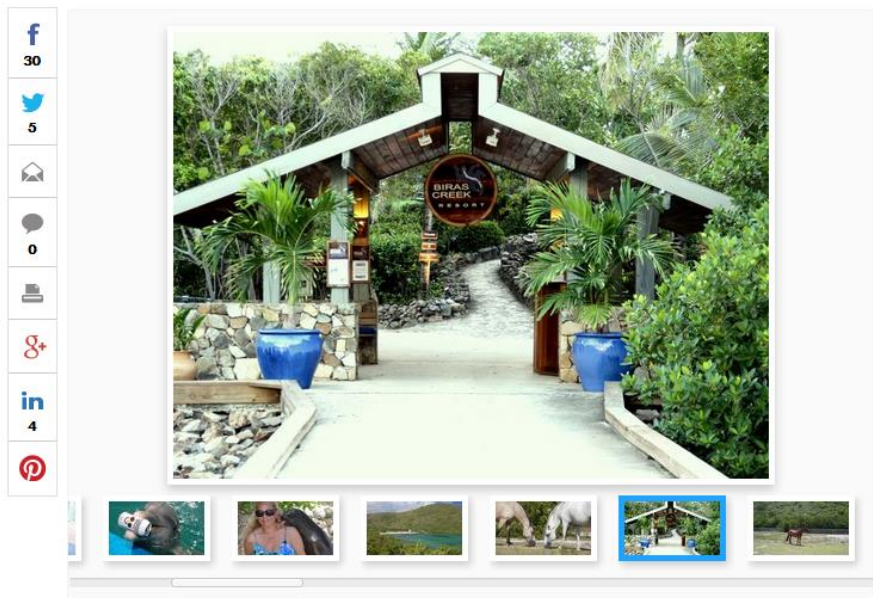


Where to cavort with critters in the Caribbean

by Melanie Reffes, Special for USA TODAY | Published on January 26, 2015



Few vacation experiences appeal to the entire family like an afternoon cavorting with the critters who call the Caribbean home. From swimming with the sharks and riding horses in the sea to staking out rare birds and hoisting a tiny monkey on your shoulder, check out the best critter quests under the tropical sun.

Bahamas



If sea lions are more your style, jump into the warm waters where the playful sea mammals who can also walk on all fours will gladly accept salty fish treats as a reward. (Photo: Blue Lagoon)

If your bucket list includes getting a mushy kiss from an Atlantic bottlenose dolphin or an affectionate snuggle from a California sea lion, take the scenic high-speed double-decker catamaran from Nassau to [Dolphin Encounters](#) on Blue Lagoon Island. After a few pointers from the pros working in the Dolphin Swim Program, the gentle giants are putty in your hands and happy to pose for the best-ever souvenir photos. If sea lions are more your style, jump into the warm waters where the playful sea mammals who can also walk on all fours will gladly accept salty fish treats as a reward.

British Virgin Islands



The horses that call Biras Creek home were rescued from Puerto Rico in 2009 and today are part of an interactive program at the Virgin Gorda Resort. (Photo: Don Hebert, Biras Creek Resort)

The horses that call [Biras Creek](#) home were rescued from Puerto Rico in 2009 and today are part of an interactive program at the Virgin Gorda Resort. An innovative experience offered to guests, visiting and grooming the horses is gratis with classes that teach the fine art of horning around available for a nominal fee. True to their name, Paso Finos are the horses with the 'fine step' and are mellow with experienced equestrians and newbies.

St. Lucia



Enthusiasts with eagle eyes (or binoculars) can marvel at more than thirty alluring varieties of birds. (Photo: Sam Hobson, Anse Chastanet)

It's literally for the birds at [Anse Chastanet](#), one of the ritziest resorts on the island that also happens to be one of the best bird watching locales. Tours from the resort take nature lovers to some of the most spectacular birding perches in the Caribbean like the Millet Bird Sanctuary Trail where enthusiasts with eagle eyes (or binoculars) marvel at more than thirty alluring varieties like the Red Neck Pigeon with its distinctive maroon-hued plumage and the St. Lucia Pewee with its cinnamon-colored underbelly.

