

Voyage into the unknown

WHILE MUCH OF THE PLANET HAS BEEN WALKED, CLIMBED, SAILED, BIKED OR OTHERWISE EXPLORED, THERE ARE STILL HUNDREDS OF EXPERIENCES AWAITING ANYONE WITH AN INCLINATION FOR THE UNEXPECTED

For those wanting to step away from the routine of everyday life for a week or two, adventure travel is an exciting yet safe way to re-energize the spirit, while discovering places and activities that until recently most people only dreamed of visiting.

Walk the sacred ghats of Varanasi

Each morning before dawn in the holy Indian city of Varanasi, thousands of Hindu pilgrims gather along the stone steps, or ghats, that line the bank of the Ganges River. As the sun's first fragile rays spill across the river, a gentle hum of prayers rises from the faithful. Amid curling smoke from funeral pyres, the tinkle of finger cymbals and the chanting of priests, holy men wander or sit in silent meditation. Pilgrims wade into the swirling brown water for ritual bathing.

One of the world's oldest cities, Varanasi is India's holiest

pilgrimage site. Here, along a great curve in the river, ancient palaces, shrines and temples rise above the sacred Ganges. Revered cows freely wander the streets. Neighbors gather to gossip in narrow lanes perfumed with incense. Vendors guard their bananas and cashews from monkeys who screech and scamper over the rooftops. And through it all an unbroken stream of the faithful moves toward the holy river, to Mother Ganges.

Raft the Grand Canyon

It's not the deepest or even the widest canyon in the world. But for pure grandeur, nothing beats America's Grand Canyon. Every year, 5 million people come to walk along the rim and peer across the gorge of this geologic wonderland. But far fewer visitors choose a more thrilling option: rafting through the canyon on the Colorado River. More than 160 roiling rapids guarantee rocketing rides through huge standing waves and deep holes. Camp on



Varanasi



Grand Canyon



Galapagos Islands

sandy beaches under a brilliant canopy of stars far from the frenzied outside world, and wake up each morning to the haunting warble of the canyon wren and the smell of brewing coffee.

A Grand Canyon rafting trip is more than merely braving wild whitewater. As the days drift by, and you drop deep into the inner gorge, life is pared down to the essentials: eating and sleeping, riding the river and watching the changing light as you float through one of the world's most magnificent landscapes.

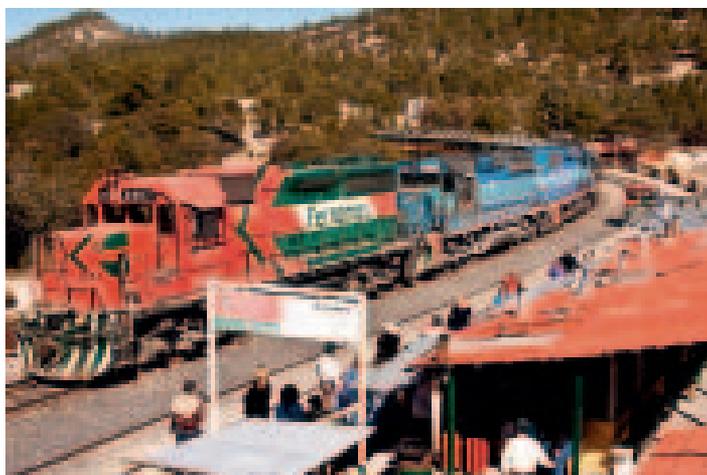
Cruise the Galapagos Islands

Lying almost 1,000 kilometers off the South American continent in the equatorial Pacific Ocean, Ecuador's remote Galapagos Islands are teeming with the weird, rare and wonderful. Dozens of animal species live here, many of them found nowhere else on the planet. Sea lions sunbathe on sandy shores, marine iguanas swim with penguins and giant tortoises roam the grassy interiors. Blue-footed boobies, frigatebirds and lava herons thrive on the fish-rich coastal waters. Without threat from predators, animals are so tame that visitors literally step around them. Nowhere else on earth can you find such close wildlife encounters in such great numbers.

Most visitors to the Galapagos take a cruise, and exploring these far-flung islands aboard smaller vessels like those used by Ecuador-based Ecoventura (www.ecoventura.com) offers several advantages: closer anchorage to shore, fewer passengers and more time on land. After hiking ancient lava fields and wild coastlines, wade into the warm tropical waters and snorkel with brilliant fishes, sea lions, sharks and turtles.

Ride the Copper Canyon train

Climbing nearly 2,500 meters from sea level into Mexico's Sierra Madre Occidental mountain range, the train trip through Copper Canyon is one of the world's great rail journeys. The route follows rivers up deep ravines, crossing bridges and ducking through dozens of tunnels before reaching the canyon rim. Numerous options await at the top: bike rides, canyon tours, hiking and crafts shopping in Creel and Divisadero. Far from the blaze of



Copper Canyon



Guyana's rainforest

city lights, the night sky sparkles with a starry splendor rarely seen by urban dwellers.

But perhaps the most intriguing feature of this remote area is its inhabitants. The shy Tarahumara Indians first entered these canyons five centuries ago to elude Spanish invaders. Nowadays many of the women, dressed in vibrant clothing, weave baskets and sell them to tourists. Families grow corn and beans and raise sheep in the canyons. Their culture sits at a crossroads between the old ways and the modern world of cell phones and Internet cafés.

Explore Guyana's rainforest

Far from South America's trodden tourist trail is an undiscovered gem. Guyana is home to some of the world's most pristine rainforests: almost 80 percent of the country is covered by tropical jungle. A visit to Guyana's interior requires planning, but travelers find a luxuriant landscape teeming with life. Boat rides along rivers reveal monkeys, giant river otters, parrots, toucans, capybara and black caiman. Lucky travelers will spot jaguar. More than 850 species of birds fill the forest with color and the haunting melodies, screeches and hoots of the tropics. Eco-lodges deep in the interior allow visitors to walk trails and absorb the visual richness and captivating sounds of the jungle.

The scenic jewel of Guyana is Kaieteur Falls, one of the world's most powerful waterfalls. Falling 226 meters, these remote falls are reached either by charter flight to a small nearby airstrip or overland on a rigorous five-day odyssey.

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