ADVENTURES WITH WILDLIFE

Spotting Wildlife in
THE GALAPAGOS

Tiger Safaris in
INDIA

AFRICA
The Wild Side

Into the Cage of Death
CROC DIVING IN
AUSTRALIA
Featured Contributors

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Melanie's 16 years as a travel writer to over 40 countries has produced adventurous stories for the likes of Outside Magazine, Air Canada, Canadian Geographical, The Toronto Star, Canadian Cycling Magazine, The Globe and Mail and Mountain Life. She has conducted writing workshops around the globe and teaches Travel and Food Writing at Western University in the winter.

LIZ SCULL
Liz is Managing Editor and Creative Director of our award-winning Vacations® magazine and has been working in the travel industry for over 20 years. Liz's job has allowed her to travel the world and is lucky to have experienced once-in-a-lifetime opportunities that she shares with us in this magazine. In this issue, Liz shares her incredible wildlife adventure in the Galapagos and according to Liz, the best trip of her life!

HEATHER GREENWOOD DAVIS
Heather is a world traveller and storyteller. The freelance travel writer, speaker, blogger and family travel advocate is a Contributing Editor for National Geographic Traveler magazine and the resident travel expert on The Social CTV. Over the last 20 years, her pieces highlighting people and destinations around the world have appeared in national and international publications including The Toronto Star, The Globe and Mail, Metro News, Canadian Living, Chatelaine and others. Look for Heather's story from Kaikoura, New Zealand where she got to swim with wild dolphins.

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Mariellen Ward is a Canadian travel writer and digital storyteller. She has a BA in Journalism and runs the award-winning travel blog Breathedreamgo.com, inspired by her extensive travels in India. Mariellen is an advocate of female solo travel and responsible travel. Mariellen has been travelling to India since 2005 and recently moved there. Look for her stories on tiger safaris and solo travel in the Yoga Capital of the World.

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Galapagos Island’s Blue-Footed Booby
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Soft Adventure

Highlights: Adventures in CHINA

By Johanna Read

Of course, I had heard of China's Great Wall, the Terracotta Army, and Chinese megacities; but, setting foot in the country, it's China's lesser-known sites that really impress me.

When it comes to mountains designated for hiking in China, I am surprised at just how many there are – due to popularity, paths are paved, and steps have been added. Several mountains have gondolas taking sightseers up to the best views, but my aching calves remind me that few of these hikes are cakewalks. I'm glad I'm not afraid of heights; pathways are often cantilevered off the sides of cliffs and some bridges are paved with glass. Photo opportunities are everywhere.

Hunan is an ideal province for hikers. The most popular is Wulingyuan Scenic Area. Its soaring tree-topped pillars rising out of the clouds next to steep cliffs inspired the look of the planet Pandora in Avatar. Southwest Hunan has several impressive mountain hikes, such as Tianyi Lane with a rock cleft to walk through and the Bajiaozhai Scenic Area with peaks that look like orca swimming through a foggy ocean.

Mount Sanqingshan, in Jiangxi province, is an immense national park that calls for a multi-day visit. I feel like a kid spotting the dozens of pillars and peaks named for the animals they resemble. In Fujian, I climb Mount Wuyi in the morning for views of the green Nine Bend Stream, and then float down it in a bamboo boat in the afternoon. An easier Fujian hike is to the mother tree of the world's most expensive tea, Big Red Robe.

In addition to the religious temples, many of China's mountains themselves are holy. Mount Lao, in Shandong province near the Olympic sailing city of Qingdao, is a cradle of Taoism. When pointed out to me, I can see how the pale cliffs and thick forest can be auspiciously interpreted as feng shui's white tiger and green dragon. The ancient trees and terraced pathways make for a peaceful hike.

Shanxi province has China's holiest mountain, Mount Wutai, where the Dalai Lama has said he wants to pilgrimage. The UNESCO-honoured Mount Wutai is dotted with beautiful monasteries. Pilgrims walk between them on their knees, while tourists are welcomed in hiking shoes. This hike has pockets of nature, connected by paths and staircases.

CLIMB HIGH FOR CHINESE SPIRITUALITY

China's mountains aren't just for climbing but for worshipping too, with most having at least one temple or shrine. Some are impromptu – I love seeing the red ribbons written with wishes and tied to trees with the hope that a higher power will grant them. I hike past countless working monasteries, complete with monks and worshippers lighting joss sticks before prayers.

China's most impressive temple is also up high. The Hanging Temple in Shanxi province was built over 1,500 years ago and appears suspended from a sheer cliff. Walking through the narrow pagoda rooms and corridors, all made from wood, I'm only slightly reassured that there are supporting beams hidden deep within the cliffs.
EXPLORE UNDERGROUND CHINA

I find spirituality and opportunities for wishing underneath the ground too. Near Mount Wutai are the Yungang Grottoes, 53 natural and man-made caves filled with 51,000 statues and carvings from tiny to immense. Within Hunan’s Yellow Dragon (Huanglong) Cave, visitors can make a wish for the future. I shock my Chinese companions by choosing to walk through the “Happiness” doorway rather than the one marked “Longevity”, the favoured Chinese choice.

China’s caves often have colourful lights highlighting towering stalagmites and dripping stalactites plus laser light shows making designs on walls and pools. It makes exploring them a little Disney-like, especially when accompanied by boat rides through underground rivers. Tianquan Cave in Sichuan even has an amusement-park-like entrance: ride down a long-angled slide atop a burlap sack (or opt for the many staircases).

China’s most famous underground site is the pits which house the Terracotta Army in Shaanxi province. Nearby, I also explore the mystical underground tombs of another emperor, Jingdi. The mausoleum is within a hill and has glass floors over the excavation site filled with tens of thousands of small terracotta animal and human figures.

Sure, China’s big cities fascinate, and it’s important to see top sites like the terracotta warriors and the Great Wall; but, adventuring further afield yields sites perhaps even more remarkable.