

The San Diego Zoo: A Southern California Attraction Review

by Amy Wear, PassPorter Featured Columnist

While our recent trip to Southern California was centered around [Disneyland](#), we couldn't go all the way to the Pacific coast without visiting the San Diego Zoo. In 2015, the San Diego Zoo was voted #1 Zoo in the World by TripAdvisor, while this year marks the 100th birthday of the zoo.

□ After spending most of the week at the Disneyland parks, we were looking forward to seeing some animals. Since this trip replaced our traditional yearly visit to Walt Disney World, we found ourselves really missing [Disney's Animal Kingdom](#), our favourite Orlando Disney park.

The San Diego Zoo had some familiar Disney theme park qualities…

□ [Irresistible Plush Stuffies](#) Much like you enter a store filled with related character merchandise when you exit a Disney attraction, you will pass by a gift shop featuring the animal you just saw at some key San Diego Zoo exhibits. Though this inevitably leads to impulse purchases, I'm still contemplating ordering the polar bear plush in his San Diego Zoo hoodie from the online store!

□ [Photo Packages](#) Much like Disney's Photopass service, the zoo has photographers on hand to take professional photos. You can purchase souvenir photos, magnets, and photo CD's.

□ [Pressed Pennies](#) Those who take their penny collecting seriously can easily fill a pressed penny book here. Our pressed penny-obsessed daughter was thrilled to find penny machines at every major exhibit. Rather than fill her special Disneyland Diamond Celebration collection, she stored them safely until we got home and added them to her zoo pressed penny book that we found at the Franklin Park Zoo in Boston last summer.

□ [Colourful Guidemaps](#) Before our trip, we printed a coloured map of the zoo. We studied the website and established our touring plan, just as we do at Disney parks. We knew that this particular zoo is on very hilly terrain, adding to the physical effort spent touring the zoo. I'm told there are moving sidewalks at certain points to help you out, but we never did find them.

□ [Gondola Ride](#) Just as Disneyland (and Magic Kingdom) once had a gondola lift called the Skyway, the San Diego Zoo is home to the Skyfari.

The Skyfari is a fun way to start your zoo visit, but surprisingly doesn't offer great views of any of the animal exhibits. Instead, this ride gives you a unique view of San Diego.

□ Since the gondola ride was included with admission, we took the path of least resistance and rode to the top of the zoo, making our way across and down the hilly terrain throughout the day. This is also the most convenient way to get to the Polar Bear Plunge exhibit as a starting point

□ Hands-on Learning As with most top-notch zoos, the animal exhibits are set up to promote learning and awareness of conservation efforts. Each exhibit is beautifully laid out with educational displays. This is a great way for kids (and adults) to learn animal facts in a meaningful way. With our own kids, it also sparks more interest in reading books and watching shows about animals at home.

□ Headliner Attractions A short walk from the polar bears, the headliner attraction at the San Diego Zoo is the Panda Trek. The giant pandas are so popular that you must stand in line and wait your turn to enter the viewing area. I caught myself gasping at first glance of the pandas. I was quickly fighting back happy tears from the thrill of coming within a few feet of these endangered animals.

□ A staff member commentates in the Panda Trek at all times, talking in a quiet voice with her microphone. We learned that the pandas are on loan from China and even the offspring born in the United States still belong to China.

□ While guests are given ample opportunity to take photographs, you are asked to continue moving down the line and make way for other guests. Those wishing to stay longer are invited to stand in the back row, but not to linger too long.

□ Since we wanted to savor this experience, we took a lunch break nearby and then revisited the Panda Trek. On our second round, the bears were more active, giving us the opportunity to take more magical photographs.

□ Guided Tours Guided bus tours are also included with admission. Before boarding the bus, you watch a short video about the San Diego Zoo's global efforts. We were impressed to learn that the zoo is 100% non-profit. All profits, including merchandise and concessions, go towards maintaining the zoo and funding over 140 conservation projects around the world that are overseen by the San Diego Zoo.

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□ Lasting about 40 minutes, the tour is a welcome break for tired feet by mid-afternoon. Just beware of the Southern California sunshine if you choose to sit on the open upper level of the double decker bus. Throughout the tour, our driver gave an excellent overview of the animals and current conservation efforts.

□ Magical Moments We were treated to a magical moment with the gorillas just before zoo closing. With just a glass wall separating us, we watched a large gorilla, who was engrossed in looking at photos of other gorillas on a frequent zoo visitor's iPad. The "gorilla whisperer" of sorts referred to this as enrichment and explained that gorillas are highly interested in seeing photos of other gorillas.

□ See Ya Real Soon We scrambled to see a few more animals before the zoo closed, wishing we had more time to visit. It was a familiar sight near the exit, the gift shops overflowing with guests making last-minute purchases. Our daughters were sure to do their part choosing panda bear stuffies, while my husband brought home beaded artwork, a hat, and a 100-years mug.

□ As we make plans to visit Toronto this summer, my 7-year-old keeps asking if we can plan on two days at the Toronto Zoo. The Toronto Zoo now has panda twin cubs and, as she points out, "remember, Mommy, one day at the San Diego Zoo wasn't enough!"

About The Author: Amy Wear is a work at home Mom, travel agent, writer, and former occupational therapist. She lives in New Brunswick, Canada, and specializes in planning magical vacations for people of all abilities at [Click the Mouse](#)

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