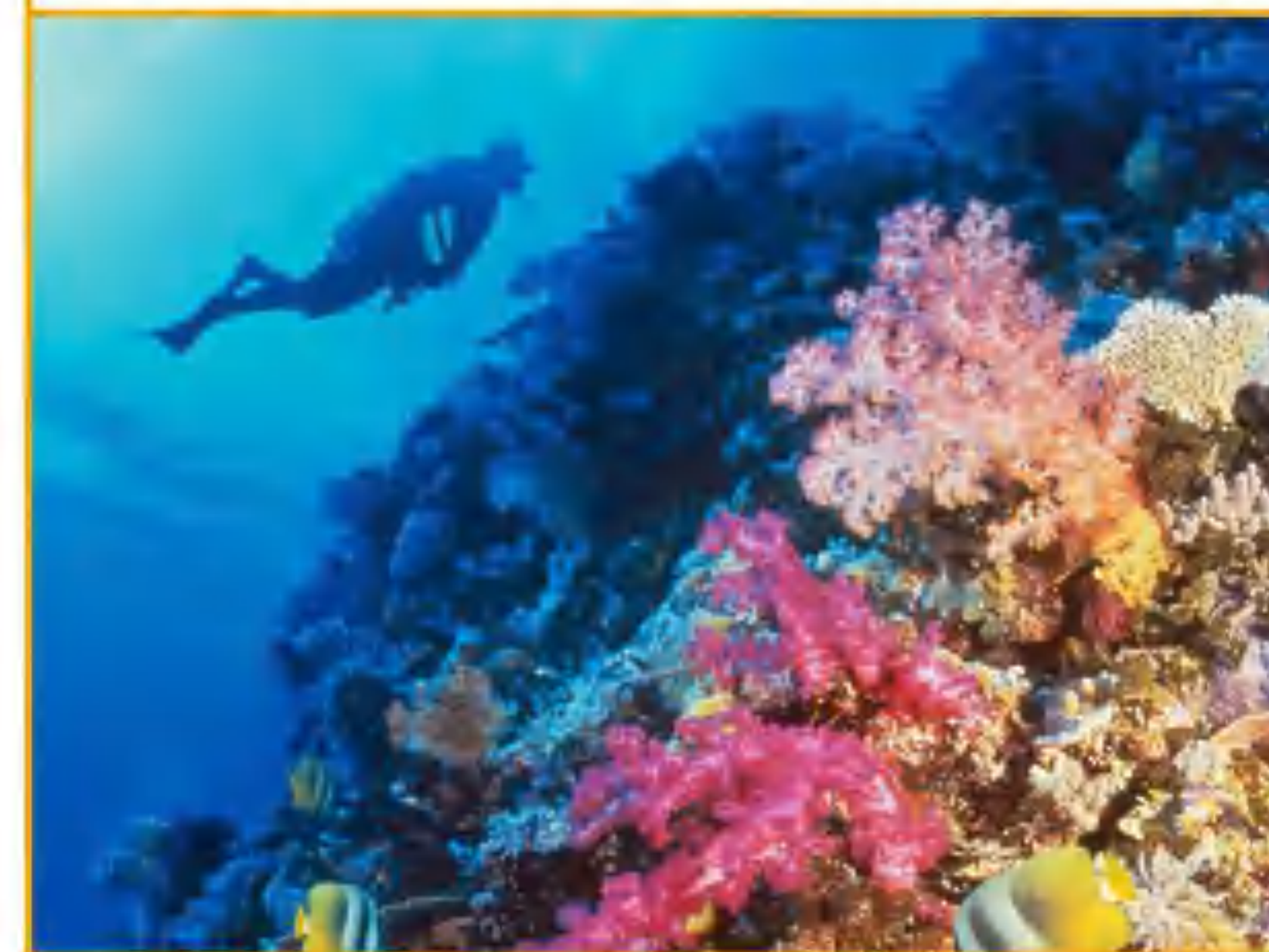
The Whitsundays, 74 idyllic islands scattered across the turquoise water of the reef, are high on the to-do lists of many visitors. Landing at the Whitsunday Coast airport near Proserpine, it's a 25-minute bus journey to Airlie Beach. This resort town is a hive of activity with beaches, swimming areas, nightclubs and a marina full of boats ready to set sail for tours of the islands. Tours can last a few hours or several days depending on your schedule and budget; overnight visitors can camp, stay in island lodges or let the waves send them to sleep in the cabin of a boat. The Great Barrier Reef sits at the top of millions of bucket lists, and with good reason.

### SEE IT UP CLOSE

Diving and snorkelling in the waters of the Great Barrier Reef are wonderful experiences for both the seasoned explorer and those wanting to try it for the first time, and most tour operators will accommodate for both. If you're concerned about swimming through crowded water, don't worry – the reef is vast, and there are many locations for exploring what lies beneath, so you won't be swimming shoulder to shoulder with a stranger.

The water has comfortable temperatures all year round, but what you will see will vary throughout the year. For example, between June and November you have a greater chance of spotting whales.

If you are an experienced scuba diver and want to try something different, you should look into exploring the SS Yongala, a passenger ship that sank in 1911. Some operators may briefly pass by this, but there are others that offer a tour of the wreckage, so make sure you find the best tour operator to suit your needs.



