

WE TAPPED OUR GLOBAL NETWORK OF CORRESPONDENTS TO BRING YOU *OUTSIDE'S* 2012 TRAVEL AWARDS: A DEFINITIVE ROUNDUP OF THE BEST NEW ADVENTURES, EXOTIC RETREATS, EMPTY BEACHES, LOCAL FOOD, BARS WITH A VIEW, ON-TIME AIRLINES, SCREAMING DEALS, GORGEOUS ISLANDS, AND MORE. THIS ISN'T JUST A COLLECTION OF UNFORGETTABLE TRIPS—IT'S A ROAD MAP TO LIFE-CHANGING EXPERIENCES.

BY STEPHANIE PEARSON
AND KATE SIBER



A fisherman stands on a wooden boat on a body of water. He is wearing a wide-brimmed conical hat, a plaid shirt, and orange pants. He holds a long wooden pole. In the background, there are fishing nets and a wooden structure. The sky is blue with light clouds.

WANDERLIST



Fishermen
on Inle Lake,
Myanmar

Grand Anse Beach, the Seychelles



BEST ISLANDS THE SEYCHELLES

There are islands with white-sand beaches all over the world, but once you've been to the Seychelles nothing seems to measure up. Its 115 islets lie in an end-of-the-world location 700 miles north of Madagascar in the Indian Ocean, which sets the stage of remove. Most hotels have an island to themselves, creating the illusion of a private kingdom. And the Seychelles' clear waters host some of the greatest marine biodiversity on earth, attracting divers, bonefishermen, sea kayakers, and sailors. While you can certainly splurge—the pinnacle of indulgence is still North Island—there's no need to empty your bank account. At the Anse Soleil Beachcomber (from \$88; beachcomber.sc), a hotel with 14 rooms on a secluded beach on Mahe, only a cold beer will distract you from the vista of empty sand and sea.

RUNNER-UP CULEBRA, PUERTO RICO

On many Caribbean islands, \$2.25 won't even get you a



Culebra,
Puerto Rico

cocktail, but on Puerto Rico it'll buy a ferry ride to Culebra, a seven-by-five-mile island that feels much farther than 17 miles away. This is a slice of bygone Caribbean, with not even a hint of a big resort or cruise ship. There are a handful of seafood shacks, small pensions, and a year-round population of about 2,000 laid-back locals. Rent a room at the Palmetto Guesthouse (doubles from \$95; palmettoculebra.com), then wander to the harbor to hire a boatman to take you to beaches unreachable by foot. Culebra Divers offers scuba and snorkel trips (culebradivers.com).

Villa North
Island, the
Seychelles



BEST AIRLINE VIRGIN AMERICA

Leave it to Richard Branson to inject style into the business of flying with the country's newest major airline. The Virgin America lounge at the San Francisco terminal feels like the lobby of a W Hotel, and the planes have mood lighting and hip music playing as you board. With above-average on-time arrivals and departures, the airline also features onboard

Wi-Fi, seat-back screens passengers can use to order meals and cocktails, and sleek entertainment systems with first-run movies, TV shows, and music videos available at a finger swipe. (The airline will debut a system with social-media connectivity later this year.) But what really surprises are the reports of stellar customer service. It's almost as if the flight attendants are happy to work there. virginamerica.com

RUNNER-UP SOUTHWEST

Because of its two-free-checked-bags policy, democratic seating, decent fares, on-time arrivals and departures, good service at check-in and in the air, clean cabins, reliable baggage handling, and helpful website, almost 15,000 *Consumer Reports* readers voted Southwest tops. Enough said. southwest.com

BEST TRAVEL COMPANY GEOGRAPHIC EXPEDITIONS

Our criteria in this category were exhaustive. We looked at the quality of a company's guides, the authenticity and diversity of its trips, its level of service, philanthropic credibility, safety record, and, most important, clients' reviews and experiences. While companies like Austin-Lehman Adventures, OARS, and Wild China scored high marks, Geographic Expeditions stood above the rest. For starters, GeoEx has consistently taken travelers to the most remote regions of the world, from Everest's north side to Patagonia's glaciers to the far reaches of Papua New Guinea. This year it's trailblazing new terrain with a 27-day trek to the north face of K2 (\$11,450; geoex.com). Guided by Vassi Koutsaftis, a 20-year vet who has led treks in Tibet, Pakistan, and Afghanistan, the journey starts on the Silk Road in China's Kashgar and tops out at the 17,056-foot advance base camp of K2. No need to worry about getting back alive. The company's emphasis on safety comes from the top: president Jim Sano, a former Yosemite National Park ranger and search-and-rescue team member, is an accomplished mountaineer himself. The price of every GeoEx trip includes medical assistance and evacuation coverage from Global Rescue and medical-expense insurance through Travel Guard. The company has also pioneered relationships



Torres
Glacier,
Patagonia



Game
viewing,
South
Africa

with nonprofits and NGOs—37 and counting—like the Maasai Conservation Wilderness Trust, which draws in annual tourism revenues of \$750,000, all of which goes straight back to the Masai community. But the primary reason more than half the company's clients come back for more? Its outstanding guides—from Buddhist icon and scholar Robert Thurman, who leads meditation trips in Bhutan, to mountaineer (and *Outside* correspondent) Dave Hahn, the only Westerner to have summited Mount Everest 13 times, who runs the company's expeditions to South Georgia Island in the South Atlantic Ocean.

RUNNER-UP THE WILDERNESS GROUP

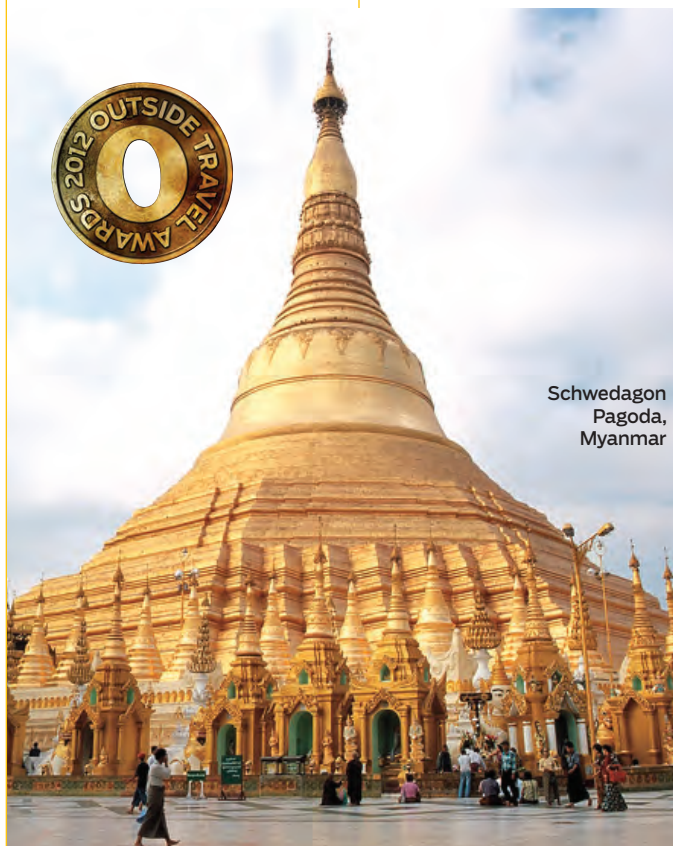
In 1983, Wilderness Safaris, now known as the Wilderness Group, was founded with a simple but novel idea: offer a superior travel experience while conserving land, wildlife, and local culture as part of its business plan. The company now runs more than 60 lodges in nine countries across Africa,

