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THE LAST WILDERNESS OF EUROPE

Europe is home to some of the most pristine areas of wilderness anywhere in the world, and some of its most magisterial displays of wildlife. **Simon Birch**, a travel writer and naturalist, gives a guided tour



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A. Białowieża Forest, Poland
Straddling the border between Poland and Belarus, the ancient Białowieża Forest is one of Europe's most priceless natural treasures. It represents a tiny remnant of the vast lowland forest that once carpeted the north European plain after the last ice age. The forest is famed for its staggering biodiversity and is home to the globally-endangered European Bison as well as lynx, wolves and other threatened wildlife.

Indeed, during the Second World War, it attracted the attention of Hermann Göring, who planned to create the world's largest hunting reserve there. In the end, though, the prey was Polish and Soviet partisans who took refuge from the Nazis in the area.

Despite its astonishing range of wildlife, not all of Białowieża is currently protected and the forest now faces an uncertain future following the Polish government's recent controversial decision to allow logging in parts of the forest.

■ A guidebook to Białowieża Forest and other wildlife sites in north-east Poland is available from www.crossbillguides.com Tours of Białowieża Forest are available with <http://bialowiezaforest.eu>

B. Dolomites, Italy
Swiss-French architect Le Corbusier once described the Dolomites as 'the most beautiful architectures on earth'. There are almost 20 peaks rising to over 3,000m. Also known as the Pale Mountains, the Dolomites take their name from the carbonate rock dolomite.

During the First World War, the front line between the Italian and Austro-Hungarian forces ran through the range. In contrast to the flat landscapes of the Western Front, here the battlegrounds of the so-called "White War" sloped at an average of 30 degrees and were set at altitudes of up to 3,350m, where winter lasts 12 months of the year. The dangers came not just from the troops in the enemy front line. On December 13, 1916, 10,000 soldiers were killed by avalanches, on what became known as "White Friday".

The region has been listed by UNESCO as a world heritage site. Given this billing it's perhaps not surprising that the Dolomites offer some of the best mountain walking and trekking in Europe.

■ www.dolomitetreks.com offer walks in the Dolomites.

C. Julian Alps, Slovenia
Less well known – and therefore less visited – than their slightly grander (at least in terms of height) Alpine siblings, the Julian Alps therefore rank as one of the finest of all Europe's natural wonders. They are named after Julius Caesar, who founded Cividale del Friuli in their western foothills. From here, in north-east Italy, they stretch into Slovenia, where they rise to 2,864m at Mount Triglav. This is the highest peak in Slovenia and lies in the heart of the Triglav National Park, one of Europe's oldest.

The region is known for its untouched – and largely unvisited – forests and pristine Alpine meadows. Its position off the tourist path makes it seem particularly remote.

■ www.keadventure.com offers a week of hut-to-hut trekking in the Julian Alps. The Julian Alps of Slovenia outlining walks and treks is available from Cicerone Books: www.cicernoe.co.uk

D. Maritime Alps, France and Italy
Less than an hour's drive from the French Riviera will get you into the Maritime Alps, the remarkably rugged and rocky southern-most outpost of the European Alps that straddle the French and Italian border.

Sure, there are bigger mountains further north in the Alps, but bigger isn't always better, as these mountainous beasts are now overrun with tourists.

In contrast, the savagely stark mountains of the Maritime Alps have acted as a fortress keeping virtually all modern developments and tourists at bay, rewarding those who venture into the mountains with a wild sense of remoteness.

On the French side, as the range descends towards the sea, and Italian one, as they fall towards the Po plain, are subtle but notable differences in geography. Among the wildlife to be seen grazing here are ibex and chamois, while above, eagles and bearded vultures patrol the sky.

■ www.inntravel.co.uk offer self-guided walks through the Maritime Alps.



E. Oostvaardersplassen, The Netherlands
Just a short train ride from Amsterdam lies the extraordinary Oostvaardersplassen nature reserve, an astonishing slither of wilderness in one of the most densely-populated countries in Europe. Reclaimed from the sea back in the 1960s, conservationists have recreated a Paleolithic landscape by stocking the reserve with the descendants of the sorts of animals that would have lived in the region in prehistoric times. As well as vast numbers of birds including sea eagles and storks, visitors can see ancient breeds of cattle, feral horses and deer living in what is regarded as one of the best examples of rewilding in Europe.

