

JOURNEY TO Renewal

THE BEST HEALING RETREATS OF 2017

60+

PLACES TO
RELAX,
RECONNECT
& RESTORE

What to Experience Now

Nature
Escapes

Hot Spring
Havens

Working
Farms

Finding
Quiet

Welcome to
Restival!

Be Enriched
by Animals

Destination
Mindfulness

Spirituality
& Health



Enriched by ANIMALS

BY BECCA HENSLEY

A couple of years ago, lonely and lost, I took a walk on a secluded beach in Nantucket, before the throngs arrived for the season. It was rainy and gray, a miasma of weather that paralleled my mood. I had the sliver moon of sand to myself; there was nobody else about as far as my eyes could see. Solitary, small, miserable, I felt like the last person on earth, my streaming tears consumed by the rain. Hopeless, I concentrated only on moving forward.

It wasn't long before I realized that I wasn't alone. As I walked, something walked with me. Not in the sand—but to my right, in the water, just beyond the breaking of the waves. It was a sea lion. She'd popped from the water, turned her head, and caught my gaze, compelling me to stop walking and stare back. Her animated eyes bored into me, filling my soul with a rush of golden warmth. Then, she'd submerge and meet up with me again a few steps later. Soon, she brought along some babies, and they, too, accompanied my trudge. This went on for nearly two hours. I can't explain what happened next, but I realized I was smiling, my heart opened—a zest for living flowed in. When my walk ended, the sea lion offered me one last, long gaze. I'll never forget the love in her face. She wasn't going to leave me unless she knew—so I nodded, and she turned and swam away.

Our connection with animals dates back at least a hundred thousand years, and it is said that at one time all

humans could communicate with beasts—that this talent was not reserved only for the gifted, but something we all had the capability to do. Perhaps, today, we've forgotten how to listen. But now at least, we can prove that our interactions with animals benefit our health (medical studies have noted lower blood pressure and the release of healing oxytocin in pet owners), lighten our moods, and fortify our soul. Animals teach us to love unconditionally, to live in the moment, and to be loyal and true. They teach us compassion and curiosity. Primal, awake, and essentially uncomplicated, infinitely free from hubris, they instruct us in our quest for meaning in our lives.

While pets at home may offer the best medicine, you may feel drawn to interact with other species in their own environment. As a caterpillar turns to a butterfly, I have been transformed by my interactions with animals during my travels. Here are some places to connect with some special creatures, and be forever enriched.



GOIN' OFF SAFARIS, EYRE PENINSULA, SOUTH AUSTRALIA

COURTESY GOIN' OFF SAFARIS



GRAND ISLE RESORT & SPA,
GREAT EXUMA, BAHAMAS

GRAND ISLE RESORT & SPA

Hike with a Llama

First of all: When llamas feel happy, they hum. Join Colorado's **Paragon Guides** at **Arrowhead Ski Area**, near Vail, for their four-hour "Take a Llama to Lunch" hike, which begins with llama lessons amid the pine-flanked mountainside. During the hike, you'll lead your gentle llama along the trail, through meadows of wildflowers, and traipse through the woods. You'll finish with a picnic, having fallen in love. Longer treks, including multiday, hut-to-hut, llama trekking can be arranged. paragonguides.com/llama-trekking/

Walk with Mountain Gorillas

They're like Zen poets. Discover the endangered mountain gorilla in **Rwanda** at **Volcanoes National Park** with **Volcanoes Safaris**. Like Dian Fossey before you, you'll follow a ranger into the thickly wooded bamboo forest, tracking these astounding apes. Serene giants who live in family groups, helmed by a gargantuan Silverback, they wander the mountains in search of food. Find a brood, then pass a joyous hour in their presence, monitoring and photographing their merry antics in this natural habitat. When the

day ends, return to Virunga Lodge to toast your day with a sundowner, and enjoy local entertainment and riveting views. volcanoessafaris.com

Harmony with Horses

Astride the steeds at **Half Moon**, a Rock Resort in Montego Bay, Jamaica, you'll ply the waves as a mermaid should. It's like riding a seahorse. Scheduled training sessions and morning rides bond riders with their mounts. The rescued horses revel in taking their riders down the beach and into the cossetting splash of the waves. Highly recommended, a Positive Empowerment exercise teaches riders to use body language and intuition to communicate with the horses. Unmounted, riders connect with the horses and hone mutual respect without the use of restrictive equipment. Halfmoon.com

Woof with Wolf Dogs

In Canada, near Banff's dramatic, mountain-laden national park, join **Discover Banff Tours** for an illuminating visit with wolves and wolf dogs at **Yamnuska Wolfdog Sanctuary**. An

interactive adventure meant to dispel the myths surrounding wolves and wolfdogs, the tour gets participants up close and personal with the majestic creatures. You'll learn about their behaviors and challenges, then have the chance to feed and photograph them. You may even consider adopting one from this ethical, nonprofit organization, inspired by its stellar cause. yamnuskawolfdogsanctuary.com, banfftours.com

Paddle with Pigs

Oink your way to shore amid a flotilla of pigs. Nobody knows how they found their remote island home or learned to swim, but a pack of adorable pigs eagerly awaits your arrival from Pig Beach on Big Major Cay's southernmost crescent of sand where they live freely, basking in the sun and plunging into the waves at intervals. They'll swim to you, and invite you to join their workout. Among them you'll grunt with glee. While many outfitters organize pig-swimming tours, consider basing your stay at **Grand Isle Resort & Spa**, which conducts frequent outings. grandisleresort.com