from rustic tented camps in Botswana to tony desert outposts in Namibia. Proceeds from guest fees go to the Wilderness Wildlife Trust, an independent entity that puts 100 percent of its funds toward conservation work, like reintroducing endangered black and white rhinos in Botswana. But customers return for the bucket-list adventures: driving hundreds of miles overland between Botswana's savannas, the Kalahari sands, and the Okavango Delta—spotting elephants, rhinos, zebras, and lions along the way (from \$5,400 per person for seven days; wilderness-safaris.com)—or diving with whale sharks off a private white-sand island in the Seychelles.

BEST NEW FRONTIER MYANMAR

Good news is starting to trickle out of Myanmar, formerly known as Burma. In August 2009, influential pro-democracy activist Aung San Suu Kyi and her party reversed their stance on tourism (it's no longer discouraged); elections—albeit contested—were held for

the first time in decades; and the long-repressive regime has begun losing its grip. Meanwhile, the number of travelers has surged about 60 percent since 2008, and more than a dozen guide services plan to debut trips this year. Still, the place saw only 310,688 travelers in 2010. (By comparison, Nepal brought in more than 600,000.) That may be due to the ethnic conflict with the Kachin Independence Army in the northern region of Kachin. But the fighting is far from the areas of the country most travelers see. So should you go? The pro-tourism argument holds that avoiding government hotels and patronizing small businesses funnels money to locals, who need it. And the appeal is undeniable. A long-standing trade embargo with the West has insulated the country—for better or worse—from modernization. Men still wear traditional skirtlike lungis, horse carts trot dirt roads, and golden stupas and Buddhas are preserved as if in a time warp. Though independent travel is possible—Lonely Planet has a guidebook—getting permits



Schwedagon
Pagoda,
Myanmar



Win one of these dream adventures by entering our What Trip Are You? contest on Facebook. Play now at [facebook.com/outsidemagazine](https://www.facebook.com/outsidemagazine).



Julian Alps, Slovenia



Myanmar youth

to trek or raft is difficult, and public transportation is poor. Asian-travel specialist Effie Fletcher, of Himalayan High Treks, organizes custom trips with local guides (\$100–\$200 per person per day; hightreks.com), including hiking through tiny Buddhist villages in the Shan Plateau mountains, rafting the Malikha River, shopping at a colorful floating market, soaking in hot springs, staying in monasteries few foreigners have ever seen, and visiting the 4,000-plus temples that have stood on the plains of Bagan for more than 800 years.

RUNNER-UP SLOVENIA

Slovenia packs Mediterranean beaches, more than 87 hot springs, rugged peaks in the 9,000-foot Julian Alps, 6,000 miles of trails, and 40-plus ski resorts into an area about the size of New Jersey. Yet it gets a mere three million visitors a year, compared with neighboring Croatia's 10.6 million. Our bet? Not for long. It's easy to get to: drive 3.5 hours from Vienna or fly from a number of European cities into Ljubljana. Slovenia is well organized and locals are friendly, making independent travel easy (slovenia.info). Fish for marble trout, Europe's second-fattest species, in the Soca River with Lustrik Fishing Adventures (lustrik.com), or explore some of the country's 8,000 caves and mountain-bike alpine valleys with outfitter Pac Sports (pac-sports.com). BikeHike Adventures' new eight-day trip (\$3,299; bikehike.com) includes kayaking the Krka River with a Slovenian Olympic medalist, biking through Swiss-like villages, and trekking to a vista above seven alpine lakes in Triglav National Park.

BEST CAMERA

CANON POWERSHOT G-12
Professional photographers use this compact and rugged 10-megapixel camera as a spare. Here's why: it shoots with the power and precision of a DSLR, fits in a breast pocket, captures 720p high-definition video in stereo sound, and sports a flip-out, adjustable viewing screen that allows for discreet composing. \$500; canon.com

RUNNER-UP

NIKON COOLPIX P300
The big news is the P300's 1080p full-HD video, a rarity in compact point-and-shoots—especially at this price. As for still images, it's a 12-megapixel camera in a category that usually tops out at ten. \$330; nikonusa.com

BEST NEW ADVENTURE LODGE

THE SINGULAR, PATAGONIA, CHILE
The Singular's owners took a 100-year-old cold-storage plant and transformed it into a luxe, minimalist 57-room hotel. The best part? It sits a few miles outside of Puerto Natales, on the shoreline overlooking the glacier-backed Fjord of Last Hope, and 70 miles southeast of Torres Del Paine National Park, making it the perfect jumping-off point for guests to get immersed in this massive landscape. The lodge offers more than 20 guided adventures, including boating up the fjord,

riding with gauchos on a private reserve, and trekking to the famous Salto Grande Glacier in Torres del Paine. The hotel's spa overlooks the moody fjord, and dinner is local Magellan lamb or king crab accompanied by any of 135 local wines. Rooms, including transfer and full board, start at \$580; thesingular.com

RUNNER-UP

TSAINA LODGE, ALASKA

Want access to 15,000 vertical feet a day and 900 annual inches of Chugach powder? Valdez Heli Ski Guides just put the finishing touches on Tsaina Lodge, a sleek 24-room building nestled at milepost 35 on Thompson Pass, 40 miles north of Valdez. Each room has huge views of white-capped peaks, the restaurant serves up fresh Alaskan seafood, and the bar sports the woodstove from the legendary old Tsaina tavern, where big-mountain riders like VHSG founder Doug Coombs used to grab a microbrew. Not a bad place to return to after a perfect powder day. Seven nights lodging, 30 guaranteed ski runs, breakfast, airport shuttles, and use of avalanche gear, \$8,340; valdezheliskiguides.com

