

Home [+](#) Adventure Travel

Best Adventure Travel Destinations 2014

BY [PETER KOCH](#) MAY 22, 2014




**TRAVEL+
LEISURE**

PHOTO: LAUREN TAMAKI

As dawn breaks over the savanna, your guide signals a stop. Through the trees ahead, you see the outline of something *very big* ambling through the underbrush. When the elephant—a 10-foot-tall, 12,000-pound bull—finally steps into the clearing and looks your way, your heart races, and for a moment, you remember how small you are. Then the giant continues on its way, and you on yours.

Welcome to a walking safari in Zambia, where your boots stand in for a Land Rover and all that separates you from rhinos, giraffes, lions, and hippos are the thin walls of a canvas tent. Sound rough? Then consider that, at day's end, hot showers, ice-cold drinks, and feather beds await you in a luxurious mobile camp.

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This is just one of the trips we've chosen for 2014, and it's indicative of the qualities we believe make for good [adventure](#) travel: extraordinary experiences that challenge you without, well, depriving you.

That means a hike through Slovenia's rugged Julian Alps that's punctuated with stops to sip local Cabernets and nibble Bohinj cheese. Or a gear-grinding mountain bike journey through Italy's mountains that pauses for a soak in 2,000-year-old Roman baths.

To find these hiking, walking, and biking trips, we tapped the expertise of more than 100 of the world's top operators. In addition to sharing up-and-coming destinations, they filled us in on the state of adventure travel today. The world is a smaller place, with easier access to remote destinations; the business of adventure tourism is helping conserve endangered flora, fauna, and in some cases, local culture; and new standards of luxury mean that you can enjoy posh amenities from Morocco's desert oases to the ice fields of southern Patagonia.

"For me," says Wild Frontiers owner Jonny Bealby, "adventure travel is a trip that takes you out of your own comfortable world and puts you in a place that will surprise you, amaze you, educate you, perhaps even scare you, and ultimately provide an experience through which you will have grown as a person."

You might eat your way through Shanghai's bustling food markets and its most renowned chefs' private kitchens, or head to the world's last intact Buddhist kingdom—Bhutan—in search of the elusive snow leopard.

A little intimidating? Perhaps. Life changing? You betcha.

Rates quoted throughout are per person based on double occupancy.

Additional reporting by Amy Farley and Brooke Porter Katz

Rising Star: Sri Lanka

On the rebound from a quarter-century of civil war and the 2004 tsunami, Sri Lanka is coming into its own as an adventure destination. People have long been drawn here for the rich culture: Sri Lanka has eight unesco World Heritage sites, including the fifth-century city of Sigiriya. Now they're discovering the incredible wildlife, including some of the world's best whale-watching. Operators ranging from Abercrombie & Kent to Natural World Safaris showcase tea plantations, religious festivals, leopard tracking, and the annual elephant migration in Minneriya National Park. Nights are spent in stylish hotels.

Book It: [Abercrombie & Kent](#); 13 days from \$6,195. [Natural World Safaris](#); 14 days from \$4,358.

Ancient Ruins: Turkey, Fourth Century B.C.

A [G Adventures](#) catamaran excursion off Turkey's Aegean coast sails alongside the rock tombs at Dalyan, carved into the cliffs by the Lycians. *10 days from \$1,899.*

For the Beer Geek: Belgium

[Ciclismo Classico](#) taps two of Belgium's proud traditions—cycling and brewing—on a 326-mile tour that winds past fairy-tale castles, charming canals, and historic breweries, with ample tasting opportunities. *Nine days from \$4,495.*

Distance: 41 miles, or four hours, per day.

Difficulty: Medium

For the Tree Hugger: The Carolinas

The [Backroads](#) approach to Appalachia balances days pedaling through Southern landscapes—the iconic Blue Ridge Parkway and Transylvania County hill country—with overnights in Asheville and at former pro cyclist George Hincapie's Hotel Domestique near Greenville, South Carolina. *Five days from \$2,698.*

Distance: 27–57 miles, or two to five hours, per day; lots of big, rolling hills.

Difficulty: Easy

For the Wildlife Lover: Namibia

Spot wildlife, hike the world's tallest sand dune, and meet Himba tribesmen on a beginner-friendly mountain biking safari from [H&I Adventures](#). You'll ride to the starkly beautiful Skeleton Coast and inland watering holes frequented by elephants, lions, and endangered black rhinos. *12 days from \$3,910.*

Distance: 28 miles, or three hours, per day on dirt tracks.

Difficulty: Easy

Cultural Immersion: Papua New Guinea

Where: Visit coastal fjords, the Western Highlands, and active volcanoes in this island nation where more than 700 languages are spoken.

The People: Much of the journey is dedicated to witnessing the everyday life of villagers, including Baining fire-dancers.

