



where the wild things are

These animal-oriented trips will expand your travel horizons and give you plenty of excuses to spend more time outside. BY ELAINE GLUSAC

Manatees are so docile, you can kayak and snorkel right next to them

When you think of wildlife-watching expeditions, you probably have visions of tracking cheetahs on safari in Africa or spotting giant tortoises in the Galapagos, but more and more outfitters are offering similar jaunts a little closer to home. Not only are these outings cheaper than far-flung journeys, they're often perfect for the entire family. Whether you're partial to land or sea creatures, these five getaways will give you a chance to learn about some of your favorite animals in gorgeous environments that also happen to be perfect for hiking, kayaking, snorkeling, and other pursuits. Finally, an excuse to really get wild on vacation!

PLAY WITH MANATEES

CENTRAL FLORIDA

At around 1,000 pounds, manatees, sometimes referred to as "sea cows," are like big, wet, blubbery teddy bears. From October through March they migrate inland and congregate by the hundreds in the spring-fed, 72-degree lagoons of Central Florida's Crystal River National Wildlife Refuge, about 75 miles north of St. Petersburg. Catch a tour boat from the town of Crystal River to swim, scuba dive, or snorkel with the lumbering beasts,

which are protected—for now, at least—as an endangered species. Captain "Manatee Joe" Detrick offers daylong conservation-oriented tours for no more than six people at a time (\$85 per person; fun2dive.com).

While you're there To tour the refuge under your own power, rent a kayak or canoe from Manatee Tour & Dives (\$35 for a half day; manateetoursusa.com). Further explore the Florida wilds by checking out native bobcats, river otters, and crocodiles (from a distance, naturally) at the Homosassa Springs

Wildlife State Park, just seven miles south of Crystal River (floridastateparks.org/homosassasprings).

Where to stay Crave another encounter with the manatees? The Plantation Inn & Golf Resort offers swim tours in addition to country club-style golf and tennis, and beach volleyball (rooms from \$114; plantationinn.com).

MAKE TRACKS FOR MOOSE

NORTHERN MAINE

The sparsely populated north woods here are home to 6-foot, half-ton moose, which feed on vegetation in the marshy inlets of Millinocket Lake (about 200 miles from Portland). Glide silently into their habitat by canoe, courtesy of the New England Outdoor Center (NEOC). Guides lead morning and evening tours to watch the moose, but loons, osprey, beaver, and muskrat abound, too (\$49; 800-766-7238 or neoc.com). Grab an oar from



Return to a homey cabin after a day of moose watching in Maine.

the crowd-free Dwelly Pond to see them, or rent a canoe at Trout Brook Farm campground to spy on moose that feed near the shores of Lake



Matagamon (\$1 an hour; 207-723-5140). **Where to stay** The rustic log cabins at Twin Pine Camps have full kitchens and sleep up to eight (from \$190 per night; neoc.com).

HAVE A WHALE OF A TIME

MAUI, HAWAII

Like honeymooners flocking to the Hawaiian islands, humpback whales make a 3,500-mile migration from Alaska and the North Pacific each fall. They breed and nurse their young before reversing course in the spring. For equal parts adventure and learning, book a tour with the nonprofit Pacific Whale Foundation (PWF), which funds ocean research, education, and conservation efforts with its whale-watching outings, led by naturalists from December through mid-May (\$32 for a two-hour tour; pacificwhale.org). Year-round, PWF also runs snorkeling trips to see the green sea turtles that gather at the under-

water lava spans known as Turtle Arches (\$80 for a five-hour outing). Or take a PWF cruise that tracks wild bottlenose, spinner, and spotted dolphins cavorting in the waters around the island of Lanai (\$80 for a five-and-a-half-hour trip).

While you're there Back on the beach, dip into the latest trend, paddle surfing, which combines stand-up surfing and outrigger paddling for a full-body workout. Action Sports Maui starts beginners in flat water, but for instant big-wave access try body boarding, in which surfers use fins to propel themselves into the rollers (lessons from \$89 to \$109; actionsportsmaui.com).

Where to stay The ocean-side Hyatt Regency Maui Resort & Spa offers after-dark stargazing sessions with its resident astronomer—and his planetarium—on the resort's rooftop (from \$325 per night; maui.hyatt.com).

EXPLORE WOLF AND BEAR COUNTRY

YELLOWSTONE NATIONAL PARK, WYOMING, MONTANA, AND IDAHO

The nation's first national park is a sanctuary for two of the West's top predators: Northern Rocky Mountain wolves and grizzly bears. These food-chain kings—along with elk, bison, foxes, and coyotes—inhabit the vast and remote Lamar Valley in the park's northeastern corner. Go there safari-style with Wildlife Expeditions out of Jackson, Wyoming (summer rates from \$1,695 per person for four days,

mid-May through July, and September through October for peak sightings.

While you're there NEOC guides will also lead rafting trips on the Dead, Penobscot, and Kennebec Rivers nearby (from \$89 per person for a full-day outing); just let them know if you're looking for an adrenaline rush or a more low-key, family-friendly option. They'll even teach novices how to fly-fish on local rivers that are famed for their landlocked salmon (from \$118 per person per day, including equipment). Back on terra firma, hoof it over to Baxter State Park, home of 5,267-foot Mt. Katahdin, the northern end of the Appalachian Trail and a very challenging eight- to 10-hour round-trip hike.