BEST LUGGAGE

TUMI DUCATI EVOLUZIONE INTERNATIONAL CARRY-ON
For the past seven years, Ted Alan Stedman, our *Buyer's Guide* luggage expert, has tested



Patagonia's Torres del Paine National Park



The Singular hotel's view of the Fjord of Last Hope, Patagonia



can spot an ocelot, puma, or rare cuckoo. \$1,552 per person (double occupancy) for three days, two nights, and all meals; mashpilodge.com

RUNNER-UP
KOSRAE VILLAGE, MICRONESIA

The owners of Kosrae Village developed the Micronesian eco-lodge in 1995, before it was trendy to be sustainable. The reason: between empty beaches, wild rainforest, and ultraclear waters teeming with coral reefs, there's a lot to protect. Visitors kayak through mangroves, hike to ancient ruins, and dive with eagle rays and sharks. Kosrae Village hired local builders to construct the collection of nine low-impact thatch-roof cottages on a small stretch of beach, all fish and produce are purchased from local farmers and fishermen, and the lodge



Heli-skiing Thompson Pass, Alaska

made of 1,200-denier recycled fabric, is ideal for rugged trips that involve flights in small planes and always fits overhead. \$159; patagonia.com

3,116 feet on the western slope of the Andes, Mashpi is surrounded by 500 species of birds, 36 of which can only be found here. It's also a place where you

BEST ECO-LODGE
MASHPI LODGE, ECUADOR

First, it had to have eco cred. Just as important—location. The striking new Mashpi Lodge, with windows so large you feel like you're suspended in a cloud forest, crushes it on both fronts. It runs on hydropower, has a farm for harvesting local papaya and other ingredients for meals, and will one day be majority-owned by the 80-percent-local staff. The lodge sits in, and will help support, 45,500 acres of the Mashpi Rainforest Biodiversity Preserve. Two and a half hours northwest of Quito, at



Mashpi Lodge, Ecuador

hundreds of bags around the world. This one is his favorite. Inspired by the Ducati 1199 Panigale motorcycle, the 35-liter Evoluzione corners nearly as well on its durable wheels; has a telescoping handle, a full zip-around main compartment for easy access, and large and small exterior zip pockets to keep crucial small stuff handy; and slides seamlessly into an overhead compartment. The only problem? Getting your hands on one. The Evoluzione sells out fast. \$545; tumi.com

RUNNER-UP
PATAGONIA MAXIMUM LEGAL CARRY-ON

After rigorous field testing, we know that the 45-liter MLC is enough bag for a 14-day trip to Africa. With tuck-away straps that convert the carry-on into a backpack and no wheels to add weight, the soft-sided MLC,

EASTERN RISING

BUY A TICKET TO JAPAN—REALLY

In the aftermath of the massive earthquake that hit Japan in 2011, tourism dropped as much as 60 percent. Now, one year later, Japan is safe—as long as you're more than 15 miles from the Fukushima power plant—and travelers are returning. To put the danger in perspective, the average radiation dose in Tokyo is less than that of New York City, Berlin, Singapore, Hong Kong, or Seoul. And average hotel rates in Tokyo and other areas are 10 percent lower than pre-tsunami prices. From skiing and snowboarding at world-class resorts like Niseko in the subarctic north; to the granite slabs, cracks, and faces of Mount Ogawa in centrally located Nagano; to surfing the Boso Peninsula in the subtropical south, the adventure options are mind-blowing. No matter where you are in Japan, you're never more than 60 miles from the ocean. Farther inland, there are dozens of volcanic hot springs scattered throughout the country for a mind-clearing soak. The bullet train will take you from Tokyo to the mountain adventure hub of Minikami in 72 minutes. At the base of Mount Tanigawa, at the headwaters of the Tone River, you'll find hiking, climbing, whitewater rafting, and canoeing. Canyons (canyons.jp) will customize any iteration of the above activities. Stay at nearby Bettei Senjuyan, a stunning contemporary *ryoken* with natural hot-spring baths at the foot of the mountain and a beautiful meditation garden (doubles from \$460; senjuyan.jp). —S.P.

FROM TOP: COURTESY OF THE SINGULAR; MIKE BACHMAN; COURTESY OF MASHPI LODGE

owners started the Reef Protection Project, which is monitored by volunteer divers. From \$139 per night; kosraevillage.com

BEST OFF-THE-BEATEN-PATH TRIP

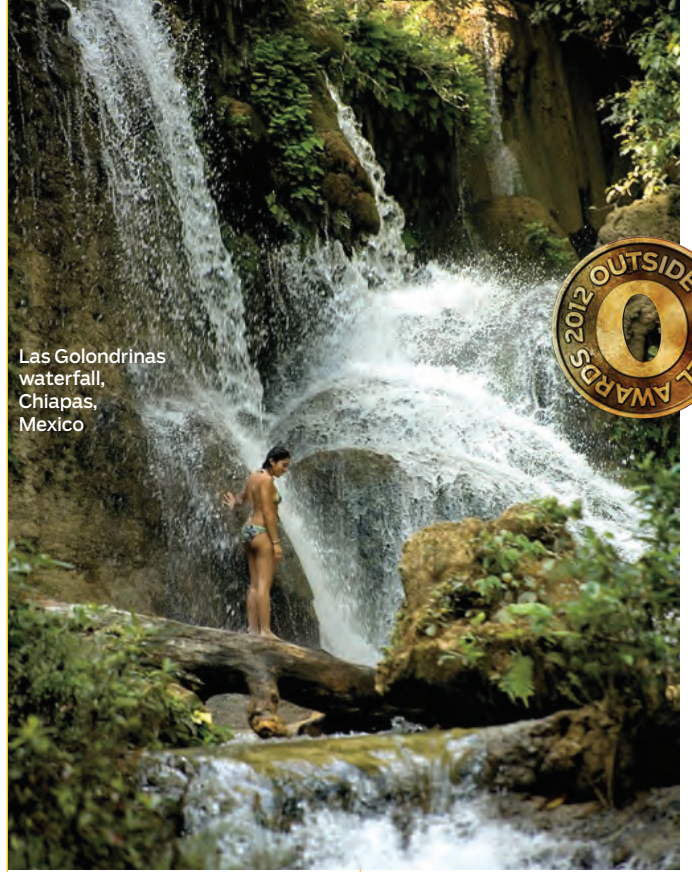
CHIAPAS, MEXICO

Until recently, Mexico's southernmost state was considered a backward land of masked, murderous Zapatista rebels. What gets overlooked: the region hasn't seen violent conflict since 1994, making its mountainous landscape ripe for exploration. Chiapas isn't even mentioned in the U.S. State Department's Mexico travel warning. Your biggest worry here is how to fit in all the rugged wilderness—3,300-foot cliffs for climbing near Tuxtla Gutiérrez; the 13,200-foot Tacaná volcano, straddling the Guatemala border; Class III whitewater on the Lacanja River, in the 818,413-acre, jaguar-populated Montes Azules Biosphere Reserve; and hiking and mountain biking on trails packed down by centuries of use by the indigenous population, many of whom have rarely seen outsiders. Fly to the city of Tuxtla Gutiérrez; hop on a bus for the one-hour ride to San Cristobal de las Casas, a 16th-century colonial city sitting at 7,218 feet; base out of the centrally located Diego de