The Experience: Participate in a *moo-moo* feast (pig roast); learn about local customs such as mat-making and tribal tattooing.

[Oceania Expeditions](#); 11 days from \$9,875.

For the Nomad: Morocco

The latest from [DuVine Cycling & Adventures](#) is a varied trip, with stops at Marrakesh's souk, Berber villages in the High Atlas Mountains, and Richard Branson's Kasbah Tamadot. On the last night, you'll wheel across the desert to a remote, starlit oasis. *Six days from \$6,995.*

Distance: 24–36 miles, or about four hours, per day.

Difficulty: Medium

Walking and Hiking: Italy

A new itinerary from [CW Adventures](#) spotlights Tuscany's little-visited Maremma region, home to ancient hilltop towns and sleepy fishing villages. You'll stay at family-run villas and a seaside resort, sip Bianco di Pitigliano wines, and soak in millennia-old thermal baths. *Seven days from \$4,498.*

Distance: Four to seven miles per day; van transfers available.

Rising Star: Patagonia

Though its attractions for serious trekkers and climbers remain undiminished, this region east of the Andes is now enticing a new set of travelers: those who prefer 500-thread-count sheets to drafty tents. A handful of luxury lodges have opened—most recently [Awasi Patagonia](#)—and tour operators are adding itineraries for comfort seekers. GeoEx explores Chile's Chacabuco Valley, the towering O'Higgins Glacier, and Argentina's Lago del Desierto. Santiago Adventures also takes in both sides of the border, with backcountry 4 x 4 rides and stays at Chile's [Singular Patagonia](#) and [Eolo Patagonia's Spirit](#), in Argentina.

Book It: [GeoEx](#); 12 days from \$8,875. [Santiago Adventures](#); seven days from \$4,126.

Ancient Ruins: Ethiopia, Fourth Century A.D.

[Cox & Kings](#) brings the country's Orthodox Christian heritage to life, with visits to religious sites such as Axum, the reputed home of the Ark of the Covenant. *12 days from \$3,620.*

For the Oenophile: France

[Butterfield & Robinson](#) introduces riders to several of France's legendary appellations on this casual sip-and-spin, which meanders through Alsace's Riesling vineyards and into the estates of Champagne. *Seven days from \$6,795.*

Distance: 22 miles, or three to six hours, per day.

Difficulty: Medium

Cultural Immersion: China

Where: Eat your way through the culinary landscape of the Middle Kingdom—Beijing, Chengdu, Hangzhou, and Shanghai.

The People: Well-known Chinese chefs open up their restaurant kitchens to lead private cooking classes.

The Experience: Pick up ingredients in bustling markets before cooking Peking duck, dumplings, dim sum, and other classic regional dishes.

[Gourmet on Tour](#); 12 days from \$1,980.

Walking and Hiking: New Zealand

The latest tour by [VBT Bicycling and Walking Vacations](#) is a highlight reel of South Island landscapes, from the soaring mountains of Nelson Lakes National

Park to the pristine beaches along the Abel Tasman Coast Track. *Nine days from \$3,595.*

Distance: Two to six miles, or one to five hours, per day, with van shuttles.

Camping in Style: India

In India, the [Ultimate Travelling Camp](#) (*six days from \$3,505*) has a series of stylish mobile tents throughout the country that allow travelers to experience everything from the monasteries of Ladakh to the lush hills of Nagaland, on the border with Burma.

Rising Star: Georgia

Set in the South Caucasus at the juncture of Europe and Asia, Georgia is both rich in history and contemporary culture. “The capital, Tbilisi, has transparent glass bridges, but if you head to Svaneti, high in the mountains, the houses still have medieval watch-towers,” says Wild Frontiers marketing manager Michael Pullman. Ker & Downey recently introduced a trip that includes visits to ancient mountaintop monasteries and one of the world’s oldest wine-growing regions.

Expert Advice: Cari Gray

Founder of [Gray & Co.](#), a custom tour operator with a focus on adventure.

On My Radar: Colombia, which has entered an era of political stability—and is full of people who are welcoming to travelers. It has a friendly cycling culture and amazing hikes. You can also explore the country’s colonial cities, salt mines, and more. We have cycling trips around Armenia and Medellín, with a stop in Cartagena, of course. The country is very close to the U.S., which makes it appealing.

I Never Leave Home Without: Maui Jim polarized sunglasses; a Nikon D5000 with my go-to 18–200 mm lens; and La Roche-Posay Anthelios sunscreen.

Most Memorable Adventure: My latest was in Western Australia, biking past kangaroos and through eucalyptus forests, swimming in the Indian Ocean, and visiting the vineyards of Margaret River Valley. We run biking trips in the area. Kangaroo sightings are guaranteed!

On My Bucket List: Heli-skiing in British Columbia.