The Great Barrier Reef is teeming with beauty



Six of the world's seven marine turtle species can be found in the Great Barrier Reef



From Airlie Beach you can catch a boat to the reef

# ★ ULURU-KATA TJUTA ★

## MARVEL AT THE MASSIVE MONOLITH AND ROCKY DOMES THAT RISE FROM THE AUSTRALIAN OUTBACK

**L**ocated roughly 460 kilometres (285 miles) from the town of Alice Springs in the heart of Australia's Red Centre, Uluru-Kata Tjuta is a vast, semi-arid desert comprising of two impressive rock formations. The first of these, Uluru (also known as Ayers Rock), is a huge, dome-shaped sandstone monolith standing 360 metres (1,181 feet) above sea level – taller than the Eiffel Tower – and is made up of valleys, caves, ridges, plunge pools and tall grooves. The second formation, Kata Tjuta (or 'many heads', as its name translates), is a formation comprising of 36 rocks that spread out across the vast desert outback.

To get a true sense of the history and culture surrounding these massive rock formations, free guided walks, lasting approximately one and a half hours, come highly recommended. Rangers regale stories of the Mala people and their traditions and how the Anangu culture thrived around the park. Grab a visitor's map and complete the full three-and-a-half-hour circuit of Uluru's base around a 10.6-kilometre (6.5-mile) loop. This is the ideal way to experience and photograph the natural beauty of this giant monolith. A number of hiking routes – varying in difficulty and length – surround the rock formation, passing by rock art, soaring crevices and astonishing geological features.

A 45-minute drive west of Uluru are the domed rock formations of Kata Tjuta. It's well worth grabbing a panoramic glimpse of Kata Tjuta from the Dune Viewing area located just a short drive away from the formation before heading further in to explore. Access

to most areas at Kata Tjuta is restricted, but there are two recommended hiking routes when visiting these incredible domes, starting with the 2.6-kilometre (1.6-mile) Walpa Gorge hike. A rocky path reveals a plethora of plant and animal life. The other walks are combined within the Valley of the Winds, comprising of tracks heading down valleys and creek beds and onto lookout points that'll simply take your breath away. During the midday heat, find some shade to cool down before heading back out in the late afternoon sun to catch the sunset lighting up the formations and turning them a glorious red hue.

Spend a couple of days exploring what's on offer in Uluru-Kata Tjuta, allocating a day to each formation. Hotels are available to book at the nearby Ayers Rock Resort, so staying longer here will give you a greater insight into the culture and historical value of the park.

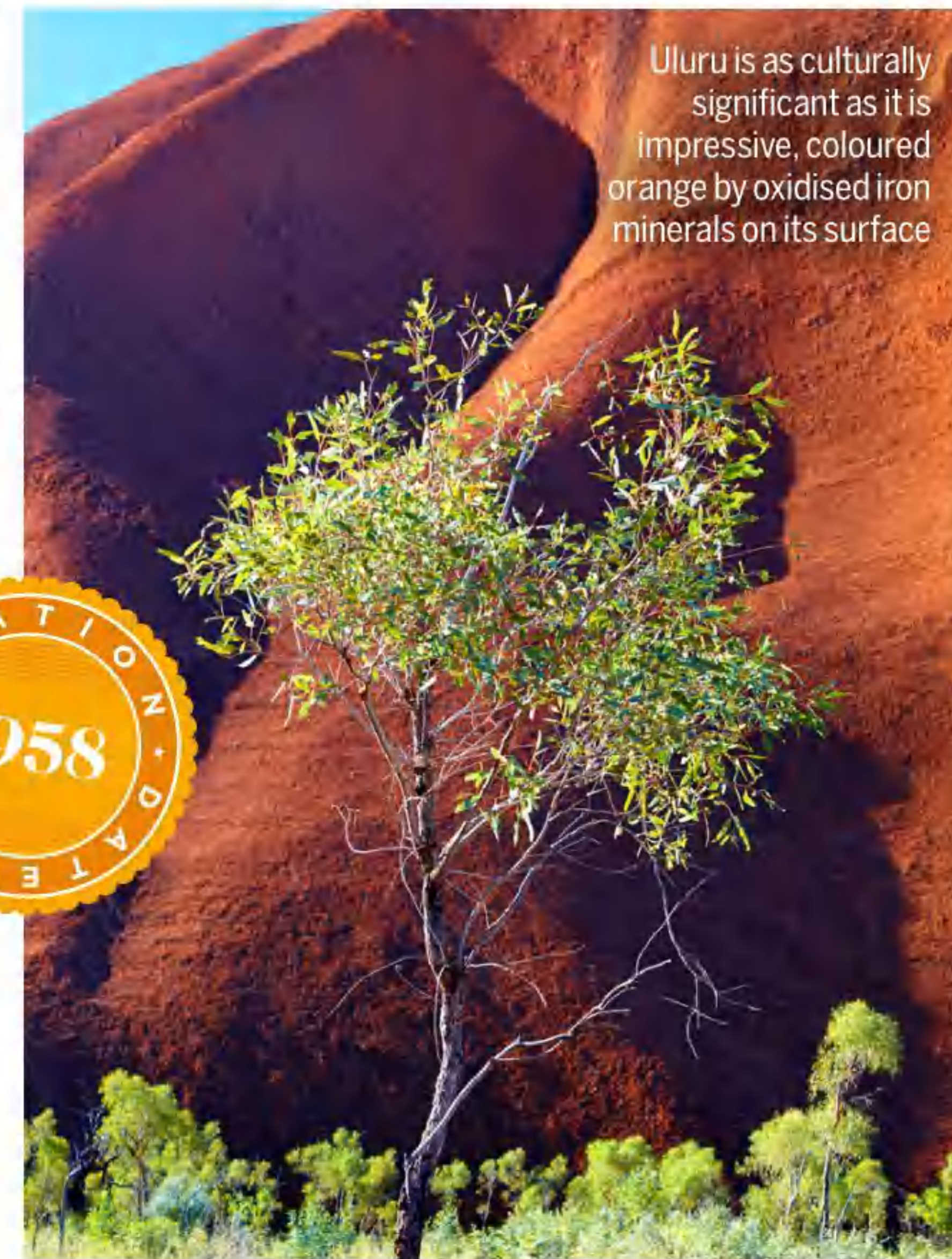
**LOCATION** Australia

**AREA** 1,326km<sup>2</sup> ★ 512mi<sup>2</sup>

### HIGHLIGHTS

- ★ Catch the red rocks glowing at sunset
- ★ *Don't miss out on free guided tours running daily*
- ★ Book a place on a stargazing session

