

On Safari in Florida

Lion Country Safari brings the veldt close to home



Be prepared for up-close-and-personal experiences with wild (and not-so-wild) animals.

by **Glenn Ostle**

If you have ever dreamed of joining a safari across the African *veldt* but have been limited by your pocketbook, you'll be happy to know that Florida offers an affordable alternative.

Jambo! Welcome to Lion Country Safari, America's first drive-through wildlife preserve where more than 1,000 exotic animals and one hundred different species roam free over 350 acres. Most of the animals can be viewed from the safety of your own vehicle.

Lion Country was the brainchild of a group of South African and British entrepreneurs who wanted to bring the experience of an African game park to families who would otherwise not be able to experience it.

In 1967 they opened their new "cageless zoo" in what was then rural western Palm Beach County to take advantage of the area's growing population, plentiful land, year-round mild climate, and influx of tourists from all over the world.

Now in its 38th year of operation,

nary hospital, an animal demonstration theater, a summer day camp, a gas station, and 160 employees who care for animals and operate the facility.

WILDLIFE PRESERVE

The wildlife preserve is divided into seven sections, connected by a five-mile road. Each section is designed to simulate a different type of habitat and includes its appropriate flora and fauna. Areas include: Las Pampas, Ruaha National Park, Kalahari Bushveld, Gir

PHOTOS COURTESY OF LION COUNTRY SAFARI



A waterbuck relaxes in the Florida sun at Lion Country Safari.

Forest, Gorongosa Reserve, Serengeti Plains, and Hwange National Park.

Safari World is the walk-through area of the park and includes a petting zoo, carousel, boat rides, mini-golf, a dinosaur exhibit, and aviaries. There are also bird, reptile, alligator, and squirrel monkey exhibits, as well as daily animal presentations at noon, 1:00 p.m., 2:30 p.m., and 4:00 p.m. daily.

For those who crave an exciting wildlife adventure, Lion Country Safari also features a full-service and award-winning KOA campground located adjacent to the wildlife preserve. Campers can fall asleep to the sounds of nighttime Africa and wake up to the roar of lions.

Campground facilities include full hook-up, shady pull-through sites with

concrete patio, and picnic tables. Other local amenities include a general store, gas-heated swimming pool, handicapped-accessible restrooms, shuffleboard, basketball, volleyball, horseshoes, playgrounds, laundry, picnic area, and a pavilion.

CONSERVATION-MINDED

Lion Country Safari has become a leader in conservation and today protects many endangered or threatened species that live and reproduce there. It is also dedicated to the captive breeding of a number of rare or endangered species. In 2001 the park was accredited by the American Zoo and Aquarium Association (AZA). Their conservation program helps ensure the survival of many wildlife species

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South American macaws and African giraffes live side-by-side at Lion Country Safari.

including lions, white rhino, African elephants, chimpanzees, zebra, and giraffes.

WHITE RHINOS

The White Rhinoceros is one of Africa's best-known endangered animals. Weighing 5,000 pounds or more and standing 6 feet tall at the shoulder, it is also among the largest and the most significant attractions at the preserve.

The unique safari-style presentation of the rhinos, where the people are caged in their vehicles as they drive through the rhino's territory, allows for the opportunity to get unusually close to these remarkable creatures. To experience an animal of this size grazing a few feet from your car window, or to have a mother and her calf lumber across the road just inches in front of you, are thrills that should not be missed.

CHIMPANZEES

Lion Country Safari boasts one of the largest captive populations of chimpanzees in North America. Four distinct populations inhabit large islands within the preserves. The groups are separated

from each other and from visitors' vehicles by water-filled canals. The social structure of the island communities is quite similar to that found in the forests of central Africa and is unique among captive chimpanzee groups found throughout the world.

Lion Country Safari is an active par-

ticipant in ChimpanZoo, an observation program of captive chimpanzees headed by world-renowned chimp expert, Dr. Jane Goodall. ChimpanZoo observers are trained to observe and record individual and group behavior which provides valuable information that enhances understanding of the habits of captive chimps.

Want to Go?

Lion Country Safari is located in West Palm Beach, Florida. It is easily accessible from the Florida Turnpike or Interstate 95. It is located approximately 20 miles west of downtown West Palm Beach, 59 miles north of downtown Ft. Lauderdale, and approximately 78 miles north of Miami.

Lion Country Safari is open every day of the year from 9:30 to 4:30, rain or shine. Please note that there are some restrictions. Your vehicle should be in good shape and able to be closed at all times during the safari. Convertibles or soft-top vehicles are not permitted into the preserve. In the summer, air conditioning in your vehicle is a must. Also, pets are not allowed in your vehicle during safaris. Temporary kennels are

provided for a five-dollar refundable deposit. For more information about special circumstances, visit the Lion Country Safari website: www.lioncountrysafari.com.

Lion Country Safari

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KOA Campground & R.V. Resort

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Herds of zebras run free in the safari lands—and no two have matching stripes.

ZEBRAS

Lion Country Safari is home to the largest herds of zebras in the world outside of Africa. Eighty zebras roam free on over 60 acres of property at Lion Country Safari's drive-through preserve.

The common zebra stands approximately 45 inches tall at the shoulders and weighs between 400 and 850 pounds. Males are larger than females, and there is a lot of geographical variation in their stripe patterns. No two zebras have the same stripe patterns. Lion Country Safari maintains a photo identification system to identify each zebra in its collection.

Zebras reproduce year round with a peak during the rainy season. Gestation is between 360-396 days.

GIRAFFES

On the morning of December 18, 2004 Lion Country Safari welcomed a 5-foot-10-inch baby giraffe following a gestation period of 15 months. The 169-pound male giraffe calf was born in the Hwange National Park area of Lion Country Safari. His very attentive mom, Pauwa, came to Lion Country Safari in 1987

from the Miami MetroZoo. A second baby giraffe, named Tanga Tanga, was born earlier that same month.

Lion Country Safari is a licensed rehabilitation facility that takes in injured wildlife and offers care and/or placement in a more appropriate facility or return to the wild. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service permits Lion Country to keep brown pelican and roseate spoonbill species, releasing the offspring of these birds into the wild or placing them in an appropriate facility if release is not possible.

STILL GROWING

In the future, Lion Country Safari will embark on a major expansion of the Safari World walk-through area. The area will increase in size by 50 percent and will see the addition of numerous attractions, including a new alligator exhibit, new giraffe feeding exhibit, a children's play area, water play area, and facilities for large groups. 🦒

Glenn Ostle is a freelance writer and photographer, avid traveler, and a lover of wild places and the creatures that live in them.



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