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**WORLD OF NATURE**



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## CHOCOLATE DROPS

CHOCOLATE HILLS, BOHOL,  
PHILIPPINES

**Much like chocolate drops stretching away as far as the eye can see, these hills are one of the main natural attractions in the Philippines.**

Legends abound regarding the Chocolate Hills and all include giants. Who else, in fact, could have succeeded in lining up 1,268 to 1,776 identical hills, 98 to 160 feet high, over more than 20 square miles? The most beautiful of these stories is undoubtedly that of the giant Arogo who fell in love with a young local beauty, Aloya. When she died, he did not stop crying for hundreds of years. His tears petrified into rows of eternal relics symbolizing his sorrow. These marine limestone hills, sculpted by the elements over the centuries, owe their name to the grass that covers them and turns chocolate brown in the dry season. Listed as a National Geological Monument, the Chocolate Hills have been proposed by the Philippine authorities for inclusion on the UNESCO World Heritage List.



## A DIVER'S PARADISE

REPUBLIC OF PALAU,  
PACIFIC OCEAN

**The Rock Islands may be lesser known than the Maldives or Tahiti but they are nevertheless considered to be one of the best diving spots in the world.**

Though the Republic of Palau enjoys one of the highest standards of living in the Pacific Ocean, this 26-island and some 300-islet archipelago's true treasure lies just beneath the surface of the blue lagoon waters: a beautiful underwater world still totally intact. The crystal-clear sea of the Philippines provides a habitat for soft corals and thousands of small multicolored fish. Sharks rub shoulders with turtles, Napoleon fish and "devilfish" or manta rays. The islands, whose submerged areas span a mere 180 square miles, the equivalent surface area of Washington DC, are covered in lush vegetation that makes them look like mushrooms floating on water. They also abound in waterfalls, well-preserved caves and jellyfish-laden lakes, not to mention white sandy beaches where one can forget about the crazy world out there... lying among the water lily flowers!





## THE ORIGINS OF THE WORLD

MOUNT RORAIMA, VENEZUELA

You would hardly be surprised to come across a dinosaur at the foot of this mountain from another age, a site that inspired Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's *Last World*, and more recently Steven Spielberg's *Jurassic Park*.

Mount Roraima is one of the most ancient geological sites on the planet, dating back a couple of... billion years. This rocky colossus is nearly 9 miles long and reaches 9,219 feet at its highest peak. It seems to appear miraculously from an ocean of greenery and mist, on the border of Venezuela, Guyana and Brazil. The forty or so tabletop mountains (*tepuyes* in Native American), formed after the separation of the South American and African continents, each harbor a unique ecosystem, a sanctuary for mostly endemic plant and animal species. Roraima's vertical cliffs have always fascinated climbers and adventurers.





#### LAYER CAKE

VERMILION CLIFFS,  
UTAH / ARIZONA,  
UNITED STATES

**Nature has donned her most beautiful palette of colors, creating these Neapolitan slices of sandstone, clay and limestone rocks that stretch out over nearly 80 square miles on the Colorado Plateau.**

Along with the Coyote Buttes, the Wave is without a doubt the most famous of these spectacular formations, part of which is known as the Grand Staircase, a stack of sedimentary layers of rock at different stages of erosion. These hills reach 3,000 to 6,500 feet at their highest peak and are streaked in yellow, orange, red and pink, primarily due to the iron oxide and manganese present in the rock. The most ancient features are 2 billion years old and the youngest a mere 40 million. The canyons are so narrow in places that only a thin blue ribbon of sky can be seen above. The décor is not only mineral: hanging gardens of ferns and orchids grow here and there, mountain sheep and pronghorns know the best grazing spots and, in springtime, rain covers the desert with a huge carpet of flowers, like a final impressionistic flourish to a painting.





**SEA SHEPHERDS**  
KORNATI ISLANDS, CROATIA

**Are these feminine curves at the surface of the water or meteorites fallen into the Adriatic? Kornati stretches out its string of bare and uninhabited islands over 115 square miles.**

A Croatian saying goes that there are as many islands as there are days in the year. The more precise (or perhaps less poetic) cartographers' version lists 147, for the most part uninhabited. Five belong to the National Park created in 1980. However, the archipelago is essentially made up of small islands and rocks, bare or covered in scrub, olive, pine and wild fig trees. There are no beaches along the crystal-clear waters; rock has instead given its name to the site (*Kornati* or "Crowned Islands"). These dots of land lying off the Dalmatian coast are in fact mountain peaks submerged in the Ice Age, more than 20,000 years ago. A network of low stone walls crisscrosses the mineral landscape and helps keep sheep fenced in. Shepherds are indeed the only temporary inhabitants of these islets. In the summer season, they leave their small, basic houses by the water's edge, which are rented out to travelers looking for a little solitude and a return to nature, each set to become the new Robinson Crusoe.





