

Wildlife

Baby love ... three-week-old panda cubs at the Chengdu base and, below, Hadley gets her moment with a young male



Having a beastly time

It's an amazing privilege to meet animals on their home turf - under supervision - as our wildlife enthusiasts discover on trips to China, Borneo, Bolivia, the US and South Africa



Pandas in China

Hadley Freeman gets up close to the black-and-white celebrities at a research base near the city of Chengdu

Late last year, I found myself waiting on a bench, waiting for my date. I'd been excited about this meeting for weeks, telling all my friends about it ever since it was confirmed. Really, I'd been waiting for this all my adult life. But what, I suddenly worried, if he doesn't like me? I shuffled nervously in my plastic blue scrubs and then the door opened and a woman beckoned me in. He was ready to see me.

I should probably admit at this point that I was not having a romantic assignation; I was not even waiting for another human being. Rather, I was at the Chengdu panda research base in central China, which is also known as the holy land among panda fans.

And pandas do have a huge fan base: a Youtube video of pandas on a slide has, at time of writing, attracted more than 6.3m views since it was posted

18 months ago (cannily, it's entitled, "Cute pandas playing on the slide"). The 2004 film *Anchorman* satirised TV stations' fondness for furry black-and-white audience pleasers when it had local newscaster Brian Fantana (Paul Rudd) sent out on what the station calls Panda Watch! "Great story - compelling and rich," Ron Burgundy (Will Ferrell) muses in response to Fantana's latest Panda Watch report. When I saw the film at the cinema, everyone in the audience laughed at that point. I, on the other hand, made a mental note to ask my editor for a Panda Watch assignment. Just under a decade later, she finally sent me.

Admittedly, there are many things to do in Chengdu besides look at pandas. Set on the western edge of the Sichuan Basin, Chengdu is a thriving, but pretty, megacity, where tourist attractions alternate between the very old (the beautiful Wenshu Buddhist monastery) and the ultra-modern (the New Century Global Centre, the world's largest building by floor area). While the city has long been known for its tea houses, and for food carts selling dishes spiced with the region's famous red peppercorns, it is also now the place where two-thirds of world's iPhones and 20% of the world's computers are made.

But I'm afraid there was only one statistic that really interested me about



For a hefty fee, you can hold a panda - as far as I know, it's the only place in the world you can

Chengdu: 80% of the world's pandas live in Sichuan province. The Chengdu Panda Base, one of the best-known and respected panda conservation centres in the world, comes with some pleasing statistics of its own: it currently houses more than 80 pandas and is a mere six miles from downtown Chengdu. I did feel a twinge of guilt as my plane swooped in to land, wondering what it said about me that I really didn't care the least bit about the culture, religion or food - I just wanted to see some cuddly pandas. But seeing as my plane had a giant panda face painted on the nose (well-played, BA!), and the city itself was bedecked with panda tat, I decided to stop worrying and enjoy panda mecca.

Chengdu Panda Base turned out to be, much to my relief, nothing like a zoo. The pandas have 240-odd hectares (600 acres) of parkland in which to scamper. And while the centre is very much a tourist destination (don't go on a national holiday or you will find yourself fighting for space with what seems like the rest of China), it is primarily a conservation and breeding centre. The pandas I saw, mostly black and white ones but some little red ones, too, all looked well cared-for, plump and relaxed, happily playing with members of staff (another tip: go in the morning to see the feeding).

After watching the bears loll around

and lumber about - and those do seem to be the two main forms of panda action - I joined the long but fast-moving queue to peer into the nursery at the litter of three-week-old cubs. Lying in their cot, they were so small and sweet I had to shove my hands in my pockets to stop myself stealing one.

Just next to the main enclosure is a little villa where, for a fairly hefty fee (about £95) you can hold a panda. As far as I know, this is the only place in the world where you can do this: I would have paid three times that. The one-year-old I already thought of as "my panda" was sitting on a wooden bench, like a small round emperor upon a throne, chewing on bamboo. I nervously sat down and immediately felt his heft and warmth as he leaned up against me. He continued to munch his bamboo thoughtfully and soon turned slowly, sweetly towards me and I looked into his panda face. We had our moment. I had my Panda Watch. And, as an experience, it was more than compelling and rich.

● *The trip was provided by British Airways (0844 493 0787, ba.com), which has a four-night trip to Chengdu, including direct flights from Heathrow and B&B accommodation at the five-star Shangri-La Hotel (shangri-la.com/en/chengdu/shangrila), from £979pp. Entry to the Chengdu panda base (panda.org.cn) costs about £5.50*



Orangutans in Borneo

Megan Conner falls for the famous round-bellied, auburn-haired jungle residents of north-eastern Borneo

The rainforest is still, when suddenly, a branch snaps. The crowd gasps. It's 10.12am, and feeding time at Sepilok rehabilitation centre in Borneo. On a wooden platform, a jungle breakfast of banana, papaya and bamboo shoots has been laid out. And our first auburn-haired visitor, round-bellied Gellison, is about to enter from the forest, stage right.

Aged four, Gellison is still a child. When he first came to the sanctuary, the largest in the world for orphaned orangutans (rescued from plantations, or homes where they were kept as pets), he preferred rolling in the mud to climbing. Now he is discovering how to fend for himself in the 45 sq km reserve, with the fallback of one guaranteed meal a day. The rangers hope he'll eventually stop coming for food, and will be ready to be released into the wild.

And at this centre in Borneo, one of two remaining natural habitats in the world for orangutans (the other is in Sumatra), there's a guarantee for humans, too: a rare sighting of the little orange man. With a daily human audience, there's naturally a bit of showmanship but the centre is much more than a glorified zoo. As our guide explains, our three-day wildlife tour of Borneo has started here because this may be the closest encounter we get with an uncaged orangutan.