**WEB** [PARKSAUSTRALIA.GOV.AU/ULURU](http://PARKSAUSTRALIA.GOV.AU/ULURU)



Uluru is as culturally significant as it is impressive, coloured orange by oxidised iron minerals on its surface



### SPIRITUAL SIGNIFICANCE

Believed to have been created at the beginning of time by ancestral beings, Uluru-Kata Tjuta has been home to Aboriginal people for roughly 30,000 years. The park is more than just a tourist attraction for travellers, it's a spiritual home for the Anangu people. These huge rock formations play a prominent part in Australian history, when the Australian Parks authority handed back ownership of the park to the Anangu people in October 1985. Travelling here is not complete without learning about bush tucker, rock art and the Tjukurpa creation stories that tell how everything here came to be.



© Alamy

Take a moment to stand back and take stock at the size and shape of these giant monoliths, and you may feel a spiritual presence

Explore the incredible wilderness of Kata Tjuta by hiking around its base





Watch the magnificent Uluru monolith shift its hue to a vibrant red as the sun is setting



# ★ KAKADU ★

## THIS GORGEOUS SAVANNA IS SACRED ABORIGINAL LAND THAT MAKES FOR AN AMAZING CULTURAL EXPERIENCE

**K**akadu is Australia's largest national park, spread over an area that is half the size of Switzerland. It is also a World Heritage Site thanks to its unique archaeological and ethnological importance, granting visitors a fascinating insight into the Aboriginal way of life. Whether you see it on a sunrise cruise, fly above it in a small plane or embark on a local tour across land, you'll almost certainly fall in love with this spiritual landscape.

It is understood that Aboriginal people have lived in Kakadu for more than 65,000 years, and you'll still see many pursuing a semi-traditional lifestyle – hunting, fishing and working the land. The Aboriginal community owns 65 per cent of the park, and their history is recorded in artwork adorning caves, rocks and other sacred locations – there are more than 5,000 art sites across the park.

The oldest paintings are about 20,000 years old, and you can see them in the main rock art galleries open to the public at Ubirr, Nourlangie and Nanguluwurr. Art has traditionally allowed

the people to express their cultural identity, and they show their connection with the environment. Some depict animals that have become extinct and many reflect the beliefs and values of Aboriginal culture. There are those that show the moment Europeans made contact too.

The National Park is also teeming with wildlife, with 280 different types of birds and more than 10,000 saltwater crocodiles, which are referred to as 'salties'. They were once hunted almost to extinction, but they flourish today in their natural environment and spotting them can be fun – so long as you're careful.

Rangers keep their eyes peeled, however, allowing visitors to enjoy the many swimming holes including the plunge pool at Twin Falls, located in the Jim Jim region (although they'll recommend you use the Jabiru swimming pool and those of the resorts, just in case). You can also go bushwalking across many trails, camp and embark on cultural tours, perhaps making time to buy some arts and crafts to help the memories of your trip live forever.

**LOCATION** Australia

**AREA** 19,804km<sup>2</sup> ★ 7,646mi<sup>2</sup>

### HIGHLIGHTS

- ★ Get a bird's-eye view of the park on a plane tour
- ★ **View Aboriginal art at the nearby galleries**
- ★ Don't miss the giant termite mounds

**WEB** [PARKSAUSTRALIA.GOV.AU/KAKADU](http://PARKSAUSTRALIA.GOV.AU/KAKADU)



Ubirr is one of the most famous spots in Kakadu and the views over the Nadab floodplain are jaw-dropping

The imposing Mt Ngauruhoe (used as Mount Doom in *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy) dominates the skyline



— ASIA & OCEANIA —

## ★ TONGARIRO ★

**TAKE THE ALPINE CROSSING TO EXPERIENCE ACTIVE VOLCANOES, EMERALD LAKES AND VIEWS TO DIE FOR**

**N**ew Zealand's oldest national park, Tongariro, is home to three active volcanoes, the largest being Mount Ruapehu, then Mount Ngauruhoe and Mount Tongariro. Along with stunning snow-capped mountains, craters, lakes and waterfalls all play a part in this truly spectacular setting. Spend a couple of days exploring to see everything this park offers.

Famous for the Tongariro Alpine Crossing, a 19.4-kilometre (12-mile) hike that takes you across beautiful landscapes encompassing glorious lakes, gigantic craters and active volcanoes, this epic hike leaves you wanting more. The Alpine Crossing is a big attraction for many travellers because it's an amazing walk that can be done in just one day. Check the weather forecast for the time of year you plan on visiting the park. During the snowy winter months, from May to October, a guide comes highly recommended.

Tongariro also draws in skiers to the area during the winter seasons. The biggest ski area, Whakapapa, covers 5.5 square kilometres (2.1 square miles) and has 15 lifts in all. There are other, smaller resorts in and around the park too, so there's no reason not to take your skis.

