

PASSION PASSPORT

Ethical Eco-tourism: Visiting America's best sanctuaries

While nature and wildlife have always served as motivators for travel, one recent troubling trend in the social media age is the exploitation of animals within the tourism industry. Many of the “wild” animals seen on Instagram and in online dating profiles have been drugged and held captive in inhumane conditions- conditions once relegated to circus animals, low-budget zoos and aquariums. For example, the number one cause of abuse in big cats is the practice of posing with them and their cubs as it creates a flood of discarded cats that serve no conservation value, ending up dead or in insufferable conditions.



However, for animal lovers, there are a great number of wildlife sanctuary travel destinations throughout North America where people can respectfully and ethically experience wildlife at minimal impact on the animals and environment just as nature intended.

Sanctuaries as Safe Havens

While there is no universal model for a wildlife sanctuary, generally speaking, they are places dedicated to the care and rehabilitation of wildlife. They usually allow animals to roam semi-freely in naturalized, spacious habitats that are as close to their natural habitat as possible. While zoos can buy and sell animals, [sanctuaries promise](#) to take in and care for any animals that have been abused, neglected, or abandoned and to keep them for life. The major difference between sanctuaries and zoos is that unlike a zoo, the public should not be allowed to wander freely through the sanctuary as the animals are not kept in cages, but rather reined in by some sort of barrier (typically a fence). Sanctuaries should be certified by the Global Federation of Animal Sanctuaries and have several vets and qualified staff present or on call at all times.

Grizzly and Wolf Discovery Center, West Yellowstone, MT

Just a short drive from Yellowstone, a visit to this sanctuary is a must-see when checking out the iconic national park. The [Grizzly and Wolf Discovery Center](#) is split into different animal habitats that allows visitors to drive through and experience the animals up close (keeping windows up and car doors locked, obviously). While the bears may show some curiosity at first, they're generally more interested in their toys and their fellow bears, all of whom are unable to survive in the wild. Many were orphaned when their mothers became used to obtaining food from human areas. Others had been labeled "nuisance bears" because they were becoming dangerously comfortable around humans. While the wolves may be a bit shyer, they're likely spending time with their pack. The wolves at the center were captive-born, unplanned litters that cannot be released into the wild. Yet the sanctuary has given them an opportunity to form the same social bonds as they would in the wild. In addition to eagles and other animals that are typically found in the area, the sanctuary recently opened an otter addition as well.

Pryor Mountain Mustangs (Lovell, Wyoming)

Located on the Wyoming/Montana border, the area is home to the last remaining Colonial Spanish Horses (also known as Spanish Mustangs) in North America. The nearby [Pryor Mountain Wild Mustang](#) center is responsible for monitoring the horses, which are allowed free range throughout the region and can be seen by visitors from the road or many of the area's hiking trails. The distinctive brown, white, and spotted horses are unique because scientists determined that the herd had genetic traits consistent with Spanish horses and that the herd lacks genetic traits that would have originated in draft or thoroughbred ancestors. Spanish horses are still considered a rare and endangered breed. Along with the Bureau of Land Management, the center works to look out for the health and population management of the horses.

Chimp Haven, Shreveport, Louisiana

Located 22 miles southwest of Shreveport, nearly 300 chimpanzees frolic in the lush canopy of this southeastern sanctuary. For most of these chimpanzees, the 200+ acre sanctuary is a second home following years in captivity, mostly in biomedical research facilities. Following the passage of the Chimpanzee Health Improvement Maintenance and Protection (CHIMP) Act by Congress in 2000, [Chimp Haven](#) has served as a sanctuary providing lifetime care for chimpanzees retired from medical research.

The Wild Animal Sanctuary, Keenesburg, Colorado

For 16 years, Ricki the bear had lived his entire existence in a bare 250-square-foot cage on the property of a Pennsylvania ice cream shop. In 2014, activists launched a campaign and with the assistance of the Animal Legal Defense Fund, successfully won the right for him to be relocated to The Wild Animal Sanctuary, a 789-acre grassland sanctuary just northeast of Denver. Visitors travel throughout the sanctuary on an elevated walkway where they have the opportunity to witness over 460 lions, tigers, bears, wolves, and other rescued animals (many of whom were held captive as pets or for entertainment purposes) living their best lives on the sprawling plains against the backdrop of the Rocky Mountains.

Glacier Bay, Juneau, Alaska

While it may not be a formal sanctuary in the traditional sense, the National Park Service recognizes the pristine waters of Glacier Bay as a Humpback Whale sanctuary. Humpback Whales in Glacier Bay benefit from some of the strongest protections found anywhere in the world- protections that have led to a steadily growing population of the once almost-extinct species. While most private boats are prohibited, [whale watching tours](#) run from May 28-September 5 and allow visitors to see whales as they should be seen and not in an aquarium.

Big Cat Rescue, Tampa, FL

In Florida, two ocelot cubs play with each other, running in and out of giant-sized cat houses the size of a child's playground. Nearby, a tiger leisurely swims in a pool as he playfully paws a giant beachball designed to withstand the strength of his teeth and claws while a lynx rolls around in a kiddie pool filled with colored paper towel rolls- essentially living out every cat's dream. While it is definitely one of the more commercialized sanctuaries, [Big Cat Rescue](#) in Tampa remains a global leader in providing a home for over 80 tigers, lions, leopards, cougars, bobcats, lynx, servals, ocelots, and caracals. Most of the sanctuary's cats were abandoned, abused, orphaned, or retired from performing acts. The organization's activism arm is also involved in legislative efforts to reduce irresponsible big cat ownership and exploitation. While Big Cat Rescue's admission price may seem high, it's important to remember that feeding some of the world's largest predators isn't cheap.

There are also dozens of other smaller sanctuaries throughout North America providing visitors with up-close and personal experiences.

All cage-free of course.