

Making the Most of Disney's Animal Kingdom: A Walt Disney World Theme Park Review

by Katherine Frye, PassPorter Guest Contributor

I almost skipped Disney's Animal Kingdom on my family's first trip to Walt Disney World in 2009.

We had only two days to visit the parks and I found myself talking to every Disney veteran I knew for tips. A well-intentioned friend (and Animal Kingdom skeptic) recommended we head to Disney's Hollywood Studios instead of our planned visit to Animal Kingdom. "There are next to no rides," she told me. "And we hardly saw any animals on the safari. You really get a better experience at the local zoo for a quarter of the cost."

I encountered similar attitudes on online forums, blogs, and even guidebooks. Few people suggested skipping the park altogether, but many stated -- or assumed it was simply a known fact -- that Disney's Animal Kingdom is only worth a half-day of your vacation.

□ After experiencing the park first-hand, I was mystified by the "half-day" attitude. We had a wonderful time, but we hadn't come close to seeing everything we wanted to. Subsequent trips have cemented my love of Animal Kingdom and its status as my favorite Disney park. In fact, my ideal vacation devotes two days to it. One day is for rides and shows and the other is for seeing the animals.

□ While it's true that Disney's Animal Kingdom is (as we are emphatically told) "NOT a zoo," and has some fantastic attractions, if all you do is ride the rides, you're missing an enormous part of the experience. Not everyone wants to devote a whole day to the animals, but I think incorporating them into touring leads to a much richer, well-balanced experience -- and this is what I suspect the "half-day" theorists are missing.

An effective ride-centric touring plan is focused on minimizing time spent waiting in line. Since the goals of animal touring are very different, a different touring strategy -- and even a different touring attitude -- are needed to maximize enjoyment.

□ Most people ride Kilimanjaro Safaris, and this is a fantastic attraction, but the animal experiences don't stop there. Let's start by examining some other places you can spot interesting fauna:

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□First off are two walking trails: Pangani Forest Exploration Trail in Africa and the Maharajah Jungle Trek in Asia. Both feature "headline" animals near the end of their lineups to keep guests moving steadily down the paths. Unfortunately, this leads many people to zoom down the trail, passing-up other animals in their haste to reach the gorillas or tigers. They're missing out on giant fruit bats, komodo dragons, meerkats, colobus monkeys, okapi, and dozens of other beautiful and fascinating creatures.

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□It doesn't stop there, though. There are animals all over the park. You might have power-walked past siamangs on your way for Expedition Everest FASTPASSES (we've all done it). Red kangaroos hang out near the Tree of Life by the Discovery Island Trails. The Oasis is host to quite a few different animal species, including some impressively plumed macaws. Rafiki's Planet Watch features a petting zoo that kids can't seem to get enough of, and is often the site of live animal presentations. You can sometimes even see staff performing veterinary procedures.

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□Once you're tired of all that walking and standing, head to Flights of Wonder, a not-to-be-missed show that features birds performing impressive, natural behaviors. The show concludes with a handler carrying out a bald eagle, which you can get quite close to (and photograph) at the end of the show. There's usually a bird demonstration outside the theater shortly before show time, as well.

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□So how do you enjoy the many varied species at the Animal Kingdom? Well, first of all, slow down. Really, I mean it. Guests miss so much in the effort to check another attraction off their touring plan. Take a breath. Take a seat by the water. Look around you. Put the map aside and go exploring. Lots of animal exhibits aren't marked on the map anyway. You'll enjoy the unparalleled theming Animal Kingdom has to offer. Perhaps most importantly, the walking trails and animal habitats are far more enjoyable when you aren't moving at a breakneck pace.

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□Much to the dismay of many a Disney guest, the animals aren't programmed to do something spectacular every time someone rounds the corner. This isn't the Jungle Cruise! These are live animals, and though Disney does their best to encourage them to be center stage as much as possible, they still have free will. It's best to set your expectations accordingly.

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□I find the most successful attitude to have is one that states: "I don't know what I'll see, but I know I'll see something cool." This open expectation is far more likely to result in satisfaction than, "My trip is only worth it if I see the lions."

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□Of course, we all have an animal that we hope to see, and our odds can be increased by a couple simple strategies. As mentioned above, taking your time is the key to more animal spotting. The best tip I can offer, however, is to head to the location of your favorite animal early in the day. Most of them are much happier to be out and about in the cooler morning temperatures. If you don't catch them then, try again in the early evening, but before dusk (the animals are trained to go back to their sleeping areas after sundown).

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□If you come across an enclosure that appears to be empty, don't move on to the next one just yet. You'll be amazed what might happen when you simply watch for sixty seconds. You might find this habitat's denizen hiding amongst the foliage. Wait another sixty seconds and he might even come out. Your odds of catching that spectacular moment increase as you spend more time patiently watching and waiting.

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□Even if you aren't lucky enough to catch your favorite animal, I find my mantra is always true. I always see something cool at Disney's Animal Kingdom. It's usually unexpected and better than what I was originally looking for.

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□During my last visit, my parents and I were spending some time in the Maharajah Jungle Trek's aviary. Both exploration trails host an aviary and I can't count how many times I've seen people power-walk through these. Most birds are wary to encounter loud, fast moving objects, so if you want to see anything in the aviary you have to stop for a minute. My father is a bird-lover (I think it's because he's a pilot and admires anything that can fly), so we always take some time to enjoy the quiet and get some good pictures. The path makes it easy to skip Maharajah's aviary altogether, and many guests do, so we found ourselves the only people in an area teeming with birds. It was silent, save for the birds' beautiful melodies. As I was waiting for Dad to finish up, I noticed a lovely, low, trilling sound.

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□Suddenly, a green-winged dove fluttered up to branch right in front of Dad. Ever so slowly, Dad got closer and closer, snapping photos. Unperturbed, the dove calmly observed my father and continued cooing, its breast ballooning outward with each note. On top of getting some amazing shots, Dad was practically nose-to-beak with this beautiful creature. I will never forget that look the dove gave him, as if recognizing a kindred spirit. That is pure Disney magic and it's the kind you can't find anywhere else on property.

About The Author: Katherine Frye is a college student in central North Carolina. Since her first trip in 2009, she has visited Disney's Animal

Kingdom no less than 25 times. She spends her free time scheming ways to make it back to the World.

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