The Alpine Crossing forms part of the larger Tongariro Northern Circuit, a 43.1-kilometre (26.8-mile) loop that lasts three to four days. Take in a striking landscape that's steeped in natural and cultural significance, passing by valleys, beech forests, lakes and meadows.

Be sure to book a spot at one of the camping grounds prior to visiting in peak season (October to April) to avoid any disappointment. In low season, it's first come, first served – with the risk of avalanches, this one is not for the inexperienced hikers. What's more, if time is limited, then there are several shorter routes that will give you a taste of the incredible terrain in Tongariro.



**LOCATION** New Zealand

**AREA** 795km<sup>2</sup> ★ 307mi<sup>2</sup>

### HIGHLIGHTS

- ★ Explore the park by renting yourself a mountain bike
- ★ **Get your adrenaline pumping with river rafting**
- ★ See the sights from a chairlift ride

**WEB** NATIONALPARK.CO.NZ

# ★ DAINTREE ★

## PREPARE TO BE BLOWN AWAY BY THE WILDLIFE OF THE DAINTREE RAINFOREST

### WHEN TO VISIT

Tourists come to the park all year round; the best time to visit depends largely on your ability to handle heat and humidity. The high season in Daintree peaks around September and October, when the average temperature is 25°C (78°F) and humidity is moderate. Temperatures climb slightly to 27°C (80°F) in November, making it ideal if you enjoy hot weather and want to avoid the crowds. Over the next few months the heat can become oppressive, reaching highs of 35°C (95°F) and making activities like hiking and cycling difficult, so fewer people visit the area.

As it's part of the Wet Tropics, you're unlikely to avoid showers on a holiday to Daintree. You'll probably be thankful for light rain during a long day of exploring, but it's wise to pack a thin waterproof in case. Make sure you've got sturdy, comfortable shoes so that after rain you can navigate the uneven and potentially slippery terrain without worrying about falling.



If you wilt in the heat, check the average conditions for the month you're planning to visit

**T**ravel north along the coast from Brisbane or Cairns and you'll eventually find yourself in the middle of an ancient rainforest – perhaps the oldest in the world. The Greater Daintree Rainforest has existed for more than 100 million years, resulting in a staggering diversity of plants and creatures.

Over 400 bird species live within the park, including riflebirds, fairy-wrens and the Southern cassowary, one of the largest and heaviest birds on the planet. More than 20 species of reptile can be found in the rainforest, along with 13 different amphibians. Possums, tree kangaroos, bandicoots, echidnas and platypuses are among Daintree's mammal residents, and thousands of beetles, butterflies and other insects fill the forest with colour and movement. While nothing's guaranteed, a walking tour with a local expert will give you the best chance of spotting wildlife, and they'll tell you the story of the forest and its importance as you venture through the trees.

If you need to relax after all that walking in the humid climate, head to Cape Tribulation. The headland has long stretches of relatively unspoiled beach against a backdrop of coastal rainforest, as well as hostels, lodges and a couple of museums. There are plenty of activities available in the area if you've still got energy to spare; try fruit tasting, a four-wheel-drive tour, mountain biking, a mangrove trail or a guided night walk. Crocodile tours and boat trips to the Great Barrier Reef also leave from the cape's beaches.

Mossman Gorge sits at one of the entrances to the park. A suspension bridge crosses Rex

Creek shortly before it joins the Mossman River, and a shuttle takes people from the Mossman visitor centre to the gorge.

Here you can search for more species on one of the looping walking routes, take a dip in the water or learn about the history of the area. The gorge is within the traditional homeland of the Kuku Yalanji, an indigenous Australian people, and it's seen many years of conflict since the first arrival of European settlers and gold prospectors.

Rather than just paddling in rivers or carefully making your way over them, why not take a river cruise? These boat trips give you views of the rainforest that you might miss walking through it, and if you're lucky you'll spot crocodiles and eastern water dragons swimming past. Keep an eye on the banks too – you wouldn't want to miss the flash of a diving kingfisher or the slow movement of a goanna.



The dinosaur-like cassowary can reach a height of 1.9m (6.2ft)

**LOCATION** : Australia

**AREA** : 1,200km<sup>2</sup> ★ 463mi<sup>2</sup>

### HIGHLIGHTS

- ★ Keep your eyes peeled for well-camouflaged animals like leaf-tailed geckos
- ★ **Take a guided walk or river cruise to appreciate the rainforest's full splendour**
- ★ Relax on one of the beaches on the park's coastline

**WEB** : [PARKS.DES.QLD.GOV.AU/PARKS/DAINTREE](http://PARKS.DES.QLD.GOV.AU/PARKS/DAINTREE)



Mossman Gorge has a long and fascinating history that is almost as complex as its biodiversity



The lookout at Mount Alexandra gives spectacular views over the park



Milford Sound and Mitre Peak are the park's most visited features



— ASIA & OCEANIA —

# ★ FIORDLAND ★

## IN A CORNER OF NEW ZEALAND'S SOUTH ISLAND LIES A SLICE OF TRUE WILDERNESS

**S**prawling over 12,607 square kilometres (4,868 square miles) of South Island, Fiordland is the largest of New Zealand's 14 national parks. It forms a substantial part of the Te Wahipounamu World Heritage Site, an area famed for its stunning landscape, and is high up on the bucket list of nature lovers, photographers and hikers heading to the island. Breathtaking in its wildness, Fiordland boasts everything from mountains and lakes to islands and rainforests.

The rocky terrain and steep slopes see limited human activity in the region. Early Maori lived within what is now Fiordland National Park, fishing, hunting and collecting New Zealand jade (also known as pounamu) from the riverbeds. Later, Europeans sealers, whalers and explorers landed on Fiordland's shores seeking either shelter or discovery, but the harshness, isolation and wet weather put most of them off settling. Today, the park and its neighbouring towns have a permanent population of just over 2,000, hugely outnumbered by the tourists hoping to share in the wonder of the area.

