Walt Disney World News

Disney Designs Wild Spaces Where Man Meets Beast, Happily

LAKE BUENA VISTA, Fla. — Architecture for Disney's Animal Kingdom is all about creating urban spaces for wild animals, wild spaces for human beings and congenial surroundings for close encounters between man and beast.

Down to the minutest detail, Disney's Animal Kingdom was carefully planned to evoke a sense of adventure travel to the edge of civilization and into a vast wilderness. Landscaping dominates as a story-telling device.

Here on the southwestern edge of Walt Disney World Resort, Disney Imagineers have created a nature-rich and protective environment for exotic animals. They include everything from Komodo dragons to hippos, lions, crocodiles and gorillas, herds of antelope and rhinos — mingled where feasible, separated by natural-looking or invisible barriers where needed.

Architectural scale is suppressed to allow trees to "overshadow" buildings. Overall building height is limited to 30 feet. Many trees transplanted to the site are over 40 feet tall. Some are man-made. Others are carefully arranged dead trees or reshaped growing trees found on the site. In Africa, for instance, they have been pruned to resemble such African signature trees as the flat-topped acacia or maringa trees with their sausage-like seed pods added.

Disney's Animal Kingdom principal icon is also a "tree" rising 145 feet over the center of the park. The Tree of Life is not only a spectacular re-creation of nature with flexing branches waving over little meadows and pools populated with animals, but a masterpiece of sculpture. A remarkable 325 animal images large and small are carved into its wide trunk, roots and main branches.

Surrounding The Tree of Life is the unique Discovery Island, a colorful melange of art and architecture casually arranged as a celebration of the animal world. As Joe Rohde, executive designer of the park, describes it, "Discovery Island is like nothing on Earth — a place where the love of animals bursts out in vivid colors across the walls and on rooftops where folk-art carvings and paintings portray every creature in the animal world — real and imagined."

Architectural critics have praised past Disney parks as examples of well-ordered urban design with a rare ability to attract and entertain millions of visitors in uniquely Disney stories. They do it with attention to every detail.

Walt Disney Imagineering designers, architects and engineers use highly detailed "scenery" as an essential part of Disney story-telling technique, along with vehicles, people — cast and guests — which give movement to the scenes. Color, shape, scale, costumes, illusions, authentic decor and in some cases inanimate objects "brought to life" through the Disney-developed system of Audio-Animatronics — all are vital to the adventures of Disney parks.

Disney's Animal Kingdom, however, carries this story-telling within themed theatrical settings to a new high, creating a whole new entertainment park by adding live and imagined animals. Unlike Disney's other parks where designers sought "cultural" icons like the Eiffel Tower, China's Temple of Heaven or a European royal castle to help visitors recognize their surroundings, Disney's Animal Kingdom architects avoided "cultural masterpieces."

As Rohde explains, "We sought less extravagant forms of architecture to keep human profile low and deliver a thematic message of humility in the face of nature's wonders."

Major “lands,” in addition to Discovery Island and Discovery River which surrounds it, include Africa, DinoLand U.S.A., Camp Minnie-Mickey and Asia.

Guests see animals as part of adventure stories. In Africa, for instance, they board a camouflage-painted truck for an exciting safari, where the tire-marked trail, the recognizably African trees, the rocky ridges and muddy river fords look absolutely real.

Disney’s Africa covers 110 acres but seems like a thousand. Guests walk over a bridge across Discovery River and down the bustling main street of Harambe on the way to the safari departure point under a 40-foot baobab tree. Here is a “real” East African port town weathered by time but struggling with the challenges of the new millennium.

Along the shore are the fishing nets and dhows of the seaside inhabitants. The Swahili-inspired architecture features hand-plastered buildings with frequently exposed coral rock substructure, walls weathered by sand and rain storms. Airy arcades provide shelter and atmosphere with eating places and shopping along the way. Corrugated metal and thatched roofs predominate.

While inspired by the town of Lamu in Kenya, Harambe designers chose not to copy a single street or marketplace but to capture the essence of the busy coastal city. They collected native artifacts, distinctive signs and designs right down to the cracks in the sidewalk.

Since you are surrounded by a compressed scene of human activity in Harambe, the contrast is even greater when you move into the animal forests and grasslands ahead. The queue area for Kilimanjaro Safaris is characterized by small pole structures and thatched enclosures which give way to progressively expanding spaces as the safari begins.

