

A Special Report from *International Living*

# The World's 10 Best Travel Adventures

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*By Angela Roberts*

We've all spent enough vacations lying on the beach...day after day...only to return to the office feeling like we've somehow wasted our precious time away. How many people do you know who stand at the water cooler recounting the time they led a team of dogs across the Norwegian snow plains...or were guided up beginner-level cliffs in New Zealand?...

A vacation filled with adventure travel will send you home with once-in-a-lifetime experiences under your belt, fascinating tales for your friends, and—believe it or not—more relaxed than your annual visit to the Florida Keys.

If the word “adventure” is enough to exhaust you, bear in mind that you don't have to put yourself in harm's way to have fun. Nor do you have to be an Olympic athlete. You can spend a week on a pleasant bike trip through Van Gogh's countryside, check out exotic species in the Galapagos Islands from the deck of a boat, or snap photos of the Great Wall of China from the window of a chugging train.

In this report, we've gathered the world's 10 most adventurous vacations for you, the curious and active traveler. Whether you want to stimulate your mind, your body, or both, our recommended travel adventures will keep the sand out of your socks, and the snooze out of your stories.

## 1. Outback adventure in Australia

Australia's outback, sprawling, mostly uninhabited, and fabulously rugged, is one of the last frontiers of the modern age. The indigenous Aboriginal people have honored the ancient tradition of the walkabout as a signal of coming of age from youth to adulthood, spending up to a month on a solitary walk through this wild countryside.

What better adventure than to take your own walkabout across the Australian outback? Because so few people inhabit the area, it is left to the graces of nature, unspoiled by modern expansion. There are beautiful flowers, exotic birds, and plentiful wildlife, a combination that draws thousands of tourists every year.

You can choose between self-guided tours and group excursions...go for a few days or a few weeks...and choose from a variety of routes from a trek through the Australian Alps to a hike through the Red Center to a guided tour of Sydney's beaches. One company you can work with, or at least get some introductory information from, is Auswalk. The company's website is <http://www.auswalk.com.au>. Prices vary depending on the length of

your hike, and whether or not you choose a self-guided tour or a guide-led group outing, but expect to pay between \$1,000 and \$2,500.

## 2. “Spring Break” in Iceland

Iceland is one big volcanic island, with enough underground geothermal activity to heat the water that bubbles up out of the ground to an average 176° F. That boiling water gushes out of the ground and collides with the ice-cold water of the flowing mountain streams to make over 800 steaming natural hot springs across Iceland’s beautiful landscape. Ironic as it may seem, Iceland has more hot springs than any other country in the world.

And, as part of the arctic region, Iceland has many months of long days by which to trek and soak. During the summer solstice, the sun can hover just above the horizon for 20 hours, giving you enough light to read by night, while never blazing hot overhead. And what you’ll see is a naturally pristine landscape: The country’s 3,700 miles of coastline surround varieties of geography from glacial lakes to wide grassy basins to volcanic mountains. As you hike, you’ll pass large stretches of fields covered in beautiful purple lupines, vast plains dotted with sheep, peaks, and cliffs, and more waterfalls than can be individually named. This unspoiled countryside is a hiker’s paradise, and the warm pools along the way are nirvana to a hiker’s feet, back, and spirit after a long day of trekking.

But, Iceland is largely uninhabited. Over half the population lives in Reykjavik, the main capital, and the rugged countryside is something of a wild frontier, meaning you’re not likely to run into a Motel 6 or Courtyard Marriott out there. If you want to walk across Iceland, hopping from steamy pool to steamy pool, your best bet is to hire a guide. Check out a company called Iceland Rovers at <http://www.icelandrovers.is>. The company has been providing tours of Iceland for a decade, and offers six- to nine-day tour packages of the country’s hot springs.

## 3. Scandinavia by sled

If you’re a dog lover, this may be the adventure of a lifetime. Imagine teaming with five beautiful huskies as you guide a sled across snowy Sweden and Norway. You’ll traverse ancient traveler’s routes, along river edges, and pass traditional settlements, with the magnificent Norwegian mountains looming in the distance. All the while zooming along behind a pack of hearty huskies.

How else could you see the 6,000-foot-plus Oxstindarna, the highest peak in Norway, Sweden’s birch forests yet to be touched by mankind, and drop a fishing line in a fresh lake to catch a fresh Arctic Char, all in one trip? During evenings, with the bright moon and stars reflecting off the abundant snow, you’ll stay in cozy farmhouses and mountain lodges, enjoying local foods, bright fireplaces, and—of course—relaxing saunas.

Of course, you won’t find a team of dogs waiting at the airport. But many guide services will be more than happy to accommodate your six-day dog sledding wishes. One that will pick you up from the airport, arrange all lodging and meals, and provide expert dogs and guide, is Nova Arctic. Find them at <http://www.nova-arctic.com> and get yourself to Lapland for a wintry adventure of a lifetime. A six-day itinerary will cost about 1,500 euro (\$1,900).

