

THE WORLD'S WILDEST NEW NATIONAL PARKS

# MEN'S JOURNAL

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# The Wildest New Parks in the World

Across the globe, countries are setting aside vast swaths of wilderness as national preserves—which already happen to be perfect for exploring. **by MARK JOHANSON**





FROM TOP RIGHT: MATHIEU DUPUIS/SEPAQ; ÁLVARO DEL CAMPO



#### NORTH WOODS RETREAT

### OPÉMICAN NATIONAL PARK, CANADA

Located 4.5 hours north of Toronto, in western Quebec, Opémican park is 100 square miles of flat-topped mountains and sheer cliff bands that drop into impossibly clear lakes and rivers—perfect for paddling in a canoe or raft. The park doesn't officially open until next year, but you already can explore everything it has to offer, from floating 10 miles down the

Kipawa River, through Class III and IV rapids, to soaking in the spray of the river's 50-foot Grand Chute waterfall on an observation deck suspended in its mist. Black bears, moose, and wolves populate the park, and one of the best ways to explore it is via backcountry camping on the small islands of Lake Kipawa, where you can see soaring peregrine falcons and hear the wolves howl at night. From April to September, you can also fish for brook trout, walleyes, smallmouth bass, and northern pike, and make a shoreside fish lunch after hauling in your limit. **WHERE TO STAY** Sépaq, Quebec's parks and wildlife agency, manages four glamping-style tent-cabins near the dramatic rock walls of Lake Timiskaming. Sleep on plush double beds with the lake just a stone's throw away.



#### AMAZON ADVENTURE

### YAGUAS NATIONAL PARK, PERU

Covering more than 2 million acres of steamy wetlands alongside the Yaguas River, a tributary of the Amazon in northern Peru, Yaguas protects one of the world's last great forests, full of more than 3,000 species of plants and 160 species of mammals, including tapirs, jaguars, woolly monkeys, pink river dolphins, and endangered giant otters. It's also home to isolated indigenous communities like those in San Martín and Tres Esquinas, where locals can row you over coffee-colored waters in search of a paiche, a torpedo-shaped giant

that's among the largest freshwater fish in the world. Remote and entirely untamed, Yaguas offers the increasingly elusive feeling of genuine discovery—what Amazon explorer Percy Fawcett must have felt walking through the Amazonian forest in the early 20th century.

**WHERE TO STAY** Head to the park's office in Iquitos to arrange a guide, coordinate fishing trips, and get permission to camp at the ranger outpost in Hipona. It lies about four hours by speedboat upstream from the mouth of the Yaguas and is devoid of all signs of civilization.



SOUTH AMERICA'S WILD FOREST

## EL IMPENETRABLE NATIONAL PARK, ARGENTINA

E

**STANCIA LA FIDELIDAD** is, today, a decrepit mansion marooned on northern Argentina's lowland plains, miles away from cell signals, running water, or electricity.

To reach it last fall, I drove four hours down dirt roads, kayaked across a lily-filled lagoon, and whacked my way through prickly bushes to reach its front stoop.

The crumbling edifice, capped off by a rusted corrugated-tin roof, was the first building in an otherwise "impenetrable" corner of Argentina's Chaco Province. Today it slumps in glorious decay, a guano-filled ruin amid a patch of pristine carob trees. With its former owner murdered by criminals in an attempted land grab in 2011, the little-touched ranch was thus expropriated by the local government at the behest of Argentine conservationists. Now it's the center of Argentina's newest national park, one in a growing list of preserves around the world

that have sprung up to protect endangered landscapes and indigenous cultures.

El Impenetrable National Park officially opened to the public in August 2017 to protect a 316,000-acre swath of the Gran Chaco, South America's second-largest forest ecosystem (after the Amazon). The Gran Chaco fans out across the heart of South America from Argentina into Bolivia, Brazil, and Paraguay. Yet while the Amazon captures the hearts and dollars of those who've never seen it, the bulbous silk floss trees, towering cactuses and bushy bramble of the Chaco disappear in anonymity. This new reserve, championed by a co-founder of the North Face, the late Doug Tompkins, hopes to change that.

