

Trafficked Underworlds with Mariana van Zeller premieres this May

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This May, multiple award-winning investigative journalist and correspondent Mariana van Zeller will dig deeper into criminal underworlds in the much-anticipated fourth installment of National Geographic's Emmy-nominated docu-series **Trafficked Underworlds**, premiering on Thursdays at 9pm from 23 May 2024 on National Geographic (DStv 181, Starsat 220).



Peabody and DuPont Award-winning journalist Mariana van Zeller makes it her mission to unearth the geopolitical circumstances and context that create the multitrillion-dollar black market economy. Her National Geographic series **Trafficked** explores complex and often dangerous inner workings of the global black-market underworlds.

In doing so, van Zeller shares the taxing process of digging into a story and takes viewers on the emotional roller coaster that provides a 360-degree view of the trafficking world from the perspective of the smugglers, law enforcement, and those caught in the crossfire.

With National Geographic's trademark inside access, in each episode, van Zeller investigates a different underworld to meet the players, learn the business, and better understand the world's multitrillion-dollar shadow economy. In **Trafficked Underworlds**, she infiltrates the webs of assassins, sextortion, body parts, black market medicine, apes, migrant smugglers, hash smugglers, illegal gambling, drug mules and terrorist gold. She meets with both the traffickers and the victims to better understand the world's growing multi trillion-dollar shadow economy.

Episodes this season include the following:

Assassins

Hitmen murder nearly 3,000 people a year around the globe, yet little is known about them. What drives a person to make a living out of killing? In this episode, van Zeller journeys inside this violent trade, first tracking down an assassin in her hometown of Los Angeles before heading to a country where contract killings have become an almost daily occurrence:

South Africa.



Sextortion

Van Zeller investigates a new blackmail scam called “sextortion,” in which compromising photos are used to extort victims. Heading to the Philippines to try and find the scammer who shamed one young American victim into taking his own life, she finds a scamming culture that is bigger, scarier and more complicated than she could have imagined.

Body Parts

Every year, the sale of human remains generates billions of dollars worldwide. Astonishingly, this thriving trade remains largely hidden from the public eye. With little oversight, abuses abound. During her investigation, van Zeller learns how anyone — whether they’ve chosen to donate their body to science, cremation, or a traditional burial — can become the victim of human remains trafficking.

Black Market Meds

Americans spend more per capita on prescription drugs than anywhere else in the world. That’s why nearly 20 million US citizens are turning to the black market for their meds — and why criminals are eager to cash in on the rising demand. In this episode, van Zeller heads to Mexico and India to meet some of the underworld opportunists risking the lives of vulnerable patients.



Apes

Van Zeller heads to the Congo to investigate the illegal trade of wild apes, pushing them to the brink of extinction. She'll follow the supply chain from the poachers to the brokers and ultimately to the buyers, many in the Middle East, who use these apes as pets and in sideshow attractions. She'll also spend time with Congolese activists who are fighting to protect apes from extinction.

Migrant Smugglers

As the debate over America's broken immigration system continues to boil, Mariana heads to Mexico to investigate the billion-dollar business of people smuggling to the US. While following a 2,000-mile trail from Tapachula to the US border, she'll try to understand who's making the money, how the cartels are involved, and why so little is being done to stop it.

Hash Smugglers

The first drug that van Zeller was exposed to growing up in Portugal continues to be Europe's favourite: hash. The booming popularity of this seemingly "soft drug" holds a dark secret. Mariana follows the trail of smugglers from the mountains of Morocco to their buyers in Europe — a world of shadowy dealers, lightning-fast smuggling boats and increasing violence.

Illegal Gambling

Americans love to gamble. The legal market made \$53bn in 2021. And yet that total is dwarfed by an illegal gambling underworld that rakes in an estimated one trillion dollars annually. Van Zeller goes inside this dangerous scene to try and understand its allure, its growth, and its dark side.



The Drug Mule Scam

When van Zeller learns that 66-year-old American Rodney Baldus is locked up in a prison in Mozambique for drug running, she begins an investigation unlike any she's done before. She learns that international criminal syndicates are targeting elderly Americans with inheritance scams and conning them into becoming drug mules. But is it enough to prove Baldus's innocence?

Caught In An African Coup

An investigation into rumours of gold mining funding terrorist groups in Niger gets turned on its head after a military coup puts the country on lockdown. While van Zeller struggles to escape, she realises that the gold trade is part of a much larger fight for influence in Africa that pits the US against some of the world's most dangerous terror groups, not to mention Russia.

Trafficked with Mariana van Zeller has been nominated for five News and Documentary Emmys, including Outstanding Crime and Justice Documentary, Outstanding Writing: Documentary for *Outlaw Motorcycle Clubs*, Outstanding Writing: Documentary for *Romance Scams* and Outstanding Promotional Announcement in 2022 and Outstanding Business and Economic Documentary in 2021. The series received a Critics Choice Real TV Award nomination for Best Crime/Justice Show for two consecutive years in a row in 2021 and 2022. The series was a 2021 Gracie Award winner for Best Reporter/Correspondent – Mariana van Zeller.

Trafficked with Mariana van Zeller is produced for National Geographic by Muck Media. From Muck Media, executive producers are Mariana van Zeller, Darren Foster and Jeff Plunkett, who also serves as showrunner. From National Geographic, Bengt Anderson and Sean D. Johnson are executive producers.

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