Mazariegos hotel (doubles, \$96; diegodemazariegos.com.mx); and piece together your own adventure with local rafting and biking guides. Los Pingüinos rents mountain bikes in San Cristobal de las Casas (\$14 per day; bikemexico.com/pinguinos) and offers guided six-hour bike tours of nearby Maya villages, like Chamula (\$50 per day), and four-hour hiking tours of the cloud forest (\$17). Heads up: Chiapas is untapped for adventure tourism, so you won't find outfitters with the latest gear on every corner. For an excellent eight-day immersion, the Muddy Boot offers a trip that includes visits to the seventh- and eighth-century ruins Palenque and Yaxchilán, a stay at a jungle lodge on the Lacantún River, a visit to a biology research center in the Maya Biosphere Reserve, and time to explore San Cristobal de las Casas (\$2,555 based on double occupancy; themuddyboot.org).

RUNNER-UP CENTRAL BLACK SEA COAST, TURKEY

Turkey sees some 30 million tourists each year, but very few of them ever make it to the remote central Black Sea coast, a four-hour drive north from Ankara. Which is good for you, because the region's mile-

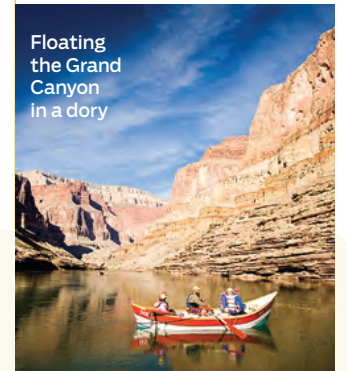


Las Golondrinas waterfall, Chiapas, Mexico



long beaches, empty coastline dotted with ancient cities like Amasra, and absurdly good seaside restaurants remain undiscovered. Even fewer people make it to Kure National Park, a pristine enclave of forests and gorges with a series of hiking trails recently crafted from ancient footpaths. English speakers are hard to come by, even in hotels. Brave it on your own or hire a seasoned Turkish

guide, like Turan Kirac, who runs BikeHike trips in Turkey but guides independently in this region. He'll lead you on a custom road trip from the



Floating the Grand Canyon in a dory

HALL OF FAME

GET YOUR LIFE LIST OUT—HERE ARE SOME OF OUR ALL-TIME FAVORITES

Knock Off Two Icons: Hit Machu Picchu and the Galápagos in one adventure with REI's new multisport itinerary. The 14-day trip includes rafting Peru's Class I–III Urubamba River, a train ride to Machu Picchu with a guided hike among the ruins, and hiking, swimming, kayaking, snorkeling, and cycling in the Galápagos. From \$5,799; rei.com

Float the Grand Canyon in a Dory: A classic 87-mile trip from Lees Ferry to Phantom Ranch with OARS, the grandfather of Colorado River running. Pass the cliffs of Marble Canyon, hike to Native American ruins, camp on sandy beaches, and

ride 19 major rapids in a storied wooden dory, which holds four guests and is much more elegant than a raft. Six-to-eight-day trip from \$2,943; oars.com

Ski-Trek Antarctica: Twelve skiers pull their own 70-pound sledges from Antarctica's King Haakon Bay more than 20 miles to Fortuna Bay, recreating portions of Shackleton's famed 1916 route. The precipitous alpine route, with hazardous crevasses and high winds, makes for an unforgettable journey. From \$14,630; oceanwide-expeditions.com

Climb Mount Kilimanjaro and See the Big Five: This journey starts with a ten-day climb of Kilimanjaro via the Grand Traverse, a little-traveled route that virtually circumnavigates the famed

19,341-foot peak. Add on a 12-day safari, including game drives in the most wildlife-rich area of northern Tanzania and three days walking in the Great Rift Valley. \$14,500; thomson treks.com

Fly-Fish Alaska: Rainbow King Lodge, on the shore of Lake Iliamna, the largest lake in Alaska, has always been the gold standard for serious fishermen. Under new ownership, the rustic, seventies-era cedar-log lodge underwent a makeover with major upgrades. But it's still about the fish. With three DeHavilland airplanes and private leases to more than 98,000 acres, fly-fish for trophy king in the morning and deep-sea-fish for halibut in the afternoon. \$7,500 for six nights all-inclusive, except for air transfer; rainbowking.com

Trek New Zealand: After ten years of trail building, New Zealand's Te Araroa—the Long Pathway—is open. The 1,864-mile path starts at Cape Reinga, at the northern tip of the North Island, requires a ferry ride across the Cook Strait, and ends on the southernmost tip of the South Island. For routes and map notes, go to teararoa.org.nz.

Explore Cuba: If you'd rather not enter Cuba illegally, Austin Lehman's 100 percent legal ten-day, total-immersion tour gets you deep into Cuban history and onto tropical trails and the island's unbelievably pristine beaches. \$4,498; austin lehman.com —S.P.

FROM TOP: CHICO SANCHEZ/AURORA; JUSTIN BAILE/AURORA

Amasra,
Turkey



Riding the
Giro d'Italia
course



Sierra
Cascades
route



Ottoman-era, Unesco World Heritage town of Safranbolu, along the dramatic California-like seashore, to the ancient mountain village of Azdavay (from \$120 per day; kiracturan@hotmail.com).

BEST NEW BIKING TRIP
CERVÉLO PRO TRAVEL EXPERIENCE

Leave it to Butterfield and Robinson and bike manufacturer Cervélo to raise the bar for outfitted trips tied to races. This year they're offering nine, including the Amgen Tour of California and the Tour de France, to name two. The difference? You'll be on Cervélo R3 team bikes—and get to test a Cervélo S5, the cycling equivalent of a Ferrari—and cover the exact same routes as the pros do mere hours before the peloton screams by. You'll ride in a peline and have support from a team car and a soigneur for water refills and pre- and post-ride massages. And you'll schmooze with pros along the way. It's the closest most of us will ever get to the front line of race culture. After rides like the famed Col d'Aubisque on the Tour de France trip (July 14–20; \$4,995; butterfield.com), cyclists sack out in grand historic hotels, gorge on butter-heavy meals, and top it all off with a snifter of cognac.