**LOCATION** New Zealand

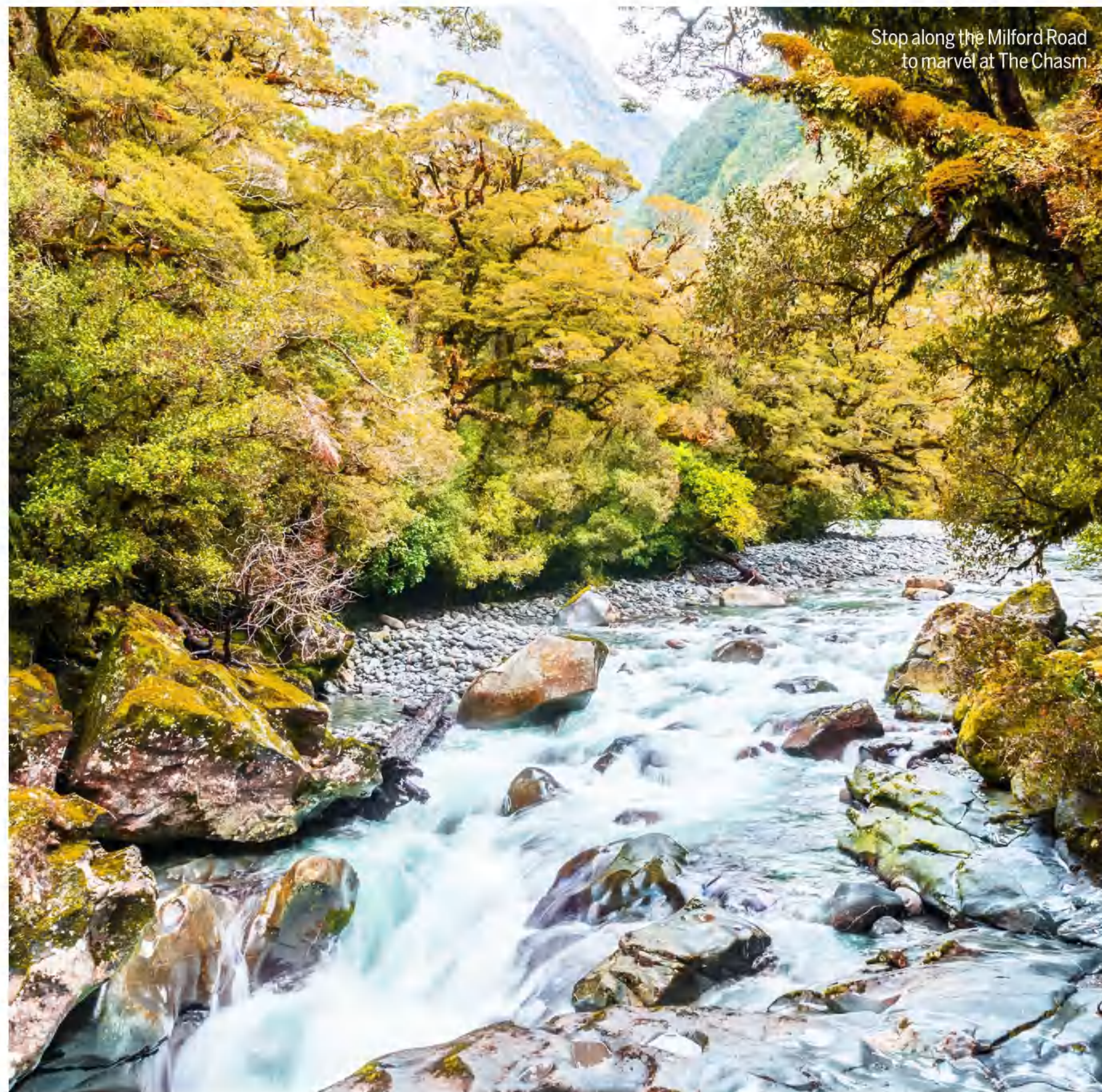
**AREA** 12,607km<sup>2</sup> ★ 4,868mi<sup>2</sup>

### HIGHLIGHTS

- ★ Take a boat trip and see the landscape from the water
- ★ **Watch glow worms sparkling in the caves**
- ★ Bike or hike your way through the mountains

**WEB** [FIORDLAND.ORG.NZ](http://FIORDLAND.ORG.NZ)

As the name suggests, fiords – deep inlets of the ocean flanked by steep cliffs – can be found throughout the park. They were carved out by glaciers when the Earth was in a period of cooling, and they give this corner of South Island its distinctive jagged profile. The most famous of all is Milford Sound (also known



