

Thursday, April 16, 1981

Africa in Tampa

It's a jungle down in deepest, darkest Florida

By Iris Sanderson Jones
special writer

We are on the back of a flat-bed truck bumping across 60 acres of grassland, with elephants on one horizon, rhinos on the other and a giraffe in the middle of what they laughingly call a road.

Suddenly, a tiny Grant's gazelle moves across our path, not running or galloping, but going "boing, boing" with all four feet off the ground at once, like a character out of a Walt Disney cartoon.

It would be easy to believe we are really on an African veldt, but when the monorail goes by on an early morning test run, we know we are on the grasslands where the African animals live at Busch Gardens in Tampa, Fla.

Visitors to the park see these animals from the monorail that travels at eye-level through the veldt, from the skyride overhead, or from the train that circles the plain, but we have been given a rare opportunity to ride the feed truck with Buddy Farrar and Charlie Gunter, both of whom have worked here for more than 11 years.

Farrer and Gunter are responsible for feeding the animals, making a daily head count, checking for newborns, tagging them and watching out for sick animals. Before the sun is fully up, we have rescued a baby kudu, been charged by a rhinoceros called Julie, and found a newborn gazelle curled up in a grassy hollow.

THE 60-ACRE VELDT is a great spread of green grass, silvered with ponds and clumped with trees. It stretches away to strange horizons.

As we enter on the feed truck, we are aware of the fence and the shaped rooflines of the theme park, but soon we see only the herds moving and high-necked giraffes making their own skyline amid high palm trees.

The kudus start moving as soon as we enter the gate. "They only get half-ration when it rains, and it rained yesterday, so they're hungry," Gunter says. He tips a bin of feed into one of the concrete feed bins that look like a hollowed-out log.

At the next bin, a 1-day-old kudu is curled up asleep. Buddy checks it while the mama kudu watches from a distance. But the baby is easily spooked, and begins to run. It runs into the river, swims across and has its head underwater by the time it reaches the reeds.

Gunter is fast. He has his shoes off and his wallet on the grass, and he is swimming after the tiny animal in an instant. The mother remains standing, staring, at a distance.

BACK ON THE VELDT, we move to feed the gazelles, watch three ducks swim by the nose of a submerged hippopotamus, and visit the elephants, Bebe and Elka, who gather behind their moat. People often ask why the elephants don't have green grass and trees, but the great animals tear up the grass and trees as fast as you can plant them.

There are Indian and African elephants on the veldt. To keep the peace, they are in separate moats, and only females are included.

Both sexes are represented in the rhinoceros area, however, where Joe is sound asleep and Julie is standing alertly beside a giant rock. Joe doesn't deign to lift his head or open his eye as the feed truck stops, and we jump off with our cameras.

Most of us think of rhinos and elephants and other such beasts when we think of dangerous animals, but it is the horns that professionals are afraid of. Farrar got charged by a wildebeest once, and the horn went right through his jacket pocket. Otherwise, none of the men have been in really dangerous situations.

Most of the animals on the veldt are skittish

enough to move away, although the flamingos move in pink herds across the edge of the pond to the feed truck, and the zebra congregate in black-and-white striped herds behind the truck, hip to hip with the giraffes, who stare down at us from their great heights.

The nyala, antelopes with large, spiral horns, stay up on the rocks because they are shy, but the gazelles come closer. Suddenly Farrar stops the truck. There, curled in a hollow of grass, where only eagle eyes would have seen it, is a newborn Thompson Gazelle. It is cuddled, checked and recorded, and we move on.

Eventually, of course, we must leave the feed truck and visit the rest of Busch Gardens.

THIS WAS a tropical bird garden beside a brewery when it opened in 1959. It is now one of the four top zoos in the country, with live animal exhibits in natural settings, shows and other attractions with animal stars, and the inevitable thrill rides added as an afterthought. Everything is themed to African animals, which have been a passion of the Busch family for generations.

The park is divided into seven areas. The original bird sanctuary, with its 1,900 tropical birds in a lush green setting, is still an important part of the park experience. So is the brewery tour and free beer served in the Hospitality Room of the adjacent Anheuser-Busch brewery.