RUNNER-UP
THE SIERRA CASCADES BICYCLE ROUTE

When the Adventure Cycling Association debuted the new Sierra Cascades route in 2010, the 2,389 miles connecting Sumas, Washington, and Tecate, California, became the most challenging border-to-border road ride ever designed, with some 20 passes. The good news: its leg-pulverizing challenge is matched only by its spectacular views. Tracing the Pacific Crest Trail through a greatest hits of western scenery, riders see the volcanoes of the Cascades, groves of sequoias, Lake Tahoe, the Sierra Nevada, and beautifully desolate stretches of the Mojave Desert. Pit stops include Mount Rainier, Crater Lake, and Yosemite national parks. Riders typically use the ACA's set of five maps—which include detailed directions and landmarks like campgrounds, motels, gas stations, and bike shops—to navigate the route, which takes about 50 days to complete if you average 55 miles per day. Or bite off a chunk, like the nine-day, 446-mile stretch between Mount Rainier, Washington, and Crater Lake, Oregon (map section 2; adventurecycling.org), which passes through Hood River, the Columbia River Gorge, and Bend, Oregon, where the beer flows freely.

BEST NEW SAFARI
ODZALA-KOKOUA NATIONAL PARK, CONGO

Next month the Wilderness Group will open the first two camps in the Republic of the Congo's Odzala-Kokoua National Park, introducing travelers to a creature few people have ever witnessed in the wild: the western lowland gorilla. Rwanda has long been known as a gorilla-watching hot spot, but in Congo you'll see few other visitors. (The peaceful country is often confused with its more tumultuous neighbor, the Democratic Republic of the Congo.) Local Mbeti trackers lead hikes through forests and savannas to observe these close evolutionary relatives foraging, socializing, and caring for young. By evening guests retire to one of two lavish camps, each with six low-impact bamboo suites. It comes at a price (\$6,000 per person for a six-night safari; unchartedoutposts.com), but the experience is singular.

RUNNER-UP
NGOMA SAFARI LODGE, BOTSWANA
Because of a prescient commitment to conservation, Botswana has some of the largest concentrations of wildlife in southern Africa—herds of hundreds of elephants aren't uncommon

here. The newest addition to Botswana's safari offerings is the luxurious community-run Ngoma Safari Lodge, which opened last spring near Chobe National Park. Each of the eight thatched suites, with atrium ceilings and canopy beds, looks over the Chobe River floodplain, which is dotted with elephants, zebra, and buffalo. From \$495 per person per night, all-inclusive; ngomasafarilodge.com

BEST BEACH
MAHAULEPU BEACH, KAUAI
There are plenty of Hawaiian beaches well suited to sipping mai tais, surfing, and admiring a parade of imaginative swimwear. Mahaulepu is not one of them. Located on the south side of Kauai, this two-mile stretch of coast is accessible only by a brain-rattling two-mile dirt road or a three-mile hike that passes by Hawaii's biggest sinkhole cave—both of which tend to weed out the cooler-toting riffraff. The area is considered sacred by native islanders, with ancient burial sites in the dunes and water

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: IZZET KERIBAR; JERED GRUBER; GREGG BLEAKNEY

where endangered monk seals outnumber people and whales pass by in winter. Bring a sailboard, snorkel the offshore reef, or simply take in the mountains and the sea from your own private stretch of shore. The closest hotel is the Grand Hyatt Kauai Resort in Koloa (kawaii.hyatt.com), two miles away. This is the Hawaii of centuries ago. malama-mahaulepu.org

Mahaulepu Beach, Kauai



RUNNER-UP

ILHA GRANDE, BRAZIL

No country does beach culture better than Brazil, and Ilha



Ilha Grande, Brazil

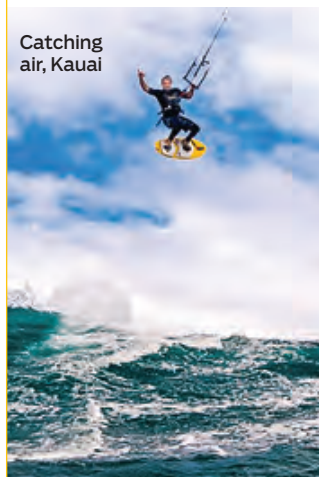


Off the coast of Ilha Grande, Brazil

Grande's 106 white-sand ones are pristine. One hundred miles southwest of Rio and 14 miles into the Atlantic, this 75-square-mile island was once home to Brazil's common criminals. The prison closed in 1994, and the government turned the island into a reserve. Abraão is

the only town large enough to mention, and most beaches are a short hike, bike, or boat ride away. Lopes Mendes, with its empty lineup, is impossible to beat for surfers. Stay at Abraão's Pousada Naturalia (\$135; pousadanaturalia.net), a small guesthouse with a hammock on

Catching air, Kauai



your own private balcony, a mere 150 feet from Praia do Canto beach, another beauty.

**BEST VIDEO CAMERA
GOPRO HD HERO2
PROFESSIONAL**

The company's latest helmet-mountable camera has a lens that's twice as sharp, and an image processor that's twice as fast, as the original's. It also has an 11-megapixel sensor, up to 1080p video resolution, and an integrated battery warmer. Users cite its excellent image and

audio quality and especially its bomber waterproof housing—the Hero2 can handle tumbles in snow and big waves. Available in outdoor, motorsports, and surf editions. \$300; gopro.com

**RUNNER-UP
CONTOUR GPS**

This tiny, 5.2-ounce 1080p video camera is embedded with a GPS receiver that automatically tracks your speed, location, and elevation up to four times per second. Download the Contour app to your smartphone and you have an instant wireless handheld viewfinder. The one bummer: the Contour lacks the waterproof casing necessary for soggy outdoor pursuits, which also makes wind noise louder at higher speeds. \$300; contour.com

**BEST WEEKEND ESCAPE
VANCOUVER, BRITISH
COLUMBIA**

Vancouver has 250 miles of bike lanes and paths, at least 100 North Shore mountain-bike trails spread across three mountains, 11 miles of beach, the best