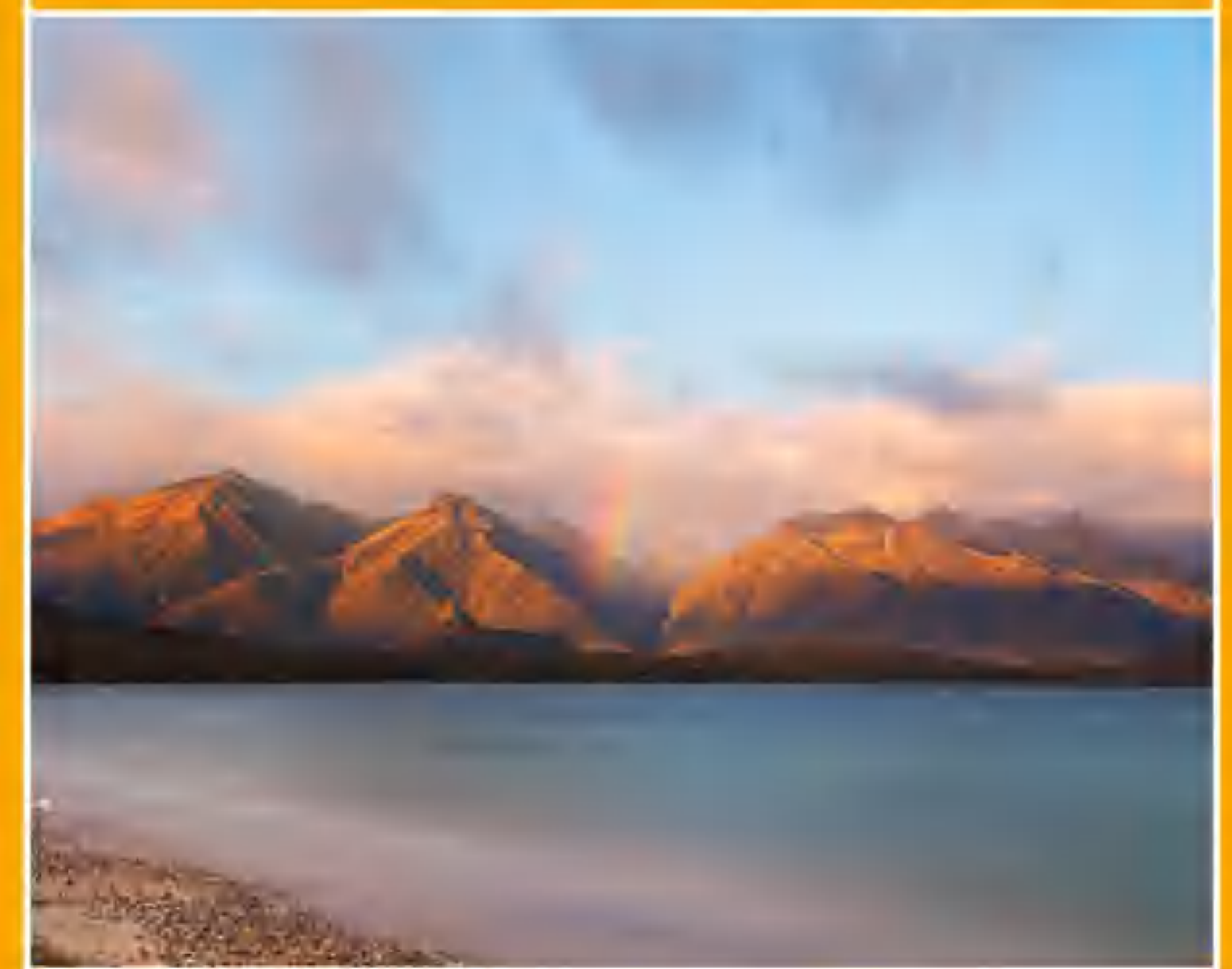
Stop along the Milford Road to marvel at The Chasm

## LAKE MANAPOURI

Surrounded by majestic peaks, vegetation and beaches and dotted with small islands, Manapouri is one of the prettiest lakes in Fiordland. As well as its beauty, the lake is famous as the centre of an environmental debate that raged for years.

Manapouri Hydroelectric Power Station – the largest hydroelectric power station in New Zealand – has been using a 230-metre (750-foot) drop at the lake's western edge to generate electricity since the early 1970s. Early plans involved raising the water level by 30 metres (98.4 feet) to increase power generation for the country's only aluminium smelter, a change that would have flooded the shore and merged Manapouri with Lake Te Anau.

The Save Manapouri campaign fought the plans from 1969 to 1972, until it was agreed that the level would be left unaltered. The high-profile campaign is often cited as the beginning of an environmental movement in New Zealand.



Manapouri's tranquil shores were the subject of fierce debates and campaigning

as Piopiotahi), a 15-kilometre (9.3-mile) fiord surrounded by towering peaks. Rudyard Kipling once described Milford Sound as the eighth Wonder of the World, and Mitre Peak, a 1,692-metre (5,551-foot) tall mountain on the fiord's shore, is one of the most photographed sites in the entire country.

Two waterfalls tumble down the sheer rock faces year round but after heavy rain falls appear all around the fiord. Boat trips, canoe tours and walking paths offer different views of the sound, but you'll need to plan carefully if you want to see it empty and peaceful; up to a million people visit every year, so on a summer afternoon you're unlikely to find a spot that you don't have to share.

Impact shock waves create these fascinating patterns at the base of Stirling Falls

Doubtful Sound, a larger fiord nearby where visitors can see dolphins, penguins and seals, is also very popular, but there are no shortage of fiords to explore if you prefer to keep away from the crowds.



Ancient glaciers carved out the landscape of Fiordland

When the glaciers retreated and the fiords were revealed, several chunks of land were left completely isolated from the mainland. Resolution Island and Secretary Island are large, uninhabited islands visible during boat tours along the coast. Free from the invasive possums and rodents that have decimated wildlife in other parts of the country, these islands are havens for native wildlife. Species extinct or extremely rare on the mainland still flourish on the islands, and they're vital to conservation efforts in the country.