You enter the park at Marrakech, where craftsmen, belly dancers and shops are found in a walled Moroccan-inspired village. A walk through the exotic planted acres of the Bird Gardens takes you over a bridge to Stanleyville, an early and somewhat old-fashioned idea of an African-village-cum-amusement-park.

You can get closest to the small animals in Nairobi, where you can look through the windows at the animal nursery, pet the small beasts, take an elephant ride and see night animals in their natural settings inside Nocturnal Mountain.



IRIS SANDERSON JONES

The thrill rides begin to take over in The Congo, and there are great American scream machines in the newest area of the park, Timbuktoo, which was built to meet the cozier and play needs of visitors.

One of the most popular eating houses is here — the Festhaus, where German food and very non-African oomp-pa stage entertainment draw crowds of 1,200 people at noon.

The oldest and best-known restaurant in Busch Gardens is still the Old Swiss House Restaurant, which was built with huge glass windows overlooking the 500 African animals that roam Serengeti Plain.

The beer magnate who founded all this was known to sit at these windows and call for his elephant; one story has it that an elephant was brought right to his table one night.

The view from the veldt at Busch Gardens, where elephants coexist with monorails.



travel log
Iris
Jones
contributing travel editor

Odds and ends for the summer

The Michigan Council for the Arts puts out a handy booklet for travelers each year. It is called Arts and Crafts Fairs and Festivals.

The publication lists more than 200 arts and craft fairs taking place throughout Michigan during 1981, including information for artists who might want to participate. That information includes entry deadlines, fees and jurying procedures.

If you would like a copy of Fairs and Festivals, contact the Michigan Council for the Arts at 1200 Sixth, Detroit 48226, or call them at 256-3732.

Another piece of local news, of special interest to golfers, is a June golfing weekend for women being sponsored by the Ford Motor Women's Club. The group will go to Candlestone Inn at Belding, 20 miles from Grand Rapids, June 12-14.

The weekend is open to the public. It costs \$155 for three days and nights, including round-trip bus transportation, meals, two 18-hole rounds of golf, carts, an awards banquet and the kind of wine-and-cheese atmosphere that traditionally surrounds such a party.

You should be more than a rank beginner to enjoy it, but you certainly don't need to be an advanced golfer. If you are interested, contact Anne Evans, the travel director of the Ford Motor Women's Club, at 2200 N. Martha, Dearborn 48128, or call 563-7876 days or 561-7498 nights.

A \$20 deposit is required by April 25. The Michigan Earth Science Teachers Association will sponsor a Colorado River raft trip through the Grand Canyon for six days and five nights, July 15-20.

Dick Munson, a teacher at Thurston High School in Redford, will lead the trip. He already has run these rapids three times. People of any age are eligible to go on this trip, as long as they are more than 6 years old and in reasonably good health. Anyone under 10 years of age should have camping experience.

The trip will cost \$700 per person, including guides, all meals, horseback riding out to the Grand Canyon and an airplane ride over it back to Flagstaff.

The trip will start July 15 from Flagstaff with a bus ride to Lee's Ferry, where rafts will be boarded. The group will run every major rapids in the Grand Canyon and will make several short hikes up tributary canyons, visiting scenic places as Redwall Cavern, Canyon of the Little Colorado, Elves Chasm, Deer Creek Falls and Havasu Canyon.

"As beautiful as the Grand Canyon is from the rim, it is even more fantastic from the bottom," Munson said. "I have 13 openings left in a charter group of 30."

Contact Munson at Thurston High School, 25255 Schoolcraft, Redford 48239. You can call him there at 535-4000 or at home after 7:30 p.m. at 597-2579.

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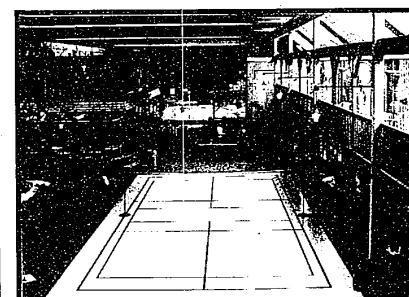
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