

Animal Adventure Trips Abound

By **Judy Koutsky**

From trekking to see the mountain gorillas in Uganda, to tagging endangered sea turtles in the Caribbean island of Nevis, there are plenty of fun vacations that involve animal interactions. Added bonus: Conservation is at the helm of these programs, so you'll have an amazing vacation, plus aid in research and protecting living things. Here, we picked our five favorite adventures.



Sea Turtles in Nevis

For an amazing kid-friendly animal encounter, it's hard to beat the beaches of Nevis, home to one of the most important sea turtle nesting sites in the Caribbean. From June to October each year, female sea turtles come back to the same place where they were born to carry on the circle of life by laying hundreds of eggs. The Four Seasons Resort Nevis and the Sea Turtle Conservancy partner up each year to create awareness about the protection of these endangered creatures.

There are three types of sea turtles that nest in Nevis: The Hawksbill, the Leatherback, and the Green turtle. They swim for hundreds of miles each nesting season. Only a small percentage of baby sea turtle survives to adulthood, so scientists are tracking and recording data to teach tourists and locals about conservation.

This year, Sea Turtle Weekend is set for July 14 to 17. Kids (and parents) along with scientists stay up late to comb the beach for female turtles making their way from the water to lay their eggs in the sand. Once a turtle is spotted (they weigh upwards of 300 pounds), everyone watches her dig a hole with her strong flippers and lay about 100 eggs (called a clutch). When she has thoroughly covered up her offspring, she starts to walk back to the water and that's when the team of scientists moves in. They bring her back to Four Season Resort Nevis for a night of luxury (she is bathed and has her barnacles removed). More importantly she is affixed with a GPS transmitter and released back into the water.

fourseasons.com/nevis.com and conserveturtles.org



Horseback Riding in Colorado

Many people go horseback riding for an hour or so on vacation, but that's nothing compared to spending a week atop these majestic steeds and really getting to know them. The setting is the heart of the Rocky Mountains in Grand County, CO, where four world-class dude ranches provide an all-inclusive, week-long experience. Each ranch has its own flavor and style.

Bar Lazy J Ranch, the oldest continuously operating guest ranch in Colorado, has a truly Western horseback riding experience as well as add-ons like trout fishing right on property. C Lazy U Ranch is

known for its rustic elegance and 5-Spur Service, both in the cabins and in its luxury spa. Drowsy Water Ranch has an amazing kids program for the junior cowboys and Latigo Ranch is secluded and intimate with the maximum number of guests at 35.

Each day, families go out with experienced wranglers, starting with short practice rides and building up full-day backcountry experiences. Plus, there's plenty of activities in addition to horseback riding, including hiking, archery, rafting, lassoing, square dancing, hayrides, rodeos and rafting trips.

You'll be surprised at how quickly your family bonds while traversing some of the 600 miles of trails and roasting s'mores under a giant star-filled-sky.

dude-ranch.com, visitgrandcounty.com



Gorillas in Uganda

Uganda is one of only three countries in the world that has mountain gorillas. There are fewer than 900 existence, making a sighting of these endangered species a bucket-list trip for many. There are two plac within the country to trek to see them—Bwindi Impenetrable National Park and Mgahinga Gorilla Natio

Park. Mgahinga has the largest number of adult silverback males, plus it's lesser known than Bwindi, so visit here means you'll feel like you are getting the park to yourself and you'll have some amazing interactions.

Trekking can be anywhere from 30 minutes to two hours or more. Trackers are sent out ahead of time, so your group is not aimlessly wandering the park. Once the gorillas are spotted, you have 60 minutes to observe them at close range. You're not allowed to get closer than 25 feet, but the primates, of course, can do what they want. Often, the younger juveniles will come close to visitors, as they are curious and playful. You'll be surprised at just how human-like the mountain gorillas are (they share 98% of our DNA

Between snapping pictures and watching the gorillas interact, your allotted time will feel like it's up quickly, but the memory will last a lifetime.

visituganda.com





Aquatic fun in Mystic

If you're looking for something a little closer to home. Mystic Aquarium in Mystic, CT, has lots of aquatic animal encounters. If you love penguins and seals, you can sign up for their interactive programs in which you work alongside a trained guide and learn how to care for them.

For a truly unique experience, book the family for one of three Beluga interactions. Paint with these gentle giants (even animals need intellectual stimulation!), put on waterproof gear and discover what it's like to be waist deep in water with them like a trainer, or stay dry through the Whales Up Close program and watch a feeding.

If sting rays are your thing, you can book a private feeding session with them (or you can paint with the guys, too!).

Lastly, if you want a full-on interaction with a variety of animals, book the Trainer for a Day program. You work side-by-side with a trainer and interact with the African penguins, beluga whales, seals, sea lions and more.

mysticaquarium.org



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Sledding in Alaska

The famous Iditarod dog sled race takes place annually each March across 1,150 miles from Anchorage Nome. Get a taste of this unique event by taking the kids dog sledding in our largest and least-populate state.

There are a number of different tour operators that offer this excursion. Salmon Berry Travel & Tours is good one to experience since they have a partnership with Dallas Seavey and his kennel (he's the 29-year-old musher and four-time winner of the Iditarod Race). The winter tour includes mushing at Dallas Seavey's homestead and kennel, where you'll see the official starting line of the Iditarod. You'll ride in the sled with a professional guide, before spending time in the kennel, where you and your family can cuddle with the adorable puppies-in-training.

In the summer you have the option to mush on a glacier (including a helicopter ride up to the ice mountain) or ride with the dogs through the Chugach Mountains. Whatever option you choose, you'll get to experience beautiful scenery alongside adorable four-legged canines.

salmonberrytours.com.





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