Te Anau is the closest town to the park, and it's where most tourists head when they arrive in the area. The town sits on the shore of Lake Te Anau, where visitors can fish, jet ski, kayak and cycle, and the caves in the surrounding rock are filled with flickering glowworms. There are lots of places to stay in the town, but campsites are dotted throughout Fiordland for those keen to get away from the man-made entirely. The Milford Road between Te Anau and Milford Sound winds between the mountains, providing not only a scenic drive but also viewpoints, stopping points for short walks (some suitable for wheelchair users) and access to campsites. The walk around the Mirror Lakes is often a welcome excuse to get

## THE TAKAHĒ

Fiordland provides habitat for many unusual and threatened species, including a creature so rare it was presumed extinct for 50 years.

The South Island takahē, a large member of the Rail family, is indigenous to New Zealand. Although it was well known to native people, the bird was first described by Europeans in the early 1850s when two specimens were sent to the English palaeontologist Gideon Mantell. After this, only two more birds were collected. The last was caught by a dog in 1898, and when no more specimens were found the species was considered extinct.

In 1948, New Zealand doctor and keen hiker Geoffrey Orbell was leading an expedition close to Lake Te Anau when he spotted a mysterious bird. Photographs taken on the expedition confirmed that Orbell had rediscovered a living population of takahē. Today, the Takahē Recovery Programme helps this population grow by ten per cent per year.



Thanks to protection and reintroduction, over 300 takahē now live in Fiordland



out of the car, as is the footbridge crossing The Chasm, a series of waterfalls that have slowly carved the rock beneath them into unusual twisting shapes.

Hikers, or 'trampers', usually head straight for the mountains rather than the fiords. The Southern Alps run through most of Fiordland, combining with the deep valleys to create a challenging landscape. The Milford Track, a 53.5-kilometre (33.2-mile) trail running between Lake Te Anau and Milford Sound, has been popular since it was first opened in 1889. A 1908 article in the *London Spectator* hailed it as the 'finest walk in the world', securing its spot on the itinerary of almost every walking enthusiast visiting New Zealand. The track can only be completed in one direction, and it's a four-day trip for the average hiker – spaces at the three huts along the trail must be booked well in advance as camping isn't permitted. People are encouraged to attempt the Milford Track only within the Great Walks season (late October to late April), as outside of these months facilities like cooking stoves and water supplies are greatly reduced, weather conditions can become dangerous, and there's a much higher chance of avalanches. Within the Great Walks season, hikers – either travelling independently or led by a guide – can follow in the steps of the thousands who've been before them and marvel at the spectacular views.

With air blown in over the mountains from the Tasman Sea, annual rainfall reaches seven metres (23 feet) in some parts of the park. Summer months are generally better suited to exploring and activities, but downpours can arrive at any time. While this might mean some damp days for visitors, the heavy rain sustains Fiordland's temperate rainforests. Most of the country's largest area of untouched vegetation

***“In 1908 the London Spectator hailed Milford Sound as the ‘finest walk in the world’”***

grows within the park's boundaries, carpeting the rugged landscape with vibrant plant life. Here, ferns uncurl their fronds beneath densely packed beech trees and mosses turn every surface green. As the wildlife here is of such great importance, certain areas of Fiordland are designated Wilderness Areas. Aircraft cannot land in these spaces, so they can usually only be accessed on foot. Bats, birds and insects – including native species now considered endangered – call the forest home, along with introduced creatures like possums and deer.

With scenery to take the breath away, wildlife found nowhere else and exhilarating walks over snow-capped peaks, Fiordland is a destination for those looking to feel wonderfully small in a vast expanse of some of nature's best work.