■ For more information visit www.holland.com For guided tours of Oostvaardersplassen visit www.birdsnetherlands.nl

F. Pyrenees, France and Spain
The Pyrenees run for more than 400km in one unbroken chain of magnificent high-mountain wilderness from the Bay of Biscay on the Atlantic Ocean to the Mediterranean. Having managed to largely escape the worst ravages of commercial development that have afflicted other

mountains, the Pyrenees offer a stunning variety of diversity and contrast, from lush forests to rugged 3,000m mountain peaks which are home to marmots, vultures and eagles.

Three national parks in France and Spain protect the best mountain landscapes with the Ordesa National Park in Spain being widely regarded as being one of the most dramatic in Europe.

■ www.hikepyrenees.co.uk offer self-guided and guided walks in the Pyrenees. Walks and Treks in the Pyrenees is available from Cicerone Books: www.cicernoe.co.uk Get there by train, see box-out.

G. Sarek National Park, Sweden
While most fans of the outdoors charge south to the overcrowded Alps for their mountain fix, those in the know quietly slip north to Arctic Sweden, where they have the vast and empty open spaces all to themselves. The destination for these savvy adventurers is Sarek National Park. While home to the biggest mountains in Sweden, what really draws hardcore adventurers to Sarek is that unlike most other mountain national parks in Europe,

Sarek remains wild in both tooth and claw. There are no helpful footpaths, signposts, let alone cosy mountain huts here. Instead you'll find the most remote, untouched and uncompromising wilderness area left in Europe.

■ To fully experience Sarek's wilderness try a cross-country ski tour camping out every night in temperatures pushing 30 degrees below freezing: www.outdoorlapland.com

H. Gibraltar
Apart from the playful Barbary macaques who have populated the Rock, Gibraltar may seem an unusual place to travel to enjoy wildlife. But it is the skies above the territory which, every year, provide one of Europe's most awe-inspiring natural spectacles. For the Rock – strategically placed in so many ways – is a waypoint on one of the world's great migration routes, as millions of birds travel from their winter home in Africa to their breeding grounds right across Europe.

Each spring millions of birds, from tiny warblers to vultures the size of barn doors, flood north over the Straits providing some of the most exciting birdwatching opportunities anywhere in Europe. In an

(1) Pyrenees, France (2) Konik horses play with snow in the Oostvaarder-spassen nature reserve in Lelystad. (3) Julian Alps, Slovenia (4) View from inside a cave, Dolomites, Italy (5) Srak National Park, Sweden (6) Rock of Gibraltar.

Photos: Getty images/ Contributed

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effort to reach Europe the birds soar spectacularly and glide across the Straits, the narrowest crossing point in the Mediterranean. The whole dramatic spectacle is then played out again as the birds head back to Africa in the autumn.

■ For more information visit: www.visitgibraltar.gi/birdwatching www.fundacionmigres.org/en/ For birdwatching tours visit: <http://birdingthestrat.com>

I. Southern Carpathian Mountains, Romania

With the vast majority of Europe's ancient forests now consigned to the history books, the forests of the southern Carpathian mountains, in the heart of Romania, represent one of the last intact ecosystems of its kind anywhere in Europe. This vast area of old-growth forests totals over one million hectares and is one of Europe's every few remaining great wilderness areas.

The forests are home to a vast array of wildlife, including Europe's biggest populations of brown bears, lynx and wolves. The area is a biodiversity hot-spot and is consequently one of the most

important areas ecologically in Europe.

■ www.absolute-nature.ro offer wildlife tours in the southern Carpathians.

J. Berlin, Germany

The German capital may seem an unlikely wilderness, but it is, in fact, a "hidden" treasure for wildlife. Top of the tick-list is the goshawk, one of the most exciting birds of prey. There are 100 pairs of this magnificent bird now breeding in the city's parks and woodlands and Berlin has the highest density of goshawk territories anywhere in the world, urban or rural. As one of Europe's most wooded cities, expect to see red squirrels hopping around the trees while wild boar have now moved into the more leafy of Berlin's suburbs. There's more wildlife too in the vast network of rivers and lakes that encircle Berlin. Here you'll find otters, ospreys, black and red kites plus the huge white-tailed eagle. Difficult to miss are white storks which breed in the centre of most villages.

■ A Birdwatching Guide to Brandenburg and Berlin is published by www.lynxeds.com For birdwatching tours around Berlin contact: www.birdingberlin.com

