



IBERÁ NATURE RESERVE, ARGENTINA

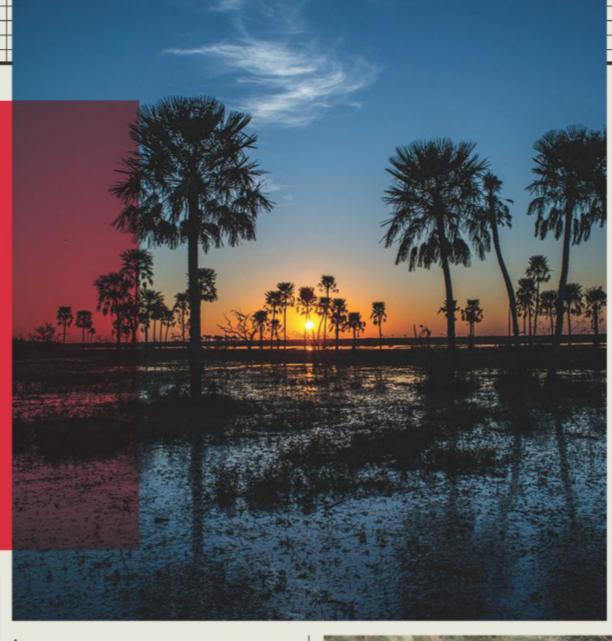
Rewilding in Remote Argentina

a photo of a caiman—basically a South American alligator—in northern Argentina's Iberá Nature Reserve, I was reminded of why this part of the world is so, well, wild. While stretching out my arm to snap a pic of the animal, which was maybe 10 feet away, I realized that my extended hand was hovering a foot above an even bigger caiman, obscured by the water. I nearly upended the kayak recoiling at its murky marble eyes.

But instead of chomping the iPhone out of my hand—and my arm along with it—it didn't even seem to notice me. And that was my experience with nearly all of the animals I witnessed: curiosity rather than concern. This was undisturbed nature, where human presence is a novelty—and a sign that years of dedicated conservation work has paid off.

Iberá, a labyrinth of forests, grasslands, and shallow lagoons, is one of the world's largest wetlands. Yet its name barely even registered two years ago, when a huge swath of it became a national park. Now tourists are catching on that there's a swampy slice of Argentina that's ripe for safari-style adventures to see giant anteaters, marsh deer, and capybaras, the world's largest rodents.

When I arrived after an overnight bus ride from Buenos Aires, the sun burst out of the pancake-flat wetlands as we raced rheas, a cousin of the ostrich, down red-dirt roads. The HQ for the nonprofit behind Iberá is Rincón del Socorro, a grand old estancia outfitted with timber furnishings and thick-framed animal



Iberá's wetlands, above, may soon be one of the best places to see jaguars in the wild, right.

portraits on the walls. It is the creation of Kris Tompkins, the former CEO of Patagonia, and her late husband, Doug, the co-founder of the North Face. Together, over two decades, they acquired private land that was ultimately donated to the federal government to create the park.

What were once rice fields and cattle ranches is now ground zero for the largest and most ambitious rewilding project in the Americas. Five locally extinct or endangered native species—including the pampas deer, giant anteater, and greenwinged macaw—have been reintroduced since work began in 2007. The project will enter its next phase this year when as many as five young jaguars are released on the remote San Alonso Island. It'll be the first time in over half a century that the wild cats have roamed this part of Argentina.

The project's communications director,

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- 77 -



Rafael Abuin Aido, says that reintroducing the apex predator will be the ultimate test of the ecosystem's health. If it works, he says, "Iberá has the potential to become the best destination in the world to see a jaguar in the wild."

While staying there, I contented myself with evening paddles to the floating reed islands of Fernández Lagoon, where I tracked marsh deer and stumbled upon capybara mud baths. Mornings, I hiked along the 6.5-mile Sendero Lobo Cua, which skirts through a palm forest pulsating with the guttural roars of howler monkeys.

The air in the park was thick and herbaceous. More than once, I was tempted to dip my feet into one of Iberá's 75 lagoons, but then thought better of it, remembering stories I heard in the lodge of old hunters who cooled off in the waters only to reemerge half-eaten by piranhas. Yes, this is unspoiled nature—in all its savage beauty. —MARK JOHANSON

ROM TOP: RAFAEL ABUIN: KARINA SPORRING



GANGES RIVER, INDIA

RAFTING THE WORLD'S HOLIEST RIVER



IN INDIA, the Ganges River is sacred water, almost a deity unto itself. It

may also be toxic and full of rotting bodies by the time it empties into the Bay of Bengal. But as it gushes from its source near the Tibetan border, it's something else entirely: wild, unspoiled, and as blue as toothpaste. Outside the Himalayan town of Rishikesh, there's a 25-mile section perfect for rafting, too, offering challenging Class III and IV rapids, as I discovered in December.

Rishikesh is often called the yoga capital of the world. Five decades ago, the Beatles traveled here for a course in transcendental meditation and inspired a generation of seekers to the area. These days, though, it's more about adventure. "The type of people who came here in the past were looking for some sort of spiritual enlightenment, but

the perception has changed," said Deeya Bajaj, my guide at the rafting company Snow Leopard Adventures. The outfit operates three tented camps along the Ganges and has become the de facto operator for all things outdoors in this area of the country. In addition to rafting, there are a labyrinth of mountain paths for trekking, zip-line tours across canyons, and, farther afield, wildlife safaris to see Asian elephants and even Bengal tigers.

Of course, as you travel here, you pass constant reminders of the Rishikesh of yore. There are the Westerners plucking sitars at an ashram dedicated to the late, infamous guru Osho (of Wild Wild Country fame) or the sadhus (Hindu ascetics) laundering orange robes on the river's edge. When you wash up in town, just below the now-abandoned "Beatles ashram," it feels as if some form of enlightenment—be it in mind, body, or spirit—was an inevitable part of the journey. But such is India, even when all you're after is a shot of



TASMANIA, AUSTRALIA

DOWN UNDER'S WILD ISLAND





I'VE ALWAYS associated an Australian adventure with the outback, but the inside scoop some Aussie friends recently showed me is that the island of Tasmania may be the truly wild place

down under. Mainlanders have long trekked to the 26,000-square-mile state to commune with nature, but it has become increasingly accessible to foreigners, with regular flights into the capital city of Hobart.

Nearly half of the island state is protected in 20 national parks and over 800 nature reserves. You won't see any koalas, but wallabies, platypuses, and wombats abound—and you might just glimpse a rare Tasmanian devil if you keep your eyes peeled at night. The community vibe is hospitable yet also gritty and resourceful, dating back to the arrival of convict ships from England in the 19th century. The Launceston region in the north smacks of Napa, while Hobart, on the south shore, is like a scaled-down San Francisco. For a blend of history, art, diverse landscapes, and great food and wine—plus opportunities to sail, hike, bike, golf, surf, and fish—you'd be hard-pressed to find a more mesmerizing island anywhere. —KIRK DEETER

M LEFT: IMAGEDB/ALAMY STOCK PHOTO; COURTESY OF TOURISM AUSTRALIA & SAMUEL SHELLEY; Steven oot; courtesy of saffire freycinet; van holmes