Kayaking off Vancouver Island, British Columbia

oysters you'll ever slurp (at the Bluewater Café; bluewatercafe.net), and, within two hours inland, some of the best skiing, mountain biking, fly-fishing, whitewater rafting, hiking, and climbing on the planet. Not to mention the protected coves and bays for sea-kayaking Vancouver Island, just a 1.5-hour ferry hop away. Book a room downtown at the 47-room Victorian Hotel (doubles, US\$89-\$179; victorianhotel.ca) and rent one of its Pashley Cruisers (US\$40 per day) to tour the city. Want big mountains? Hop the Rocky Mountaineer train downtown for a 3.5-hour ride winding through canyons and up steep mountain grades to Whistler (round-trip from US\$264; rockymountaineer.ca). The lift-accessed Whistler Mountain Bike Park has more than 4,946 vertical feet (whistlerbike.com). Want watery fun? Fly-fishermen catch and release steelhead on one of the myriad Sea to Sky rivers, like the nearby Upper Cheakamus. For more water, raft the Elaho Squamish, a thrilling Class III-IV ride (from US\$165 per person for a day trip; wedgerafting.com). Stay at the Nita Lake Lodge, a classic log building on the shore of Nita Lake, less than five minutes from the Whistler train station and trailheads to



Mount Lemmon ride, Tucson, Arizona

world-class hiking, biking, and skiing (doubles from US\$229; nitalakelodge.com).

RUNNER-UP TUCSON, ARIZONA World-class athletes know that Tucson is an excellent place to train in winter. For one thing, it's warm: the dry Sonoran Desert sees 84-degree highs in October and November, and temps range from 68 to 99 February through June. Base out of the Arizona Inn (doubles, \$299; arizonainn.com), then start exploring. There are more than 500 miles of premier road biking nearby, and desert singletrack radiates in every direction, including the 16-mile Molino Milagrosa Loop east of the city, which climbs up the side of Mount Lemmon. Hikers



A waterfall along Vancouver's Fraser River



Montanya's tasting room

can choose from more than 165 miles of trails in nearby Saguaro National Park.

BEST APRÈS-ADVENTURE BAR MONTANYA DISTILLERS, CRESTED BUTTE, COLORADO Montanya Distillers, which opened a rum distillery and tasting room in Crested Butte in November, has notably upped the standard for ski-town cocktails. They craft their Platino

and Oro rums from spring water, Hawaiian sugarcane, and local honey, and have snagged an impressive amount of gold hardware at spirits competitions in the past three years. Order the Freestyle (lemon juice, basil leaves, clove syrup, pineapple, and Oro, with a turbinado-sugar rim) or the Teocalli Martini (lime, mint, cucumber-infused Platino rum, and honey-lavender syrup) at an antique bar under the 40-foot ceilings of a former powerhouse that has hosted mountain folk for over a century.

RUNNER-UP THE RHUM BAR, BEAUFORT, NORTH CAROLINA At the Rhum Bar, at the Front Street Grill at Stillwater, it's all about the waterfront deck, which is perched over the Beaufort Inlet. The bartender

FROM TOP: MICHAEL HANSON/CORBIS; CHRIS JOHN/S/GETTY; TY MILFORD/AURORA; SCOTT DW SMITH



Skogafoss waterfall, Iceland

whips up an awesome mojito—then kick back for killer sunset views. Come by car or boat. frontstreetgrillatstillwater.com

BEST DEAL
ADVENTURE CAMPING SAFARIS IN KENYA

Gamewatchers Safaris' new six-night Adventure Camping Safaris (porini.com) have all the trappings of an expensive tour—highly trained guides, Land Cruisers, chef-cooked meals—with two notable differences. Instead of swanky lodges, guests stay in simple Coleman tents (patrolled by armed watchmen at night), and instead of paying up to \$4,200, clients pay \$1,550. See the rare African wildcat and gerenuk, a long-necked antelope, in the Selenkay Conservancy, and watch a pride of 25 lions on the hunt in the Ol Kinyei Conservancy in the Masai Mara. Come evening, sit next to a campfire and watch the sun set behind Mount Kilimanjaro.



Hiking north of Reykjavik

Ring Road, stopping to dive the ultraclear Silfra Ravine between continental plates; hike over glacier-carved valleys to hot springs and waterfalls in the Skaftafell area of Vatnajokull National Park; sea-kayak through deep fjords (h2outfitters.com); raft the Class II–III Hvita River (arcticrafting.com); or fish for salmon on the newly opened Stóra Laxá River (\$4,000 for seven days; lax-a.net).

BEST HIMALAYAN TRIP
TREKKING THE TSUM VALLEY

Most trekkers don't stray far from Nepal's obvious routes, like the Annapurna Circuit and Everest Base Camp, which might explain why the Tsum Valley, a remote north-central region nine hours by bus from Kathmandu that opened in 2008, sees fewer than 500 travelers annually. That could



Maasai guards at Porini Rhino Camp, Kenya



change quickly as word trickles out about a region where women spin wool by hand, men in Tibetan hats ride jangling horses on centuries-old paths, and many households still brew homemade *raksi*, a local moonshine. You need a permit to trek on your own here, and local guides and porters can be found at Tsumvalley.org. Or go with Mountain Madness's new 27-day trip and trek with a local lama through valleys dotted with monasteries and surrounded by 18,000-foot peaks (Nov. 6–Dec. 2; \$4,900; mountainmadness.com). One World Trekking's Tsum Valley Research Trek is another good option, a 21-day trip that passes hot springs, peaks, waterfalls, and hamlets (Oct. 7–27; from \$2,495; oneworldtrekking.com).

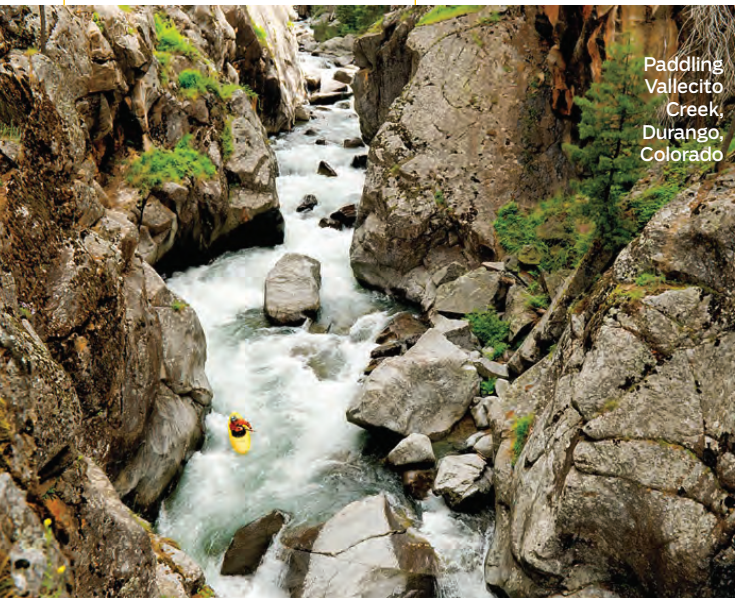
RUNNER-UP
MOUNTAIN-BIKE THE HIMALAYAS

This year, World Expeditions introduces a novelty: a 25-day Himalayan mountain-bike expedition between Lhasa, Tibet, and Kathmandu (May 6–30; \$4,890; worldexpeditions.com). Riders cover as much as

56 miles per day on remote four-wheel-drive roads and singletrack under the shadows of the tallest peaks on earth, including a three-day side trip to Tibet's Everest Base Camp to see the North Face of the famed mountain. Camp and stay in guesthouses in tiny, seldom-visited Buddhist villages, ascend three passes over 16,000 feet, and top it off with a screaming 11,000-foot descent from the Tibetan Plateau to Kathmandu.