**SAND SPHINX**  
RUB AL KHALI, OMAN

**In this desert as big as Texas, the dunes look like giant fingers, or perhaps the claws of a sphinx, stationed on the old incense trade route.**

The changing winds fashion these growing but static star-shaped dunes (up to 650 feet high). This is the largest sand desert in the world; two million years old and as big as Texas, it stretches out over four countries: Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Yemen and Oman. In this area close to the Yemenite border, known as Rub al Khali ("Empty Territory"), the temperature can reach 131°F and years can go by without there falling a drop of rain. Although these landscapes seem devoid of any life, Bedouin tribes, animals and plants have adapted to the conditions, much like the Oryx, a kind of antelope that can survive for months on end simply licking off the morning dew. The desert is as calm as the dromedaries that traveled these dunes in long caravans, carrying precious incense, until the search for black gold.







## FLOATING ISLANDS

ICEBERGS, ANTARCTICA

**White, blue, and even multicolored, hiding its bulk under the icy waters of the Poles: drifting ice floe ahead!**

Icebergs are small chunks of glacier which, once out at sea, start their long wandering journey. Before breaking up and melting into the salty water, they travel thousands of miles following eccentric courses, tossed about by the winds, waves and currents. They are made of fresh water that is sometimes 15,000 years old and can take on surprising shapes, such as these hard candy icebergs with colorful stripes. The purest have a bluish hue, with areas of red, orange and green being due to algae, and grayish or brown tones to remains of moraines or volcanic ash. These giant ice cubes are closely monitored and are in fact listed according to size and shape. Whatever their appearance, 90% of their volume is submerged. The largest iceberg ever detected was called B-15 and when it broke away from the Antarctic 10 years ago, it measured 4,250 square miles, that is to say more than twice the size of Delaware. It continues to drift along the coast of Antarctica.





**WATER AND GRASS**  
EVERGLADES, FLORIDA, USA

**Baring your teeth to save your hide: so goes the daily plight of saurians and other endangered species at the heart of the largest subtropical natural reserve in North America.**

Beware of still waters! Under the surface of this huge two-million-acre swamp lurks the American alligator and his cousin the crocodile. In the high grasses and reeds also prowls the Florida panther. This haven provided a perfect equilibrium for thousands of species of mammals, reptiles, birds, insects and fish, until man took over this "river of grass" to irrigate surrounding fields and thousands of tourists came to invade this vast mangrove in the dry season. The Everglades cover Florida's entire southern peninsula and this internationally-renowned wetlands was designated a biosphere reserve and listed as a UNESCO World Heritage site. Will this be sufficient to dry the crocodile's tears and those of the thirty endangered species?



### THE FAKIR'S BED

TSINGY DE BEMARAHA  
NATURE RESERVE,  
MADAGASCAR

**Seen from above, this vast network of faults looks like a carpet of formidable prickly spikes. Once used as shelter, these calcareous cathedrals are now a place of worship.**

In Malagasy, Tsingy means “where you cannot walk barefoot.” These unique and ragged mountain ranges appeared following the movement of tectonic plates as the island of Madagascar broke away from the African continent. These limestone rocks are made of fossils and shellfish that died in the sea 200 million years ago, sculpted by the rain into sharp blades and needles. Their fairly complex hydrology enables the Tsingy to act as water towers for the region. This mineral world stretches out over more than 370,000 acres and is the largest protected site in Madagascar. It is surrounded by savannah and dry forest populated with baobabs and commiphora, a very resilient tree, highly prized by carpenters and used for its resin and golden parchment-like bark. And, like the Tsingy, some varieties also come with large prickles.





**HOT WATER ON TAP**  
THINGVELLIR NATIONAL PARK,  
ICELAND

**Whether it falls from the sky or gushes out of the ground icy cold or hot, water is everywhere in Iceland. This geologically young land is still in formation thanks to its permanent volcanic activity.**

This island very much deserves its name of the land of ice: indeed, 10% of its surface is covered with glaciers, including the largest in Europe, the Vatnajökull. Volcanic activity causes constant and rapid changes across the ages. In the Southwest, past earthquakes have created a vast trough fault with multiple rifts in part covered by Lake Thingvellir, now home to various species of fish that are unique in the world. When the magma teems under the Earth's crust, natural pools and the river's waters meandering to the lake see their temperatures increase, geysers explode and cauldrons of mud make enormous bubbles. This mix of water and fire is used to produce geothermal and hydraulic energy. Despite these "eco-friendly" efforts, Icelanders produce four times more greenhouse gases per inhabitant than the French, for example, in large part due to car-related pollution.





