

WILDLIFE
ENCOUNTERS

Six of the best

Snorkelling with orcas. Hand-feeding hyenas. Wild beasts can be beauties up close — **Chris Allsop** can't wait 'til he sees the whites of their eyes...



1 Otter-spotting Shetland Isles, UK

The encounter: Not content with taking over YouTube — stealing the limelight from kittens and their cute antics — otters and their squeaky offspring have been quietly reconquering Britain's rivers and coasts. As you'll see if you head north to the craggy Shetland Isles, home to the highest density of Eurasian otters in the country. How close can you get? Local guide-spotter Brydon Thomason has had them clamber over his shoes (unwittingly, as they're not eagle-eyed; that said, other senses are razor sharp, and a camera-click will send them scurrying). Summer may be the best season for the Shetlands, but not until autumn and winter do mothers start teaching their young cubs life skills — including how to get their internet break.

More animal magic: After spying on the otters, explore Shetland's shores by kayak, paddling its subterranean marine passages as your whoops echo off sheer cliffs, and navigating rock stacks as you scan the horizon for seals as well as the extraordinary birdlife of this sub-arctic archipelago. Family-run Sea Kayak Shetland (01595 840272, seakayakshetland.co.uk) has day tours for £80pp, all equipment and tuition included.

Make it happen: Shetland Nature (01957 710000, shetlandnature.net) has guided day tours for £245 for two, and holiday packages (with an otter-tracking day and boat trip to a seabird colony) such as the five-night 'Shetland Spring Experience Long Weekend' for £995pp, all-inclusive.



2 Tracking wolf packs

Yellowstone, Wyoming, USA

The encounter: Banish thoughts of freezing in some hide like in a wildlife-documentary, eyes peeled in vain for a glimpse of grey fur. Think, rather, reality TV, only with wolves. Here, in 9,000sq km of Yellowstone National Park, you are guided by biologists and volunteers engaged in wolf-monitoring year-round, who can fill you in on the quirks of those lupine residents as you advance through the wilderness. Time a visit for winter, when the creatures are more visible against the snow (you can expect crowds in summer) — and when you're also likely to see grizzly bears, eagles and elks.

More animal magic: After the ground tour, hop in a helicopter and soar over herds of buffaloes,

thousands strong, gawping in amazement at thundering waterfalls and the peaks of the Teton mountains. Rocky Mountain Rotors (00 1406 579 9312, rocky mountainrotors.com) has heli-tours from £640 per hour (up to three passengers); book four weeks in advance for late spring or summer dates.

Make it happen: National Park-approved providers the Wild Side (00 1406 223 6634, wolftracker.com) offers wildlife excursions (£512 for two people per day). Virgin Atlantic (virginatlantic.com) and Delta (delta.com) fly to Bozeman, with connections through Salt Lake City; fares from £554. Hire a cabin at Yellowstone River Lodge (yellowstoneriverlodgemt.com; from £116 per night).

3 Swimming with sharks

Ningaloo Reef, Western Australia

The encounter: To watch this speckled monster languidly propelling its bus-length body through the ocean gloom is, for many, the definitive underwater prize. You can swim with these, the world's largest fish, in tropical waters around the world, but Ningaloo Reef — part of Western Australia's Coral Coast — is tantalisingly accessible, especially for families, delivering balmy mid-20s sunshine during UK summer holidays, too. A few hundred metres offshore lies fringing reef, where fish in kaleidoscope colours gather year-round, along with manta rays and dugongs. Be here between March and July to witness the whale sharks nonchalantly steal the show, swanning into the clear turquoise waters to feed on krill.

More animal magic: Charter a live-aboard and you'll access dive sites all your own, with enough parrot fish, giant clams and sea turtles to guarantee a day's snorkelling. Then, as your fingers de-prune back on board, sip Australian Sauv, while the chef cooks your freshly caught dinner. Sail Ningaloo (sailningaloo.com.au) has three, five, and nine-night live-aboard trips, from £1,104pp; flights extra.