BEST NEW ADVENTURE HUB
LAKE WANAKA, NEW ZEALAND

When tourists in New Zealand want adventure, they go to Queenstown. When Kiwis want to escape, they head an hour north to tiny Lake Wanaka, a town of 5,037 right next to Mount Aspiring National Park that's emerging as the country's Jackson, Wyoming. Lake Wanaka is surrounded by the Crown Range and the Southern Alps, and sits on the shore of New Zealand's fourth-largest lake. There are two ski resorts, Treble Cone and Cardrona, roughly 20 miles away; more than 20 mountain-bike trails



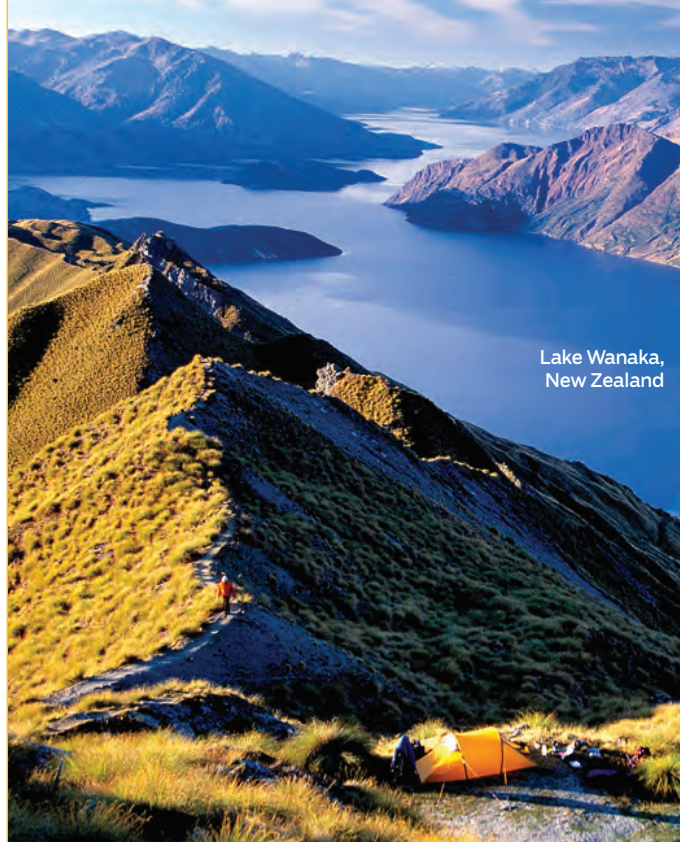
Paddling Vallecito Creek, Durango, Colorado

in Sticky Forest, five minutes north of town; endless mountainous road cycling; and 74-square-mile Lake Wanaka for sea kayaking, sailing, fishing, and swimming. The Wanaka Homestead (doubles, \$143; wanakahomestead.co.nz), just a few hundred feet from Lake Wanaka, has an alpine-lodge feel and is an easy walk to town. Or splurge at the Whare Kea (doubles from \$1,158; wharekealodge.com), an elegant lodge on the edge of Mount Aspiring National Park that offers everything from backcountry heli-skiing to fly-fishing. Cyclists: sign on to Active New Zealand's eight-day Zone (\$2,999; activenewzealand.com), a challenging trip that starts in Christchurch and crosses the South Island's two major passes: 3,018-foot Arthur's and 1,850-foot Haast.

The last two days, you'll bike the 40 miles from Wanaka to Queenstown.

RUNNER-UP
DURANGO, COLORADO

Durango an adventure-sports capital? Go in April and you'll see why. Within an hour of town, you can ski spring corn, nordic-ski around an alpine lake, kayak the Animas River, catch fat trout, hike a thirteener, ride 10,000-foot passes on a dizzy-making scenic byway, and mountain-bike blue-ribbon singletrack. Packed with college students and young transplants, the populace is uniquely devoted to the pursuit of fun, which might explain the four micro-breweries and outside nightlife for a town of 16,000 three hours from an interstate. Stay at the Rochester, a historic hotel that has a full breakfast and free



Lake Wanaka, New Zealand

cruiser bikes for guests (from \$129; rochesterhotel.com). Large groups can base-camp at the Treehouse, a downtown vacation rental with a hot tub, views of the mountains, and singletrack right out the back door (from \$1,400 per week for up to ten; vrbo.com/312061). Did we mention the 300-plus days of sunshine?

BEST TRAVEL INVESTMENT
TRAVEL GUARD

More than 1,200 travel companies sell Travel Guard insurance to their clients. Here's why: the insurer, which has been in business for more than 25 years,

has a base policy that includes vacation and trip cancellation, travel interruption and delay, emergency medical and health expenses, lost baggage, and more. It also offers two important add-ons: hazardous-sports protection of up to \$25,000, with coverage of injuries incurred while high-altitude trekking or bungee jumping, among other pursuits; and evacuation coverage of up to \$1 million. Policy costs vary depending on age and the length and price of the trip, but are far less than chartering a helicopter should things go drastically wrong. travelguard.com

CLICK HERE

THE BEST TRAVEL TOOLS TO GET YOUR TRIP DIALED

Twitter Feed:

@airfarewatchdog George Hobica, the founder of Airfarewatchdog, has by-the-minute scoops on fare sales, tips for maximizing frequent-flier miles, and hints for sleuthing airfare deals.

