

Disney's Animal Kingdom will give you a happy face

BY DR. BRAD DAVIS
SPECIAL WRITER

I love Walt Disney World. Sure, I once hated it. I pictured it as little more than an overrated roadside carnival with drunken teenagers running around in rat suits.

The cure for hating Disney is about the same as the cure for hating cats. Once you have your own cat, you realize how cool they can be.

Every year, I attend a veterinary conference held in January in Orlando. The first year, we went to Epcot, one of the four main parks within the massive Disney complex, mostly to make fun of it. By the end of the day I found myself wearing an oversized Mad Hatter's hat, ooh-ing and ah-ing at fireworks, grinning ear to ear. A great place, almost an alternative universe, that really does seem to be the happiest place on earth.

Rarely can traveling to Orlando be called inexpensive. Prices like a \$15 breakfast buffet can make your mouth drop open. Disney makes up for these prices by exceeding expectations, attending to every detail, and giving the opportunity to just about everyone to have a great day no matter which of the four theme parks they are visiting.

Especially when they are visiting The Animal Kingdom.

The Animal Kingdom can be described as a zoo that has been Disney-ed. After entering and pushing through crowds of kids waiting to take their picture with Baloo, or Tigger, or some character from Mulan that I've never heard of, you enter an area that feels like a rain forest, with an oasis of birds and tropical critters. Walking further, more animal exhibits surround the Tree of Life, the huge, artificial tree that serves as the park's centerpiece, with multitudes of animal images carved into the bark.

A short walk, and you find yourself in an African Village, listening to native music, then riding a jeep through a safari, or walking a trail where naturalists stationed by exhibits tell you about the animals, from hippos to mountain gorillas.

Trains made to look like they traverse African plains take you to the petting zoo, and the veterinary area, with windows giving you views into the actual vet clinic, such as the shell surgery on a tortoise we saw.

A short walk takes you to Asia, where animals like tigers and bats are on display in excellent habitats, again with naturalists from the nations the animals are native to answering questions about them. This adds even more to the illusion the park creates through architecture and

If you go:

For information: For more information on the Animal Kingdom Lodge, call Disney at 407-WDISNEY, or go to their web site at www.disneyworld.com. Birnbaum's Disney guides make a great resource for Disney information. Boon with a view: If making reservations, make sure you ask for a room overlooking the savanna, as some overlook the pool area.

Money saving food tips: The Lodge snack bar sells large cups for about \$10 to be reused for soft drinks throughout your stay. Given the cost of individual soft drinks, it's a great investment.

Transportation: A great bus/monorail system is included with the stay. Getting to and from the four Disney world theme parks from the lodge couldn't be easier.

music of being in another country.

Oh, sure, you have to have the theme park touches. Water rides, gift shops, musical and 3-D shows all dot the park. But most impressive are the smiles on the guests' faces. Kids aren't bored thinking it's too educational. Adults aren't wishing for a fifth of Scotch to try to get that "Small World" song out of their head like the Magic Kingdom. How could it get better?

How about if you could stay there?

The Animal Kingdom Lodge, Disney World's brand spanking new resort, opened last year next to the Animal Kingdom. We had heard about the facility when it was being built, and called several months in advance for reservations. Since both my wife and I are veterinarians, when we get time off we make sure we get away from it all...by looking at more critters!

Nice amenities can be found here: Good food (including a wonderful African buffet, Boma, which features American and African dishes), great rooms (done to look like an African lodge), attention to detail and hospitality. But the animals make the experience great.

Three large savannas, African style fields populated by animals native to the continent, surround and are surrounded by the hotel. Almost every room has a balcony overlooking a savanna.

The animals have free run of the area, and move around quietly, living a relatively normal existence. Some mornings, look out your balcony, and there's a giraffe, an impala, and some wildebeest. After breakfast, you look again, there's a bongo, a Thompson's gazelle, maybe a

blue crane. It's so entertaining that the ride to a park to see Mickey or Donald might be put on hold. (Dragging my wife, a wildlife artist and photographer, off the balcony became a daily struggle, as she shot numerous rolls of film each day.)

Don't worry about people hurting the animals. Security cameras watch the balconies, and anyone throwing anything off gets expelled from the facility. Plus, not many spring breakers are having wild keg parties here. Viewing areas throughout the resort area allow different views and opportunity to see animals not in your savanna. Naturalists stationed at these areas answer questions, usually with excited enthusiasm. Even the pool gives a savanna view, so it might be possible to see a giraffe while you're sitting in a hot tub.

(There are no predators on the savannas, so I guess Elton John would just call it a "Semicircle of Life.")

What about the parks?

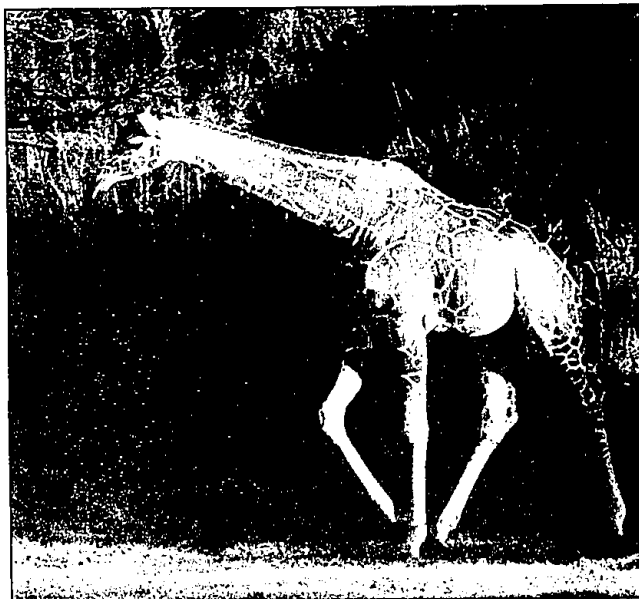
WDW has a great bus/monorail system included with your stay. Your family will probably want to spend some serious time in the lodge, so consider getting a Park Hopper pass rather than a Length of Stay pass. The Park Hopper allows you to attend any or all the parks for the number of days you pre-purchase. Length of Stay passes start the moment you arrive and end the day you leave. The Park Hopper usually saves some serious money.

Another money saving trick would be to bring breakfast food to the room with you. The parks really frown on bringing food from the outside, and, frankly, eating amusement park fare is half the fun. But the Lodge probably sells the same doughnuts or breakfast bars you bring anyway, and that's a nice savings you can put toward getting Grandma that Tigger T-shirt.

Incidentally, if you find yourself with impatient children, on a rainy night, they have TV's showing Disney movies all around the facility, including in the large, comfortable lobby, and a fireplace where African men and women tell stories and legends from their homeland.

I should mention that I'm not a shill for Disney. We stayed at the lodge for a few days receiving no discounts. Yes, after adding up the costs of travel, room rates, food, and so on, staying there can range between pricey and a small fortune.

But it's still much cheaper and probably safer than a trip to Africa. Plus you won't need any shots or a passport to go. And, the way Disney makes a point of exceeding expectations, the memories will be priceless.



Wildlife: You might see a giraffe from the pool area or the balcony at Animal Kingdom Lodge (left), which is surrounded by three African style savannas.

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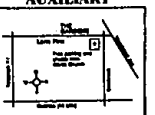
on Tuesday, at 5:45 pm. Seating is extremely limited.

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