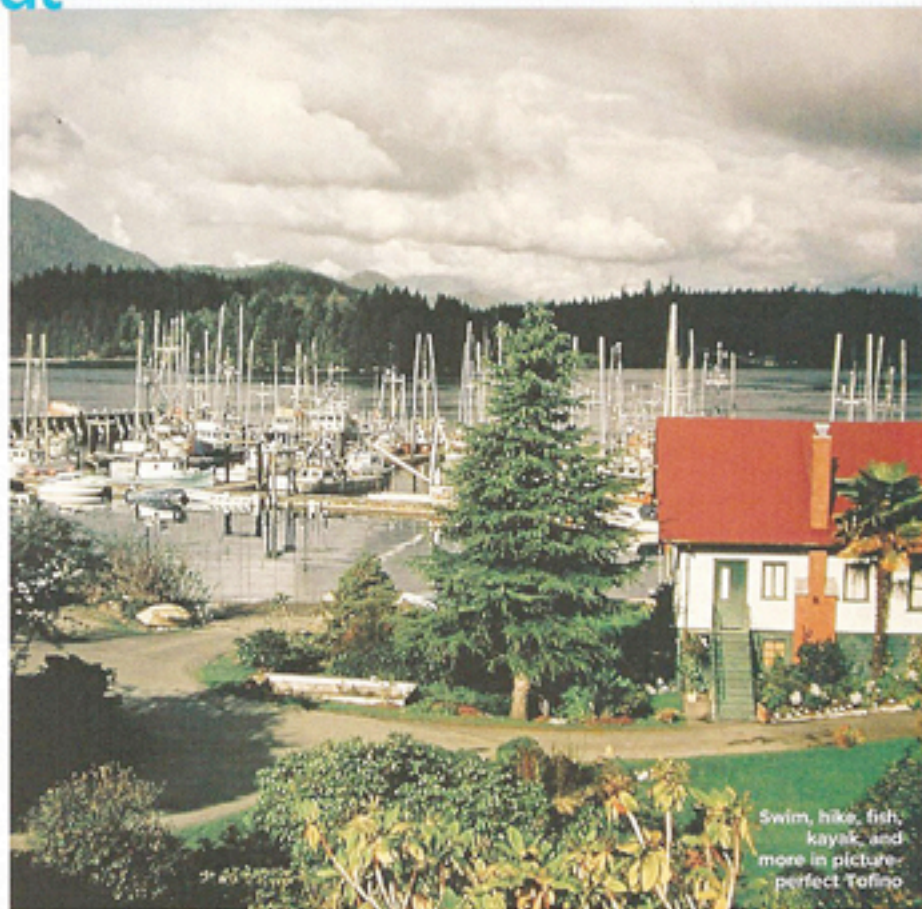
The park's many bogs and ponds are prime moose habitat for do-it-yourself wildlife watches (just use common sense and always give a moose a wide berth). Hike the three-mile round-trip route to



The Snake River Lodge & Spa provides pampering in a rustic yet luxe setting.

MOOSE: VICKI HOLMAN

including meals and lodging in park-adjacent motels; *wildlifeexpeditions.org*). On the daylong tours you'll ride in SUVs that have open rooftops for unobstructed viewing, and naturalists will lead you to where the bison, elk, eagles, moose, and more roam. At dawn and dusk (prime times to catch harder-to-see animals like wolves and grizzlies), guides will set up powerful sighting scopes. **While you're there** You can't visit Yellowstone without following the herd of other tourists to the park's geothermal features, including its famed geyser, Old Faithful, and the bubbling Mudpots. But the more physical effort you put into seeing this park—such as on the three-mile climb up Observation Peak or the 12.5-mile Blacktail Deer Creek–Yellowstone River Trail hike that drops 1,100 feet to the river's edge—the more rewarding and uncrowded it is. **Where to stay** Since Wildlife Expeditions runs its trips from Jackson, bunk pre- or post-safari at Snake River Lodge & Spa in Teton Village (rooms from \$319 per night, 866-975-7625 or *snakeriverlodge.com*). If you loved



Swim, hike, fish, kayak, and more in picture-perfect Tofino

the invigorating fresh air during your outings, hit the spa for the Spirit of Wyoming exfoliation, a scrub scented with cedar, pine, and juniper (\$190 for 75 minutes).

TRY SEAL SPOTTING

VANCOUVER ISLAND, BRITISH COLUMBIA

The cold, nutrient-rich waters off Pacific Rim National Park on Vancouver Island's remote west coast support teeming colonies of sea mammals. From May through October, Subtidal Adventures sets out aboard a hard-hulled inflatable boat to the Broken Islands, a group of more than 100 protected islets in nearby Barkley Sound (\$89* for three hours; *subtidaladventures.com*). En route you'll spot breaching gray whales, rock outcroppings covered in seabirds, harbor seals with their pups, and

beaches blanketed by California and Stellar sea lions. Captain Brian Congdon, a former Broken Islands park warden, provides expert guided tours as well as warm, windproof "cruiser suits," a must-have in the wet and chilly weather (even in August).

While you're there Hike North America's last remaining temperate rain forest to long, driftwood-strewn beaches and starfish-filled tide pools. Based just outside the park in the bohemian harbor town of Tofino, Surf Sister leads two-hour or two-day surf lessons (\$75 to \$195, including board and wet suit; *surfsister.com*).

Where to stay If you become enchanted with Tofino, stay at one of the many B&B's in town, such as the BriMar (rooms from \$150; *brimarbb.com*). Or reserve a rustic-chic cabin just steps from the shore at Terrace Beach Resort near the town of Ucluelet (from \$349 per night; *terracebeachresort.ca*).

* All prices are in Canadian dollars.

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Whales roam the entire Pacific and often swim close to shore