On my second morning in the park, I meet up with Leonardo Juber, its 36-year-old superintendent. As we boat down the caramel-colored Bermejo River, a few miles away from La Fidelidad, he tells me that the creation of El Impenetrable is a huge opportunity to expose the world to this forgotten wilderness. "The

THE CHACO IS ONE OF THE REGIONS WITH THE MOST BIODIVERSITY IN ALL OF SOUTH AMERICA.

Chaco is one of the regions with the most biodiversity, not only in Argentina but in all of South America," he explains.

Yet threats are all too present.

A small fishing boat zips around a snake-like curve in the Bermejo while we chat. Before I know it, we're in pursuit. The three men, I'm told, have been illegally fishing and poaching animals, including the vulnerable South American tapir. Juber says he's been tracking them all morning, but since it's a new park—and antagonizing locals isn't the plan—the men get off with a stern warning once we catch up. Our confrontation is heated but respectful. I'm comforted by the fact that our boat driver is a man built like Tarzan, even if he's jokingly named Chiquito ("little guy").

We set up camp that afternoon at a sandy beach and hike over cracked earth to a nearby lagoon. The air has an herbaceous smell, while the overall look is of a landscape never truly controlled by humans. It's sunset, and we're here to check for animal tracks.

Dubbed "Argentina's Outback," the Chaco's drier half is a sunbaked land of snakes, caimans, and untamed bush. Juber tells me that the national park will soon be home to six safari-style viewing blinds with attached campgrounds. They'll rise near the buggy lagoons like this one that make El Impenetrable such a rich oasis of biodiversity in an otherwise arid forest. Birding is the top draw (there are some 305 species here), but the park is also home to northern Argentina's big five: the puma, tapir, giant anteater, giant armadillo and, possibly, a jaguar or two (a

BIG CAT SANCTUARY

## NORTHEAST TIGER AND LEOPARD NATIONAL PARK, CHINA

Solitary, nimble-footed, and as frighteningly fast as it is impossibly strong, the spotted Amur leopard is among the world's rarest big cats—there are fewer than 100 left in the wild. Similarly threatened is its striped 600-pound cousin, the Siberian tiger, which is the largest cat on earth. The chance to see both of these enigmatic felines in their natural habitat is the reason China created this 5,600-square-mile reserve in northern Jilin and Heilongjiang provinces, which brush up against the Russian and

North Korean borders. This pilot preserve—the first in a series of national parks dedicated to conserving imperiled species like pandas, Tibetan antelopes, and snow leopards—is slated for a grand opening in 2020, but you can visit now with a guide from China Exploration. You'll slink through the frosty maple forests of the Changbai Mountains in search of elusive tracks and even a rare sighting, which may be the most electric—and spiritual—experience of your life.

**WHERE TO STAY** A melting pot of Russian, Korean, and Chinese cultures, the cosmopolitan border town of Hunchun is, for now, the de facto base for visits to the park, with a series of stoic, soviet-inspired guesthouses. The palatial Xierdun Hotel is the most comfortable and comes with an eyeful of red and gold bling.



FROM TOP: ÁLVARO DEL CAMPB / THE FIELD MUSEUM; FRANK PALI / GETTY IMAGES

telltale sign of a healthy ecosystem).

Part of the park's broader appeal is that it will empower the indigenous Qom and Wichí communities that surround it to be stewards of a forest that's fast disappearing to soy farms and cattle ranches. With the help of the government and several NGOs, these communities have opened craft cooperatives, campgrounds, and kayaking outfits along the Bermejo and Bermejito rivers. By early 2019, they'll also be the caretakers of four eco-lodges.