But I'm hoping it won't be the only one. For the rest of our trip we're staying by the Kinabatangan river, with a 560km floodplain that's estimated to have the largest concentration of wildlife in Malaysia (of which this

corner of Borneo is part). The area is only accessible by boat, a bumpy two-hour trip from Sandakan on Borneo's east coast to the village of Sukau and its Rainforest Lodge - as good an example of rustic luxury as I've seen.

It's no secret David Attenborough stayed here in 2011 - there are photos everywhere and a room named after him - but still, nothing quite prepares me for seeing the man himself turn up that night for dinner (served by candlelight on communal tables on the jetty). Attenborough is back in Borneo to film a documentary for the Discovery Channel, and while the lodge can't accommodate him because it's fully booked, he's a big fan of the food.

Earlier that afternoon, we'd taken a river cruise in one of the lodge's green fibreglass boats. The shallow vessels felt like they would not be much defence from the crocs in these swampy waters, but our guide, Jumanji, assured us he'd only ever seen a monkey eaten (and that was in 2007). On the 90-minute trip we spotted packs of mischievous macaques, comical-looking proboscis monkeys - unique to Borneo - and our first wild orangutan, a blur in the distance that became clearer with binoculars. There were also monitor lizards up to three metres long, tree snakes and birds from rhinoceros hornbills to purple herons.

The next day, we spot a mother and baby orangutan pair dozing in a tree and some pygmy elephants grazing just metres from our room. This species, only found in north-east Borneo, has larger ears, a bigger belly and a longer tail than a standard nelly, making it incredibly cute. And when I hear that Attenborough has missed the pygmies every time he's visited Borneo so far, I know we got lucky.

● *The trip was provided by Borneo Eco Tours (+60 88 438300, borneoecotours.com) which has three-day Kinabatangan safaris at Sukau Rainforest Lodge, from £284pp, including full-board and transfers from Sandakan. Malaysia Airlines (malaysiaairlines.com) flies from Heathrow to Borneo's capital, Kota Kinabalu, via Kuala Lumpur, from £621 rtn. Air Asia (airasia.com) flies from Kota Kinabalu to Sandakan from £33 rtn*



Hairy moment ... snapping an orangutan at Sepilok, Borneo

Ticked pinkish ... river dolphins are the star attraction in Bolivia's lowlands



Dolphins in Bolivia

The bufeo is a creature of myth, but Ed Stocker is pretty much guaranteed a sighting in the Bolivian wetlands

It's late afternoon and the sultry heat of the day is beginning to diminish. Young people circle the plaza on scooters, eyeing each other up as they cross paths. Oblivious to the sexual tension, a sloth - the most leisurely of tropical creatures - surveys the scene from a tree in the middle of the square while chewing slowly on a leaf.

Trinidad, in Bolivia's north-eastern lowlands, not far from the border with Brazil, feels a million miles away from the Andean culture that dominates the South American country's politics and culture. Capital of the province of Beni, Trinidad sits on the banks of the Marmoré, in an area of vast wetlands, jungles and rivers that flow into the Amazon further north. And the star resident of these waters is the *bufeo*, a beautiful pinky-grey river dolphin.

There are several varieties of South American river dolphin, the best-known being the pink *boutu*, a popular draw on Amazon river trips in Brazil. Their less startlingly pink Bolivian cousin was formally discovered by French naturalist Alcide d'Orbigny in 1832: he named it *inia boliviensis*, borrowing *inia* from the word he'd heard indigenous people use. Like many facets of life here, the creature

comes cloaked in myth. When a handsome stranger appears at a local fiesta, he is said to be the *bufeo* in human form - dancing all night long and seducing women.

The beauty of this wilderness is that tourism is in its infancy here: you'll share your dolphin sightings with relatively few outside visitors. Some miles west of town, at Puerto Ballivián on the Ibare river (a tributary of the Marmoré), is a settlement of wooden houses on stilts at the edge of the jungle. We're doing a day cruise, within a 25,000-hectare reserve, to spot the dolphins, which are unique to the area and protected under law since 2012.

At the helm of our little motorboat is Roger, a fiftysomething local with salt-and-pepper hair and a broad grin. As we chug down river, he points out taro plants growing in the water which, he says, act as a natural filter.

While spotting a dolphin in the water is pretty much a given, how much you'll see of them - and whether they'll jump out of the water - depends on patience and luck. But there's plenty to see if they're not playing. The trees are full of birds (a mind-boggling number of species), including toucans, rare jacamars and herons. Its astonishing to see so many weird and wonderful creatures so easily, but that is a major part of Beni's appeal - its untapped feel and sense of being in a place few people even know exists.

● *The trip was provided by HighLives (020-8144 2629, highlives.co.uk), a South America specialist which has a seven-day tour of the Bolivia Lowlands, including the dolphin route, from £1,230pp, including transfers but not international flights. Flights were provided by Air Europa (0871 423 0717, aireuropa.com), which flies from Gatwick to Santa Cruz via Madrid from £700 return*

"It's clean here," he adds, "but the biggest threat to the dolphin is contamination near urban centres."

We spot a pair of *parabas* - gold-and-blue parrots - in the trees and hear the thunderous roar of a group of elusive monkeys in the distance. But the dolphin is the star attraction.

The first one we spot teases us, revealing just parts of its body, from the blowhole and beak to a flipper. We play a leisurely game of cat-and-mouse, spotting it in the distance, edging nearer and then watching it disappear, only to surface again further away moments later. Sightings are almost guaranteed here: there are plenty of bufeos in this part of the river, and there's something mesmerising about the graceful way the dolphin, one of several we see, glides just below the water's surface.

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It's mesmerising to watch the dolphin gliding gracefully just below the water's surface

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