Make it happen: Exmouth's Sea Breeze Resort (00 618 9949 1800, seabreezeresort.com.au) has a five-day 'Complete Whale Shark Package' from £1,365, B&B, for a family of four with car; flights excluded. Qantas (qantas.com.au) has return flights in the summer from Heathrow to Exmouth, via Dubai and Perth, from £891. ➤

4 Polar bear safari on foot

Churchill, Manitoba, Canada

The encounter: They're almost three metres tall, weigh nearly a tonne, and sprint at 40km an hour — no wonder walking safaris in search of polar bears are rare. But that doesn't deter Churchill Wild (churchillwild.com), operating out of remote Nanuk Polar Bear Lodge in Manitoba province, on Hudson Bay. You get cosy, stripped-down comfort, juicy caribou steaks for dinner, and an on-foot polar bear safari with experts. The two main viewing periods in Manitoba are July/August and October/November — October being your best bet,

when it's a little colder and the world's largest carnivore is more active. To see them in the flesh is so extraordinary that the pyrotechnics of the Northern Lights are reduced to a sideshow.

More animal magic: Savour the unique and wonderful shock of bubbles agitating the base of your sea-kayak as, peering over the side, you come face-to-face with a ghostly white whale drifting below. Churchill (aka 'the Polar Bear Capital of the World') also moonlights as the 'Beluga Whale Capital of the World'. A waterproof

video camera on a stick is an essential accessory as you navigate your vessel among these playful canoe-length cetaceans, which mass here, in the local estuary, in their thousands (seanorthtours.com).

Make it happen: Frontier Canada (020 8776 8709, frontier-canada.co.uk) offers Churchill Wild's 'Hudson Bay Odyssey' and Sea North Tours' 'Kayaking with Beluga Whales' on a seven-day package, from £6,649pp, with Heathrow flights to Winnipeg, via Toronto, and most meals. ▶





5 Feeding hyenas

Harar, Ethiopia

The encounter: As the sun sets red over the Ethiopian city of Harar, a doleful howling starts up. It's the sound of the hyena men — Harari — who summon the wild hyenas to feed, as a distraction for passers-by. Peaceful human co-existence with hyenas stretches back centuries here, as evidenced by the hyena holes — think massive cat-flaps built into the walls of this labyrinthine Unesco World Heritage Site. The daredevil ways of the hyena men are said by some to be a harvest ritual. Others claim that it deters the hyenas from devouring the locals. The good news is that you can join in — the best time is during our wintertime (when here it's 20°C and dry), after a few jars of the locally brewed Hakim Stout. It's a nervy but memorable

experience, having a wild hyena snatch meat from the stick you're holding in your mouth. Don't forget your vaccinations.

More animal magic: Meet the hyena men on a 12-day African wildlife tour. Begin in the biodiverse Rift Valley lakes. Explore the windswept plateau and lichen-veiled forest of the Bale Mountains National Park and the Awash National Park. Finally arrive at Harar. Expect to see antelopes, baboons, warthogs, and the very rare Ethiopian wolf.

Make it happen: Rainbow Tours (020 7666 1250, rainbowtours.co.uk) has a 12-day 'Ethiopia Wolves & Hyenas Tour' from £4,350pp, including flights, a guide, a 4WD vehicle, and most meals.



6 Snorkelling with orcas

Tromsø, Norway

The encounter: Every year, some 350km above the Arctic Circle, refuge-seeking herrings surge from the ocean into the gun-metal depths of northern Norway's dramatic fjords. The herring draw hundreds of killer whales (orcas) — intelligent mammals that over-winter here to gorge on the millions of tonnes of easy pickings. This is one of the most reliable places in the world for an orca sighting, so expect tourist boats among the Norwegian trawlers. In a dry suit you plunge into the frigid waters, your eyes adjusting to the piebald constellation of an orca pod lingering in the depths below.

More animal magic: Swim with an orca *and* kiss a wolf? It's an entirely feasible — and survivable

— double dare. Simply drive for three hours through the fjords south to the Polar Park (polarpark.no). The world's most northerly wildlife park has a residential pack of socialised Eurasian wolves and the kiss — which involves buckets of slobber — isn't just a stunt. Witness the wolves happily fall in line as your group wanders deeper into their snowy enclosure. For over-18s only.

Make it happen: The Mighty Fine Company (0333 800 2033, mightyfinecompany.com) tailors itineraries that include snorkelling with orcas and kissing wolves, from £1,295pp, for four nights, half board, including flights from Gatwick. The orcas appear around Tromsø between late November and early February. ■