## 4. Galapagos Islands à la Ecocruiise

Darwin came here to study the behavior of rare and wild animals because it was pristine, with little human influence on the environment. So enchanting, it was once called the Bewitched Islands, and, to this day, it is one of the most environmentally protected places on the entire globe. The Galapagos Islands, unspoiled, untouched, and unpolluted, are a nature lover's paradise.

Want to see iguanas, flamingos, sea lions, reef sharks, sea turtles, whales, dolphins, and penguins—all in the sultry heat of the equator? The Galapagos Islands has it all. Sitting in the Pacific waters, about 600 miles off the coast of Ecuador, the archipelago's five islands are covered with saltwater lagoons, lava fields, forests, beaches, and bays, and are inhabited by scores of tropical birds, rare animals, and an abundance of marine life.

While cruising among these beautiful islands, you can stop and hike, go for a swim, listen to evening nature lectures, and sleep in comfort. Expect to pay around \$1,500 for a five-day/four-night cruise, but keep in mind that doesn't include your airfare to Ecuador and on to the islands—and you will have to pay an additional \$100 park entrance fee into the islands. A great tour company to work with is Southern Explorations, which you can find at <http://www.southernexplorations.com>.

## 5. New Zealand on the rocks

But, if sitting on the deck of a boat, breezy veranda, or sunny patio isn't your idea of high adventure, maybe you should consider this one.

New Zealand has been known for years for its ruggedly beautiful terrain. In the past decade, rock climbers from across the globe have started to appreciate it, too. A string of mountain peaks works its way down the country's South Island like a backbone and dots the coastlines. The weather is almost always perfect, the air is unpolluted and clean, and the views from the tops of these peaks are amazing. This beautiful landscape coupled with high quality limestone rock has put New Zealand top of the list of international climbing destinations.

A flight into Christchurch, South Island's most populated city—renowned for being “more English than England”—will put you close to several climbing areas. Though you don't need any previous experience to give climbing a try, you will need a guide to show you the ropes...and the knots, the routes, and the rules.

If you take the phrase, “high adventure” literally, this is the vacation for you. Find a guide company in any area of New Zealand at <http://www.climb.co.nz/Adventure/Adventures.htm>. You can expect to pay about \$300 for a three-day guided trip.

## 6. All aboard the Trans-Mongolian Express

For an adventure packed with beautiful sights, enter a world of fascinating history. While you're at it, enter three. From the elegance of Russia's grand cities to the opulence of China's, with the grace and beauty of Mongolia's plains in between, you'll take in diverse views from the comfort of a chugging train.

The Trans-Mongolian Express offers a 21-day, one-way trip, and you can board in either Russia, and go southeast, or China, and travel northwest. No matter which way you go, you will have the exhilarating experience of viewing a part of the globe that few have laid eyes on.

Visit the Great Wall of China and stroll in Tiananmen Square. Drop by Lenin's Mausoleum, gaze at the onion domes of St. Basil's Cathedral, and contemplate the view at Red Square. And, in the time between, you'll cross the plains of Mongolia's Gobi Desert, the shadowy forests of the Terelj National Park, and the grassy steppes of the Mongolian countryside. The train will follow along rivers, chug past mountain ranges, and cover five time zones, all the while stopping in tiny country towns, little fishing villages, and small cities replete with traditional architecture and culture.

You will most likely not be able to do this trip in less than 21 days. Keep in mind that you must fly into one location (Russia or China) and leave from another (China or Russia). An adventure like this also requires three separate visas, so you should consider booking your train travel through a tour service that will arrange all the details, including accommodation and visa paperwork. The total cost, including local fees, should be around \$3,000 per person. One resource to help you start planning your trip is: <http://www.responsibletravel.com>.

## 7. Sicily and the Aeolian Islands for Hike or Bike

The seven small islands sprinkling the waters just north of Sicily contain some of the most picturesque living you can imagine. The smallest and western-most of the islands, Alicudi, is covered by pink heather in the spring, and is mostly overlooked by tourists. The western half of the island is completely uninhabited, and the steep cliffs drop straight into the blue waters beneath, while the eastern half is covered by steppes on which the village sprawls.

While Alicudi is covered in pink heather, the next island, Filicudi, is covered in green ferns. This rugged island has two small villages on a peninsula, and hardly any noise—the only usable road here is a path for mules. The largest island, Lipari, is an island of beautiful contrasts. White pumice-stones and pitch-black obsidian cover the coasts. Volcanic peaks rise above long white beaches. And though there are 600 thermal springs, it only has four towns.

Four more islands, each a magnificent gem in the crown of the Mediterranean, covered in olive groves, fields of golden corn, and strawberry tree woods. The seven volcanic islands contain a spectrum of diverse landscapes from fields to beaches to mountains. And all of it free of smog, bright lights, and city noise.

And then there is Sicily itself. Olive groves, lava fields, and citrus orchards surround the great Mt Etna, while gorgeous beaches, stylish boutiques and chic cafes will leave you in want of nothing.