Dense rainforest brings life to the rugged park



An impressive hiking trail starts by Falls Creek, a cascade waterfall

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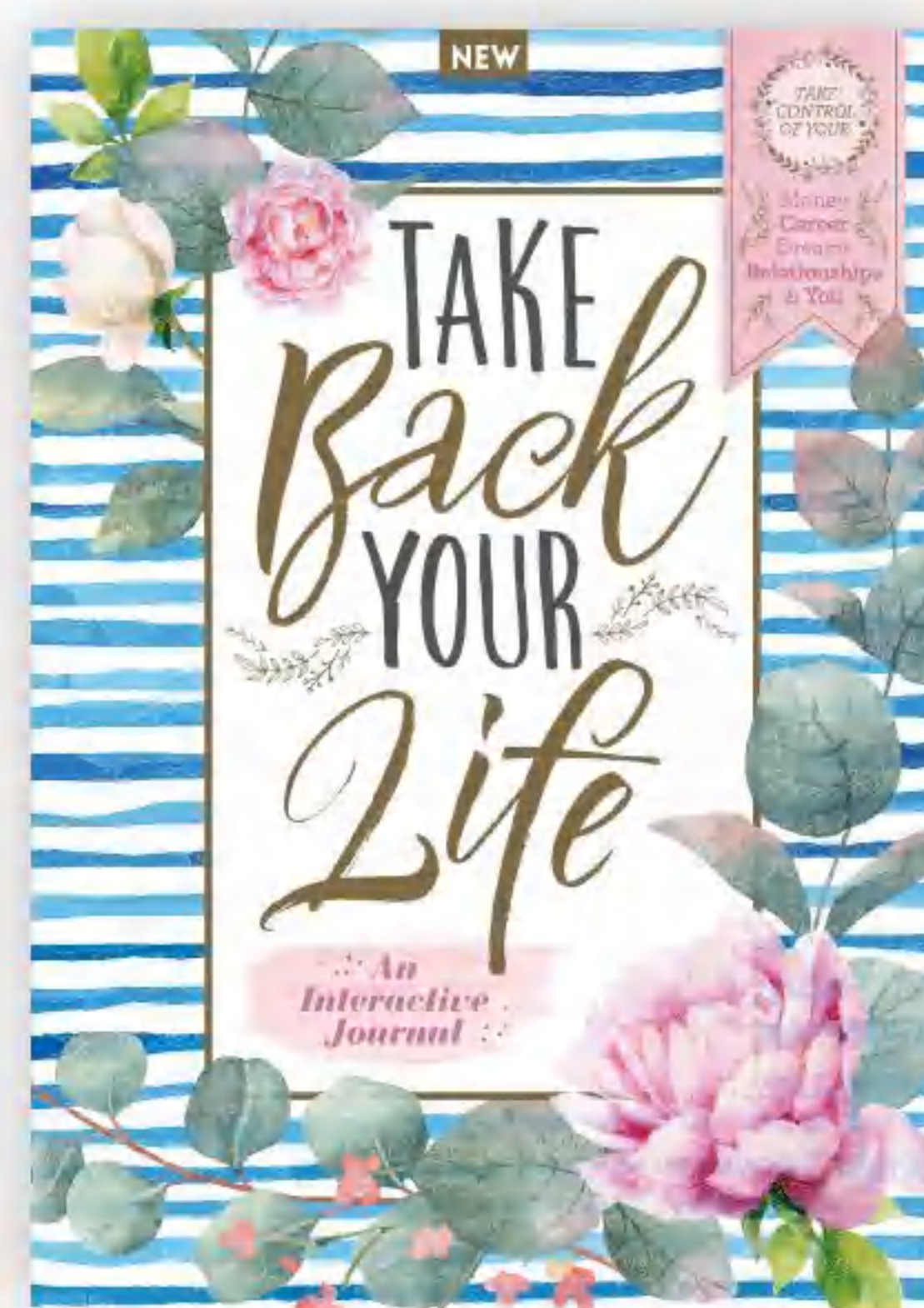
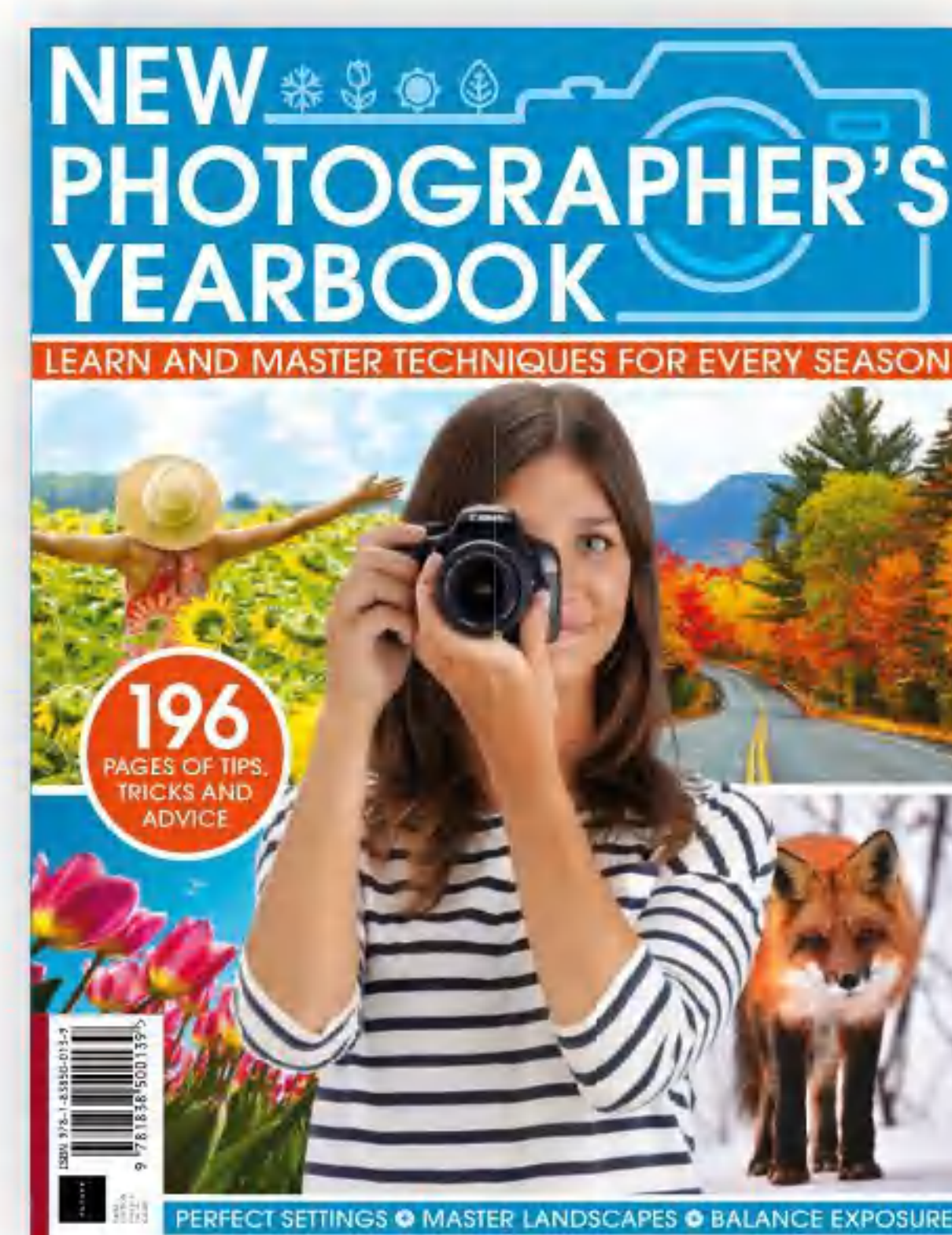


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