"Nature has always provided the essentials for the indigenous communities living here," says Juan Honorio Arguelles, of the Gran Chaco Foundation, who joined Juber and me the following afternoon—my final day in El Impenetrable—for a short hike through the columnar cacti of Sendero Conejo de los Palos, the first of several planned trails. "Our goal is to help these communities rise out of poverty by realizing that the future lies in the forest."

While this wild frontier hasn't been on travelers' radars as of yet, both Juber and Arguelles admit that the ambitious plan to turn it into a hub of sustainable tourism won't be easy. But when you're starting from nothing, you haven't got a whole lot to lose.

## ESSENTIAL INFO

**HOW TO GET THERE** Fly to Buenos Aires, then take an hour-and-a-half flight up to Resistencia, the capital of the north-easterly Chaco Province. From Resistencia, Vagabundos Viajes offers guided trips to the park, 230 miles northwest of the city.

**WHERE TO STAY** The first two of four planned eco-lodges are scheduled to open in early 2019 near the indigenous villages of Nueva Población and La Armonía. The nicest campsites available now are by the river at Camping Los Algarrobos, in Nueva Pompeya.

FROM TOP: MAURITIUS IMAGES GMBH / ALAMY STOCK PHOTO; © DESTINATION ASNEN



### A COLLECTION OF WONDERS

## CERRO CASTILLO NATIONAL PARK, CHILE

Imagine a corridor of national parks spanning all the way from Seattle to San Diego. That, in essence, is what Chile created last year with its mind-boggling "route of the parks," a 1,500-mile-long network of 17 reserves connecting the volcano-dotted forests of the country's Lakes District, in the north, with the fjords of

Tierra del Fuego, at the southern tip of South America. Travel to the heart of the route, near the regional capital of Coyhaique, and you'll find Cerro Castillo, a castle-like mountain that was part of a 10-million-acre addition to the national park system this January. The best way to explore the new park is by strapping on a backpack and setting off on foot for a four-day, 34-mile circuit around the spires of this Andean goliath. Along the way you'll experience body-toppling winds, pass three major glaciers, dip your toes in turquoise lagoons, and scramble over high alpine passes. It's like hiking through Colorado's Rocky Mountain National Park, if it were full of guanacos (a cousin of the llama), condors, and endangered guemal deer—and absent the Denver crowds.

**WHERE TO STAY** The tiny service village of Villa Cerro Castillo (population 163) has one homey guesthouse, two campgrounds, and dozens of beret-wearing gauchos who will inevitably pass a gourd of yerba maté your way. Do yourself a favor and accept the offer.

### SCANDINAVIAN LAKE COUNTRY

## ÅSNEN NATIONAL PARK, SWEDEN

Perhaps it's only fitting that Sweden's newest national park, Åsnen—a small, seven-square-mile preserve composed mostly of pine forest and water—has a place called Trollberget ("troll mountain"), whose hidden corridors are said to hold untold treasures. This fabled mount lies along the edge of all that water, Lake Åsnen, a place dually suited for Scandinavian fairy tales. One way to appreciate the area—five hours south of the country's capital, Stockholm—is to paddle the length of the 75-mile-long Värendsleden canoe trail, which

starts in Åsnen park, navigating fast-flowing rivers and glassine fjords en route to an archipelago of more than 100 freshwater islands. Along the way, you can sleep in rustic wind shelters under the stars and discover your Zen amid the whispering pines. Spend enough time amid the beech woodlands along the lake's shores and your eyes will inevitably tune in to the miniature forests of lichen, fungi, and moss. Surely, you'll think, the trolls must live nearby.

**WHERE TO STAY** The shoreline of Lake Åsnen is dotted with comfy cottages and grassy campgrounds, including canoe-accessible Getnö Gård, where you can crack open a lager and watch as osprey swoop into the water, talon-first, to snag their prey. Afterward, you can also fish for pike and perch and cook them on your lakeside fire.

