

TROPIC THUNDER

BY MICHELLE JUERGEN

OFFERING EVERYTHING FROM VERDANT JUNGLES
TO REAL-LIFE DRAGONS, THESE PARADISIACAL LOCATIONS
GET CLIENTS OFF THE GRID AND INTO NATURE

The Marquesas Islands are
located some 930 miles
northeast of Tahiti.



"THEY TASTE LIKE BLUEBERRIES," HE SAID, HOLDING OUT HIS HAND TO ME.

I started to reach for the contents of his palm, then hesitated. Did my sense of adventure extend to eating a live army ant? I reflected silently on the matter for a few seconds.

"I'm too full," I teased, pulling my hand away and grinning at Eddy, our bilingual local guide at Nicaragua's Parque Ecologico Charco Verde.

The protected reserve is located on Ometepe, an island formed by two volcanoes rising out of Lake Nicaragua. (And, indeed, Ometepe means "two mountains" or "two hills" in the native Nahuatl language.) We were exploring the lush rainforest, which thrives thanks to volcanic ash that has fertilized the soil, with the enthusiastic Eddy, who giddily pointed out creatures such as capuchin and howler monkeys, butterflies, snakes, lizards, birds and — the snack he would offer me — giant army ants swarming on a log.

With incredible wildlife, stunning landscapes and a host of outdoor activities, Ometepe is just one of the world's under-the-radar tropical adventure destinations that feels like a primeval paradise. For fearless wanderers interested in off-the-beaten path locales with endless natural beauty, we've rounded up a sampling of can't-miss hidden gems.



Scuba diving in Tahiti's Tuamotus Islands is a must.

Clients can observe mountain and eastern lowland gorillas in the Congo.



MARQUESAS AND TUAMOTUS ISLANDS, TAHITI

The Islands of Tahiti are best-known as a hot spot for honeymooners. But there's an adventurous side to the destination that clients may not be aware of.

"From swimming with different shark species — such as lemon sharks and gray reef sharks — to hiking mountainous peaks and waterfalls, our paradise is able to quench the thirst of any explorer," said Kristin Carlson, managing director for Tahiti Tourisme.

She says intrepid travelers will particularly enjoy the remote, dramatic Marquesas Islands, as well as the serene Tuamotus Islands.

Whether clients are history buffs or thrill-seekers, Nuku Hiva — the Marquesas' largest island — has something for everyone. Via a four-wheel drive excursion from Taiohae Bay to the village of Hatiheu, visitors can follow the route of *Moby-Dick* writer Herman Melville, who jumped ship here and took up residence with the native Typee people.

Travelers can also visit the ancestral sites of Hikokua and Kamuihei and the archaeological site of Kaoueva. The more active set may enjoy a hike to the Hakau Valley's Vaipo waterfall, one of the tallest in the South Pacific; a horse-back ride to the lush Toovii Plateau; a sail along Hakatea Bay; and a snorkel or scuba excursion to see manta rays, dragon moray eels, scalloped hammerhead sharks and countless varieties of tropical fish.

The Tuamotus, which comprises 76 islands and atolls spread over more than 7,500 square

miles, offers even more interaction with wildlife. On Rangiroa, the largest atoll in the archipelago, clients can head back under the waves near Tiputa Pass, one of the world's best shark dive sites, or they can swim with black-tipped sharks at the Blue Lagoon and visit the "lagoonarium" (a natural aquarium of tropical fish).

Fakarava atoll, too, possesses incredible undersea experiences: In the north or south pass of the island, clients can drift dive, observe coral gardens and see the "wall of sharks," an annual gathering of hundreds of the creatures (usually in July). And Fakarava is a UNESCO Biosphere Reserve, showcasing rare flora and fauna including the hunting kingfisher, Tuamotu palm, squills and sea cicadas. (www.tahititourisme.com)

BUKAVU, CONGO

The Democratic Republic of the Congo is a bit of a mystery for most globetrotters. The second-largest country in Africa, with the second-largest rainforest in the world (after the Amazon), it's still vastly unexplored by most foreigners, mostly due to its long-standing political instability.

But this tropical destination is rich in wildlife and natural resources, and with thoughtful planning, a healthy dose of vigilance and expert guides, undaunted travelers can plan a visit. (It is dangerous to visit the country without a tour operator or guide; consider the matter non-negotiable.)

Bukavu, located at the southern tip of Lake Kivu on the eastern border of the Congo, is a great base for those who want to get up close with the area's eastern lowland gorilla, the largest living primate. Civil unrest; poaching; and destruction of habitat through logging, mining and agriculture have put these animals in jeopardy, causing a more than 50% decline in their numbers since the mid-1990s.

Just outside Bukavu is UNESCO-protected Kahuzi-Biega National Park, one of the last refuges of the endangered animal. With landscapes that range from swamps and dense rainforests to subalpine prairies and bamboo forests, the 2,300-square-mile park is one of the ecologically richest regions of Africa and the world. Other creatures that call this place home include the eastern chimpanzee, hippopotamuses, African forest buffalo, giant forest hogs and lowland bongos.