## SERIAL FALLS

IGUAÇU FALLS,  
ARGENTINA/BRAZIL

**A gem hidden in an exceptional showcase of greenery, this massive wall of water is nothing short of an awesome sight. Brazil and Argentina are contenders for the best vantage point to admire this natural wonder.**

Both the falls and their environment make this site nestled in the 45,000 acre cross-border natural park an exceptional place. Right in the middle of the tropical forest, 275 waterfalls stretch out over a 2-mile front, plunging from an average height of 262 feet. This is due to the Iguacu River's sudden drop, falling straight down the basalt cliffs. The 300-foot Devil's Throat is without a doubt the most spectacular part with its 14 horseshoe-shaped cataracts. No less than 460,000 cubic feet of water flow out of it every second in a muffled roar, and thick mists are known to produce huge rainbows. You also have to decide from where to admire this sight. On the Brazilian side, various facilities enable you to get a panoramic view; head for Argentina for a cozier vantage point. You might be lucky enough to spot toucans, parrots or eagles flying over the falls.



## A VISION OF PARADISE

BORA BORA ISLAND, FRENCH  
POLYNESIA

**This Eden floating on turquoise waters barely measures 15 square miles. A coral necklace protects this old volcano, which sunk into the Pacific.**

Bora Bora... its name alone, a distortion of Pora Pora, meaning "first born" in Tahitian, is enough to get the imagination going. The island is said to have been created by the god Taaroa just after the island of Raiatea. It emerged from the waters 13 million years ago, and the highest of its three mounts culminates at only 2,385 feet. The old volcano gradually sunk into the sea, giving birth to a lagoon encircled by a barrier reef and large enough in places to support a string of *motu*, small islands of sand and coral debris. Three bays open up onto the lagoon, including Tuuraapuo, to the west, made up of an old, now submerged, crater. Directly opposite, Teavanui Channel is large enough for boats to pass through and is the island's only opening onto the ocean. The landing strip, dating from the last world war, was for years the longest in Polynesia. This is one of the vestiges of the presence of American troops; this paradise was once a wartime military base.





## FIRE AND ICE

MYRDALSJÖKULL GLACIER  
AND KATLA VOLCANO,  
ICELAND

**Under this huge 230-square-mile icecap lays one of the most active volcanoes in Iceland. When it awakes, it provokes devastating floods.**

Iceland is sitting on a powder keg. Located at the edge of the European and American plates, the island has more than 130 volcanoes, including the violent Katla (4,961 feet) that erupts an average of two times per century. It is capped with a large white hat, the Mýrdalsjökull or “Mire Dale Glacier” in Icelandic, which is slowly making its way towards the Atlantic, with a varying thickness of 650 to 2,300 feet depending on the spot. A reservoir of magma can be found two miles under the Mýrdalsjökull, and the heat of the molten lava melts the lower layers of ice. When the temperature rises considerably, an ice disaster takes place – as was the case in 1918 – leading to a ten- to hundred-fold increase in flow and a powerful flood laying waste to the surrounding plains. This union of opposites is particularly feared by the Icelanders, always ready to flee if fire and ice unleash their powers.





#### HIDDEN TREASURE

GOBI DANXIA PARK, GANSU PROVINCE, CHINA

**Man has explored space and walked on the moon but he is far from having unearthed all of the treasures on the Blue Planet: these multicolored mountains were only discovered in 2005!**

Today, tourists flood in from all over the world to admire these “red mountains” covered in vegetation and surrounded by rivers, and which turn even redder after the rain. Danxia means “pink cloud” in Mandarin, a poetic name for these reddish limestone formations eroded over time, resulting in these unusual rocks and series of mountains surrounded by curved cliffs. These mountains were a longstanding secret even though they cover an area of 180 square miles in the Gansu province. Similar landscapes can be found in other regions of southern China (Hunan, Zhejiang, Jiangxi, Fujian, Guizhou and Guangdong). Local authorities have not hesitated to move populations and to ban tree-felling in order to preserve the sites. Indeed, China is proud of these treasures and has asked for these mountains to be listed as a UNESCO World Heritage Site.





## MYSTERIOUS ISLES

HA LONG BAY, VIETNAM

**This bay, said to be the most beautiful in the world, was once a place of refuge for pirates and the scene of naval battles. It now harbors hundreds of small fishing boats among its islands...**

According to the legend of Ha Long (literally "Descending Dragon"), the dragon severed the mountain with his tail while in the throes of fighting the sea currents, leaving a string of some 2,000 sugarloaf islands and islets in the China Sea. These rocky peaks, scattered over 579 square miles, date back 250 to 280 million years, and were sculpted by erosion from the thick layer of sediment left by the sea. Rain and subterranean rivers have also hollowed out a number of caves, some leading to inner lakes and closing up again at high tide: an ideal hiding place, once for privateers, and now for hundreds of fishing families who live on the water... A little more than half of these islets are officially named. The "Dancing Dragon," the "Old Man Fishing," or the "Pair of Roosters" appear to sailors, like ghost ships, wreathed in the mysterious mist that always floats over Ha Long.