Walk and bike these fabulous islands for seven days for around \$3,500. Bike Riders (<http://www.bikeriderstours.com>) offers ready-to-go trips. You may want to throw in a few boat tours to see the beautiful island profiled against the aqua Mediterranean waters, which will be an additional (but worthy) cost. And, don't forget to sample locally made marzipan and authentic cappuccinos along your adventure.

## 8. Be Inspired in Van Gogh's France

In 1888, Vincent Van Gogh searched for inspiration. He found it in Provence, France. A land of unmatched beauty, Van Gogh believed this to be an enchanted world in which man and nature commingle effortlessly. Here he painted what he saw: sun-baked sanctuaries of redolent fields, cypress trees, peasants, and scenes of a rustic life that can only be found in Provence.

A master of vibrant brushstrokes and bold colors, Van Gogh remained largely unappreciated during his life, yet today his paintings hang in the great halls of The Louvre, The Musee D'Orsay, and prestigious museums around the world. And his paintings are not just coveted by museums—they are guarded in the safes and private galleries of collectors. In fact, you could travel to every great museum and gallery in the world and still not see them all. Why not go beyond the norm and experience what the great master experienced himself?

See the great architecture of Avignon, the bucolic vineyards of Côtes du Rhône, splendidly baroque churches, the stunning cliffs of Les Baux, and the infamous Provençal town of Arles. You can even stop by St-Paul-de-Mausole, the sanitarium in which Van Gogh spent a year. See the world through the eyes of Van Gogh, while combining art, history, nature, and adventure. Six days should include bike rental and accommodation for around \$2,000 a person. Van Gogh Tours specializes in combining art with nature: <http://www.vangoghtours.com>.

Don't worry about the calories from the cheeses and wines—you'll surely cycle them off. And, if nothing else: don't forget your camera.

## 9. Elephant Trekking in Chiang Mai

The city of Chiang Mai, nestled in northern Thailand, is a quick flight from the bright lights-big city of ultra-urban Bangkok, but it might as well be another world altogether. Here you can hire a tuk-tuk, a small carriage drawn by a motorcycle, to motor you around the small but thriving city, sampling delicious native foods such as fish curry and banana coconut pudding. In the hot afternoon, you can take a bamboo raft down the river. Or spend a day exploring the famous Chiang Dao Caves, and visit a nearby village where "Karen Long Neck Ladies" purposefully extend their necks with the help of metal neck extenders.

All of these are optional. But, one thing you absolutely must do while you're in this exotic city is to go on an elephant trek. The driver sits on the elephant's head, while the

passengers (usually two) share the seat strapped across the animal's back. The elephant can cross streams on tiny stepping stones with the grace and balance of a gymnast. As he steps down, you are tilted at a 90-degree angle to the ground. (The motion may make you feel sick at first, but your body will soon become accustomed to it.)

Avoid the big, touristy elephant camp; instead, ask a tuk-tuk or taxi driver to take you to one of the smaller camps, farther up the hills (about 45 minutes outside the city). To find a guide or tour, try <http://www.chiangdao.com>.

## 10. Safari adventures in East Africa

East Africa, one of the last strongholds of the lion, the elephant, and the gorilla, is the best place in the world to go on safari. Enormous national parks have been established throughout the region, where the great beasts can roam free, untouched by the progress of mankind.

Hunting is now banned in many African countries, but the traditional safari has been replaced with a viewing safari. So, if the only things you want to shoot are pictures, your options are wide open.

Zambia, still largely unpopular and, therefore, untouched, is the only country where walking safaris are still common. The breathtaking power of the Victoria Falls has caused it to be dubbed the world's greatest curtain of falling water. Up to 546 million cubic meters of water per minute plummet over the mile-wide basalt edge, thundering 100 meters downward into the basin below. Bright rainbows hover over the falls, and misty rainforest surrounds them. Close by, the Mosi O Tunya National Park is only 25 square miles, but home to antelope species, zebra, giraffes, and white rhinos.

Kenya and Tanzania are the best countries for viewing wildlife, offering comfortable accommodation, and have mild climates with warm, sunny days and cool nights. In Kenya, you'll see African buffalo, zebras, bongo, jackals, and baboons. In Tanzania, your view of the wildlife will be framed by the imposing Mount Kilimanjaro on the horizon.

On the border between the two countries is the Masai Mara, Africa's most accessible game park. Situated in the Rift Valley, the Masai Mara has the largest diversity of game: from elephant herds to antelopes to baboons and lions, all dotting a pleasant landscape of rolling plains. Situated on the Masai land is the Ngorongoro Conservation Area, stretching 3,200 square miles, and includes the Ngorongoro Crater and Serengeti Plain. Together, these two areas have the largest concentration of game in the world.

But, if your heart is set on bagging exotic game, Zimbabwe is one of the few African countries where hunting safaris are still permitted.

Wherever you go in East Africa, plan your adventure for July through March to avoid the rainy season. Safari prices vary greatly between regions and countries. Your best bet is to book through a tour service such as: <http://www.go2africa.com>

## Further Resources

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