You may catch a glimpse of the Wildlife Express steam train puffing its way along the tracks from the vintage Harambe terminal to Rafiki’s Planet Watch. It’s the kind of mud-streaked train you might see in Africa with local passengers riding on the roof with their luggage or hanging from its louvered shutters. The fact that it is a narrow gauge train makes its surroundings appear larger.

For concept architect Tom Sze, the big challenge of Africa was to apply modern materials and techniques which he used in past big-city experience to meet tough building codes, then disguise them to look like crude native construction of a hundred years ago.

Careful “aging” by Disney craftsmen makes new walls look old. And construction workers can be trained (with difficulty at times) to abandon smooth walls and precise edges to produce a crudely-made look. Achieving “the look,” however, takes real artists who oversee the work at every stage.

Buildings are even more primitive-looking in such areas as Pangani Forest Exploration Trail. Where steel or concrete supports are needed — for instance in a “timber” dam which provides a glass window for underwater viewing of the hippos — they are covered with rough timbers, burlap or even epoxy coatings carved to look and feel like lodge pole construction. A “leaking” timber wall adjoining adds to the realism.

Architecture is used to replicate nature in other ways. Typical rock outcroppings in the African savanna, waterfalls and rocky grottos, a rushing “Himalayan” mountain stream for the white-water rafting experience in Asia — all were man-made to look like the real thing.

Imagineers created an authentic look throughout the land of Asia with the crumbling ruins of an ancient village, including temples and a maharajah’s palace. The land’s rainforest habitat and striking aged murals further develop the ambiance. Tigers live among the palace ruins, and other Asian creatures, including a Komodo dragon and giant fruit bats, populate the area.

At the Expedition Everest attraction, a village called Serka Zong rises from the landscape to replicate the rustic buildings of Himalayan lands. Stacked stones and rammed-earth blocks drizzled with “slurry,” a plaster-like mud mix, form structures enhanced by ornamental window carvings of animal, floral and other traditional motifs. A three-tiered temple features a crowning finial of hammered copper. Traditional totems and flags decorate the village, which sits at the foot of the 199-foot “snow-covered” mountain.

Designers have reproduced a dig site where children can play beneath giant dinosaur skeletons in DinoLand U.S.A. The Boneyard looks absolutely real with researchers’ tools and memos hung on the walls. Casts were taken from real dinosaur bones found in places like Utah’s Dinosaur National Park, then reproduced in a plastic-cement which looks and feels real.

Nearby is a light-tight building the size of a movie soundstage built for a twisting, high-speed ride through time into the pitch-darkness of a mysterious prehistoric forest where “living dinosaurs” roar and charge in the darkness.

DinoLand U.S.A. is a study in contrast. The dinosaur dig site and playground known as The Boneyard is a jumble of spaces in disarray, while the well-ordered natural beauty of Cretaceous Trail offers a serene home for plants and some animals that are “surviving descendants” of the dinosaur age.

Fueling more fun among the fossils is Chester & Hester’s Dino-Rama! This mini-land within DinoLand U.S.A. is a wacky dig-side attraction with rides, dinosaur-themed games and Chester and Hester’s tacky but popular Emporium of Extinction, always overrun with souvenir hunters.

Inside The Tree of Life in Discovery Island is a 430-seat theater where a 3-D film special-effects experience with computer-controlled creatures celebrates the lives of the animal kingdom’s largest population — bugs.

In animal areas, design plays a vital role. Within guest view, feeding stations were made to look like trees, stumps, reed clumps or rocky pools preserving the look of the wild for both animals and human guests while encouraging herds of antelope, elephants or giraffes to move from one area to another throughout the day. The result is a complete scenario of life in the wild arranged for the well-being of the animals and the amazement of guests passing through or walking along the edge of the forests and grasslands.

Overlooks were built where lions can feel at home. Gorillas at play can come right up to a row of “bamboo” so they can be seen up close but still separated from guests. Hidden moats and escarpments prevent other mingling of non-compatible animal species, but always with a “natural” look.

Disney designers traveled hundreds of thousands of miles to remote areas, wildlife preserves and colorful communities. They’ve collected thousands of sketches, pictures, artifacts and mental images to give realism and authenticity to their story — not content to depend on picture books, motion picture films or periodicals.

The result means real “adventure travel” for millions of Disney’s Animal Kingdom visitors who may never get to Katmandu or Kilimanjaro.

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