

Sporting times



Dog sled racing, Alaska



Sumo wrestling, Japan



Archery, Bhutan

The march to globalisation of certain sports may seem unstoppable, but more localised pursuits are still extremely popular in certain corners of the globe. Our specialists reveal some of their favourites.

Bull fighting, Oman

Traditional Omani bull fighting is a far cry from the Spanish version of the sport. The Brahmin bulls are much-loved by their owners, and the contest is a trial of strength. Two bulls are brought together in a ring and lock horns; the victor is the bull that forces its opponent to its knees, out of the ring, or simply to turn tail and flee. It is a bloodless sport and the most severe damage is normally sustained by the spectators trying to catch the bulls at the end of the fight.

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Sumo wrestling, Japan

Sumo wrestling is one of Japan's oldest and most traditional and absorbing sports. Originally part of a Shinto religious rite to pray for good crops, the religious aspect of sumo can still be seen today in the modern ring – salt is used to purify the wrestling area, while the roof overhanging the ring resembles that of a Shinto shrine. A wrestler wins his bout when he can get any part of his opponent's body to touch the ground (except for the soles of the feet), or to exit the ring, and with over 70 different ways of achieving this, sumo can be more complicated than it first appears. Bouts are fought in Tokyo, Fukuoka, Nagoya and Osaka in six tournaments throughout the year, which are open to the public. Alternatively, you can visit the sumo 'district' in Tokyo where you can eat chanko-nabe, a hearty stew traditionally eaten by the wrestlers, visit the sumo museum or even take a tour of the training 'stables'.

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Traditional outrigger canoe racing, French Polynesia

Archery, Bhutan

The mountain kingdom of Bhutan is often revered as the last Shangri la and the epitome of Buddhist tranquillity but the picturesque valleys and mountains house a dark secret. The rugged terrain makes Bhutan unsuitable for the relaxed sporting pastimes of cricket and bowls and instead the Bhutanese compete for village pride or national honours in archery. Aiming at seemingly impossibly distant targets and using hi-tech composite bows the participants launch arrows across designated archery grounds or improvised patches of dirt whilst fellow competitors partake in a barrage of vocal banter and sledging that would make an Australian cricketer blush! Although the Bhutanese approach to archery is unlikely to yield many Olympic medals (they do have a team), it is a fascinating spectacle and one that many visitors to the country can enjoy throughout the year.

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Dog sled racing, Alaska

The origins of dog sledding, where a team of harnessed dogs pull a sled and driver (musher), are unknown. However, history shows that the first organised dog sled racing originated in the Alaskan mining town of Nome in 1908 with the All Alaska Sweepstakes, a 408-mile race from Nome to Candle and back. The race came about during the Nome gold rush of 1900 as a winter pastime for idling miners, and although dog sledding or mushing, is now also popular in Canada and northern Europe, it is only in Alaska that it is the official state sport. The most famous race, held in March, is the Iditarod, where mushers and teams of dogs cover about 1,151 miles in ten to seventeen days, facing blizzards and wind chill of up to minus 75 degrees Celcius. Thousands of visitors join the excitement at either the start of the race in Anchorage or the finishing line in Nome in this epic event. You'll be hard pressed to find a spectacle that provides a greater adrenaline rush.

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Canoeing, South Pacific

The various people of the South Pacific islands share a history of oceanic voyaging, crossing the Pacific Ocean by innumerable canoe journeys to gradually populate the scattered islands. Traditionally great navigators, the island societies still celebrate this heritage, and each individual country still uses a variation of the traditional canoe, for practical purposes and for sport. The most popular design is the outrigger, built for speed and stability across the open ocean, which is usually hand carved by the village. Teams throughout the Pacific train year round to compete in inter-island races, with the largest event being the annual Hawaiki Nui Va'a, held in French Polynesia. Smaller versions of traditional canoes can often be hired, allowing visitors to explore these beautiful waters in the same way the Polynesian ancestors did.

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Goat racing, Tanzania



Bull fighting, Oman

Goat racing, Tanzania

The annual highlight of Dar es Salaam's social calendar falls each year during July or August. The great and good gather for the city's annual goat race, a fiercely fought competition held to raise money for local charities. A few years ago I had the honour of attending the very first goat race. Competition was ferocious, with men wagering high stakes on their favourite goat and ladies parading the ring in fantastical headgear. Jockeys led, chased and coaxed their charges around the ring and the champions were held high to the cheers of the crowds. Since then, almost US\$180,000 has been raised for charity from the event. In true African style, the date for this year's race hasn't yet been fixed, but for those with an afternoon to spare in Dar es Salaam, I can't recommend it highly enough.

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