Virunga National Park, too — also a UNESCO World Heritage Site — showcases a diversity of natural beauty, as well as two active volcanoes. North of Bukavu, the park is one of the first protected areas in Africa, and primate lovers can't miss the chance to see the threatened mountain gorilla.

Kivu Travel is one local operator promoting responsible tourism to the region (a portion of all bookings goes toward its humanitarian and development projects in the area). Via itineraries that visit Kahuzi-Biega and Virunga — as well as the Lake Kivu area, which is situated between the two parks — visitors can see the

lowland and mountain gorillas.

"Kivu is mostly untouched by tourists, offering a paradise of fauna and flora in a preserved environment; mountain gorillas in their natural habitat; Nyiragongo, an active volcano where you can spend a night in front of the biggest lava lake in the world; welcoming locals; and more," said Eric de Lamotte, partner at Kivu Travel.

He recommends including time in the neighboring countries of Rwanda and Uganda to visit their national parks, as well, calling it "an authentic and unusual trip to do once in your life." (www.kahuzibieganationalpark.com, www.kivutransit.net, www.virunga.org)

KOMODO, INDONESIA

Come for the diving, stay for the dragons. That was the impetus for my visit to the UNESCO-designated Komodo, one of the 17,508 islands that make up Indonesia. The destination boasts some of the best scuba diving in the world thanks to strong currents, pristine reefs and incredible marine biodiversity.

On a trip with local outfitter Flores XP Adventure, I spent three days at its XPirates Dive Camp to earn my PADI Open Water Diver certification. Evenings entailed watching picture-perfect sunsets on the company's private beach on Sebayur island, about an hour's sail from Komodo. (The island has no accommodations; overnights must be onboard a boat.) Days were spent exploring popular dive sites such as Pink Beach, Batu Bolong and Manta Point, where we drifted alongside giant manta rays, white-tipped reef sharks, turtles and hundreds of colorful fish.

Above the sea, the area's main attraction is the Komodo dragon, the

world's largest living lizard species. Averaging 6 to 10 feet and weighing about 150 pounds, these monsters are truly a sight to behold.

Through Tour East, a full-service DMC that operates in the Asia Pacific region, clients can spend a few days observing the animals. Via the company's Komodo & Rinca Trails packages, visitors will wander the rugged savannah of Komodo National Park with a ranger and spot other wildlife such as Timor deer, the orange-footed scrub fowl, water buffalo, crab-eating macaque monkeys and civets — all of which are potential prey for Komodo dragons. The itineraries include overnights on air-conditioned boats, as well as time to swim and snorkel. (www.floresxp.com, www.toureast.net)

EL NIDO, PHILIPPINES

El Nido, located on the archipelagic province of Palawan in the western Philippines, is known as the gateway to the Bacuit archipelago, a group of islands with towering limestone cliffs. Though the municipality is a four- to five-hour drive from Palawan's capital of Puerto Princesa (home to the province's international airport), it's worth the road trip.

White-sand beaches, turquoise lagoons, jagged peaks, caves and coral reefs beckon sun seekers and water babies. A visit isn't complete without a trip to Big Lagoon and Small Lagoon on Miniloc island, where travelers can partake in pastimes such as fishing, crabbing, boating, diving and birding.

El Nido Resorts, a group of sustainable local resorts, operates four properties in the

area, located on the islands of Apulit, Miniloc, Lagen and Pangulasian. During a stay at one of the resorts, guests have access to activities such as rappelling off a 200-foot cliff, snorkeling to see giant clams, swimming with jack fish, touring mangroves, kayaking, windsurfing and more. (www.elnidoresorts.com, www.philippinetourismusa.com)

OMETEPE, NICARAGUA

Nicaragua, dubbed "The Land of Lakes and Volcanoes," is the largest country in Central America and is bordered by both the Pacific Ocean and the Caribbean Sea. It features plentiful natural beauty, including tropical rainforests, archipelagos and dozens of volcanoes, as well as Central America's largest freshwater lake, Lake Nicaragua.

Ometepe island, located on the body of water, features Concepcion Volcano to the north (an active volcano; its most recent eruption was in 1957) and Maderas Volcano to the south. With a local guide, clients can trek up one or both peaks, or they can kayak Istian River on the isthmus between the volcanoes to take in the scenery from below.

On the northeast side of the island, on Santo Domingo Beach, is Finca San Juan de la Isla, a lovely lakefront lodge situated on a tropical fruit tree plantation. The property features a restored, century-old Spanish colonial hacienda and accommodation options including lakefront cabins on stilts.

The lodge is also just 15 minutes north from swimming lagoon Ojo de Agua.

Its crystal-clear waters flow from an underground river coming from Maderas. A 10-minute drive in the opposite direction takes clients to Altagracia, the second-largest town on Ometepe located near the archaeological sites of Taguizapa and San Silvestre, home to petroglyphs and ancient sculptures.

And, of course, a stop in the 50-acre Charco Verde is a must to take in its dry tropical forest, emerald-green lagoon and abundant animal life — no ant sampling required. (www.sanjuandelaisla.com, www.visitnicaragua.us) **X**

See the beastly Komodo dragon in Indonesia.



Hike up one or both volcanic peaks on Ometepe island.