SEE MORE: [The Caribbean's most amazing birds](#)

Cuba



Tourists are treated to vistas of the stately pelicans and flaming orange flamingos as they strut about Cienaga de Zapata National Park. (Photo: Natural Habitat Adventures)

With easy travel to Cuba looming on the horizon and a US Embassy set to reopen in Havana, the island may soon be as popular with Americans as it is with Europeans and Canadians. Chockablock with history, music, cigars, old cars and spicy fare, Cuba is also home to a thriving ecosystem. On an itinerary organized by [Natural Habitat Adventures](#), tourists are treated to vistas of the stately pelicans and flaming orange flamingos as they strut about Cienaga de Zapata National Park, a 1.5 million acre UNESCO Biosphere Reserve on the southern coast. For those wondering about travel logistics, Natural Habitat books the flight from Miami to Cienfuegos and the return flight from Havana to Miami with a charter company that is authorized to provide direct flights to Cuba.

St Kitts



If you arrive on St. Kitts via a cruise ship, you'll see the cuter-than-cute vervet monkeys on the shoulders of entrepreneurial locals who hang out on the Port Zante pier, hoping you'll stop for a photo. (Photo: St. Kitts Tourism Authority)

If you arrive on [St. Kitts](#) via a cruise ship, you'll see the cuter-than-cute vervet monkeys on the shoulders of entrepreneurial locals who hang out on the Port Zante pier, hoping you'll stop for a photo. If you're on the beach, you'll find the little monkeys foraging for a food handout. As the sun sets, friendly gangs of them raid beach bars like Shiggedy Shack in search of a cocktail sip or two. Mostly vegetarian, the cheeky boozers with expressive black faces arrived with the slaves from West Africa. They developed a taste for alcohol from eating the fermented fruit that blankets the rainforest floors.

Grand Cayman



One of the Cayman Islands' most popular animal attractions, Stingray City is delightful for swimmers, snorkelers and divers who covet an up-close-and-personal experience with the smooth southern stingrays. (Photo: Cayman Islands Department of Tourism)

One of the island's most popular animal attractions, [Stingray City](#) is delightful for swimmers, snorkelers and divers who covet an up-close-and-personal experience with the smooth southern stingrays. The strange sea creatures look like large dinner plates burrowing into the sandy ocean floor of the North Sound, yet they eagerly swim to the surface when they hear the boats full of tourists at Stingray City. Fleets of the graceful creatures started gathering in the area decades ago when local fishermen cleaned their catch on the shallow sand bars. Eager for a snack from the hands of tourists, today they swim so close that you feel them brushing your face with their wings and sucking squid from your fingers.

Paradise Island



For the cherry on top, enroll the kids in the Jr. Ultimate Trainer for a Day program (Photo: Atlantis Paradise Island)

When it comes to interactive fun with sea animals, [Atlantis Paradise Island](#) wins the Powerball lottery. The mega-resort in The Bahamas boasts one of the largest outdoor marine habitats in the world, counting over fifty thousand animals. There's an overwhelming amount to see and do, from the touch tank aquariums in The Dig where lionfish, piranhas, iridescent jellyfish and six-foot long eels keep each other company to Dolphin Cay where the placid mammals live on fourteen acres filled with seven million gallons of seawater. One don't-miss for the whole family is the Shark Tunnel, where curious tourists wear glass helmets for a nose-to-nose experience with the fierce animals zigzagging around them. For the cherry on top, enroll the kids in the Jr. Ultimate Trainer for a Day program and the grown-ups in the Ultimate Trainer for a Day Program. The up-close-and-personal interactions definitely beat another day on a sun lounger.

St. Martin



Micro-chipped, neutered and vaccinated, the dogs are in tip-top shape, and are easily adoptable to boot. (Photo: Ursula Oppikofer)

The name of this sanctuary on the French side of the dual-nation island says it all. ['I Love My Island Dog'](#) is the only shelter devoted to keeping strays off the streets and beaches and finding new homes for them overseas. Relying solely on generous donations, the ramshackle shelter welcomes volunteers who assist in keeping the pooches clean and happy. Micro-chipped, neutered and vaccinated, the dogs are in tip-top shape. Since the adoption process is a breeze via the New York-based ['One Puppy at a Time'](#), dog lovers can return home from vacation with more than tan lines and a few extra pounds.

Jamaica



Straddling a mild-mannered mare or a feistier stallion, the scenic trot may just be the most fun you have in a bathing suit. (Photo: IRAT)

Saddle up in Montego Bay for a [Horseback Ride 'n' Swim](#) past the craggy cliffs, along the uninterrupted northwest coastline and into the warm waves of the Caribbean Sea. Straddling a mild-mannered mare or a feistier stallion, the scenic trot may just be the most fun you have in a bathing suit.