Travel App: Localscope Tell Localscope your need, from an ATM to a beer, and the magic app will search Google, Twitter, Facebook, Bing, YouTube, and other

social media to turn up the best options and map them in seconds. \$2; cynapse.com

Outdoor App:

Accuterra Unlimited Accuterra Unlimited downloads detailed topo maps of five million square miles of recreational terrain in the continental U.S. and Hawaii. It also triangulates your location with cell service, all at a fraction of the cost of a map-loaded GPS. \$30; accuterra.com

Voluntourism Vetter:

GoVoluntouring The problem with voluntour-

ism trips: you don't know how effective they are. GoVoluntouring painstakingly vets and catalogs effective and ethical trips from a variety of outfitters. govolutouring.com

Travel Site: Local Guiding

Local Guiding connects far-flung travelers with guides around the world. Most are licensed, some are private citizens, and the majority have been rated and reviewed by the site's users. The result: authentic travel experiences at prices that are usually cheaper than those charged by big companies. localguiding.com —K.S.

RUNNER-UP

GLOBAL RESCUE

The official emergency-response service for the U.S. ski and snowboard teams and the American Alpine Club, Global Rescue has saved a woman gored by a Cape buffalo in Africa and climbers caught in a violent miner's strike in Indonesia. Its medics are largely military-trained former Special Forces, and they're like having a Navy SEAL team at your disposal. They'll not only get you out of danger, but they'll also deposit you at the hospital of your choice (wherever that may be). Individual member-



Above and left, rooms at Sweden's Treehotel



ships, \$329 per year for medical only and \$655 with security; globalrescue.com

BEST NEW HOTEL TREEHOTEL, SWEDEN

A lot of great hotels have opened in the past couple of years, but we have a thing for treehouses. The Treehotel's five surreal "rooms" sit as high as 18 feet off the ground in a 100-year-old pine forest with views of the Lule River near the village of Harads (pop. 600), roughly 600 miles north of Stockholm. Choose from a flying saucer, a mirrored cube, a bird's nest with a retractable staircase, the Blue Cone (which is actually red), and a futuristic "cabin" with a rooftop deck that looks as if it's floating in the canopy. Then there's the Tree Sauna, a traditional wood-fired Swedish steam room with a hot tub out the door. Guests eat in the 1950s-era Britta's Pensionat, a five-minute walk away, or order "tree service." Doubles from \$590 per night; treehotel.se

RUNNER-UP WASHINGTON SCHOOL HOUSE, PARK CITY, UTAH

Park City is a mecca for winter fun, with average annual snow-

fall of 360 inches. But few know that come summer, the crowds thin and the locals have excellent mountain biking and hiking on more than 150 miles of Wasatch trails practically to themselves. The Washington School House, an 1889 National Historic Registry icon just two blocks from the town lift, is in the center of it all. Last summer the building was gutted, and it reopened in December with 12 spacious rooms and suites, a fireside lounge, a private chef, and a heated pool and spa terraced into the hillside out back, making it difficult to motivate for a ride but all the sweeter when you return. Doubles from \$400 per night; washingtonschoolhouse.com

BEST SURF TRIP FROM CAPE TOWN TO DURBAN, SOUTH AFRICA

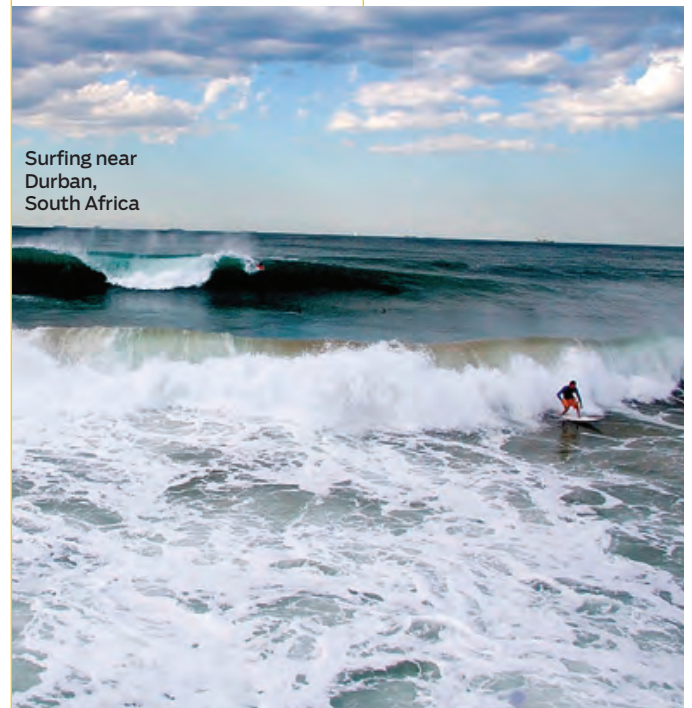
The stunning 1,000-mile coastal drive between Cape Town and Durban offers more consistently uncrowded waves than anywhere else in the world. Why? Southern Ocean storms produce southwest waves that start as raw, monster swells in spots like Dungeons and Sunset Reef near Cape Town, then mellow out along the coast at Mossel and Victoria Bays, ultimately feeding one of the best right-hand point breaks in the world at Jeffrey's Bay, 423 miles east of Cape Town.

Past Jeffrey's Bay, there are ridiculously empty spots, like Seal Point and East London, all the way to Durban. Rent a VW bus in Cape Town through Lekker Camper (standard two-berth bus from \$80 per day; lekkercamper.co.za), which will drop off the vehicle at the airport, then check in at Surf Zone (surfzone.co.za) on Big Bay for surf reports, shark reports (attacks are a real threat in places), and last-minute necessities. Before hitting the coast-hugging N2 Highway, have a beer on the Bikini Deck at the Brass Bell and watch surfers take on sketchy Kalk Bay Reef. Then stop wherever the waves look good. Roughly halfway up

the coast at Jeffrey's Bay, take a break from the van and rent a room at the African Perfection Lodge, a surfer's hangout that overlooks the famed Supertubes and offers B&B rooms, self-catering digs, or an entire house (from \$54 per person per night including breakfast; africanperfection.co.za). Splurge at die Walskipper for some of the best seafood in South Africa. In the unlikely event that you hit a bad day—hey, you're in South Africa. Go see the Big Five.

RUNNER-UP PAVONES, COSTA RICA

Pavones's location—far down Costa Rica's Pacific coast, a jostling two-hour drive from the nearest airstrip—keeps its waves uncrowded. Services in town are limited to a couple of mini-marts, a handful of guesthouses, a beach bar, and one glorious half-mile-long left surf break called Rio Claro. Though most surfers come between March and September, when South Pacific storms bring swells across the ocean, it's rare that the surf falls below waist-high at Rio Claro or the half-dozen other point breaks in the area. Rent one of four artfully simple stucco *cabinas* at Rancho Cannatella (\$25–\$35 per person; pavonesranhocannatella.com), run by a laid-back American surfer and his Costa Rican wife, who offer lessons on blissfully empty breaks.



Surfing near Durban, South Africa