Walt Disney World News

Pangani Forest Exploration Trail Offers Intimate Walk With the Animals

LAKE BUENA VISTA, Fla. — Pangani Forest Exploration Trail at Disney's Animal Kingdom leads guests down a leafy trail through lush jungle glades into the adventurous heart of Africa for an intimate view of wildlife research with some of the world's most fascinating animals.

It's a true walk on the wild side.

From rustic observation stations along the winding trail, the self-guided tour allows close-up study of rare birds, mammals, fish and reptiles and a glimpse of the daily lives of researchers who spend their days in far-off jungle outposts searching for ways to preserve and protect the animals and their environment.

Many of the animals are too small or too shy to be seen intimately from passing safari trucks or long-distance viewing. At Pangani Forest, they are close at hand.

Just inches away, trail travelers see a family of lowland gorillas foraging through the trees and bushes "picnicking" on favorite fruits in a shady grove. Hippos swim right past a thick-glass observation window. Carmine bee-eaters, red-bearded barbets, Brimstone canaries and other rare African birds fly past visitor eyes, almost close enough to touch.

Pangani Forest Exploration Trail begins near the bustling riverfront village of Harambe, typical of East Africa. But civilization falls behind as guests pass between hand-printed sandstone pillars and under a thatched archway.

The moist-earth trail is imprinted with leaves and twigs. Lush vegetation crowds the sides of the path. At the first break in the foliage, striped-rump okapi — small-antelope fifth cousins to the giraffe — poke their long necks into view.

A glass wall holds up riverbank earth exposing a network of underground burrows and tunnels made by naked mole rats — not rats at all but relatives of the common mole with a unique society more like bees or ants where a queen is the center of life. She receives constant attention from her worker-mole-rats who are constantly trying to hide her within the tunnel network.

Within the fresh-air facility, guests find a researchers' desk, computer, study notes and other evidence of their daily activities. A host stands by to talk with guests about the importance of their studies in global animal conservation.

Exiting the building, explorers enter a unique aviary filled with rare tropical birds free to fly through the green canopy of trees overhead, which appear to be the only separation from the world at large.

In pools below are many rare fish including the most colorful cichlid found only in Lake Tanganyika.

Moving across the aviary through another screen door, strollers pass into another open air shelter with a well-aged dam on the far wall with a large panel of inch-thick glass, holding the mill pond. Water seeps through the cracks in timber walls on each side of the window. The pool is home to a trio of giant hippopotamuses. Viewers see them both above and below water.

The hippos spend most of their time in the water but can relax on nearby boulders, particularly in cooler weather.

Along the path again, visitors come to a large savanna overlook, a circular, thatched roof structure with a grand view

of the grasslands where gerenuk, rare members of the antelope family also called giraffe gazelle, stand on their hind legs to eat leaves from the trees.

Immediately in front of the observation platform, at the bottom of a small canyon, are meerkats creeping around grass patches and bushes — one meerkat always stands sentry.

Bending sharp right and following the trail through a leafy canyon, guests come to the gorilla research camp, a tent where scientific tools — binoculars, field notes, detailed records and books — reveal the nature of the work. Hosts are available to answer questions, but all the attention is focused just outside a giant plate glass window where a family of gorillas — several adult females, a silverback (adult) male and their offspring — have a lush green home in the forest.

Going out of the tent and around the corner through a narrow passage between plant-covered rocks, visitors come to a swaying suspension bridge crossing a deep green canyon for still another view of the gorilla family — and in the other direction a group of male gorillas which are part of an unusual study of gorilla social habits.

In zoological parks, older male gorillas are frequently kept separated. They have a tendency to be less inclined to live together as they get older, according to Disney curators. Researchers here have developed a compatible group that has lived together for several years in the most natural of surroundings.

Trail walkers catch a final glimpse of the gorillas through a "bamboo" fence before heading to the end of Pangani Forest Exploration Trail near the Harambe station of the Wildlife Express trains. From there, guests travel to Rafiki’s Planet Watch where many more insights into worldwide animal preservation efforts provide fascinating experiences.

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