

Text : Jeffrey Warner
Images : S.P.

WILDLIFE WALKABOUT:

An Excursion into the Depths of the Chiang Mai Night Safari

Journal Entry #1: The Chiang Mai Night Safari and the "Walking Zone" comedy show

After traveling from my hometown in the U.S.A.'s Northern Minnesota, literally to the other side of Planet Earth, I am today in the middle of Thailand's Chiang Mai Night Safari.

This natural theme park is both a day and night-time zoo comprising about 1,600 animals from 130 different species - including the white tiger and white lion, each of which is one of about 200 remaining in the world.

I'm open for whatever this adventure will bring, because although I've lived in Chiang Mai for nearly two years, I've never really explored this area attraction.

All of this is going to change though, because I have yet to fully realize the great depth of experiences available here, including the sometimes hilarious comedy show - starring 400 animals of 50 different species - that is about to ensue during a 1.2 kilometre-long 'walking zone' adventure around

24 :: CHIANG MAI TOURIST GUIDE



Swan Lake, the evening location of an elaborate, laser-lit fountain show.

I am armed merely with nearly insatiable curiosity, a somewhat tattered notebook, blue-ink pen, fancy-schmancy camera and a backpack containing supplies that will suffice for an overnight stay at the Night Safari's resort accommodations.

For now, all I can do is record what I'm observing.

A haphazardly organized parade of quacking ducks mixed with honking geese are hurriedly waddling toward the water's edge where a rubber boot-clad human is pouring a litter of grainy-grub from a plastic bucket onto the ground.

A stone's throw away is a posse of monkeys. Some are gleefully exploring their stone, some house-like abode. Others are relaxing, preening one another; picking off bugs or whatever. All was tranquil prior to an abrupt, choral director-like grunt from the alpha monkey that has activated an onslaught of howling, hooting and hollering from the remaining horde.

CHIANG MAI TOURIST GUIDE :: 25



It's as though an elaborately-constructed (albeit, out of tune) wind chime has suddenly received a blast of air from an oncoming storm-front. Followed by sudden silence. Then, repeat.

Moving on, it's as though I'm literally entering into other worlds. Each animal is doing its own thing - turtles lounging rock-side over here; a rabbit munching on a plant over there. I am attempting to interact with this long-eared fur ball, to no avail; typical rabbit - concerned only with greenery and mating.

Lizard! This nearly neon-green critter is either attempting to get back into its cage or is making a valiant attempt at eloping with its monstrosity look-alike companions located on the other side of the clear-plastic barrier between them.

After one more frantic attempt, it has darted off to the back of the cage. I'm (somewhat foolishly) trying to follow in the attempt to get a bit closer. And it's scurrying further

away! "Fine, lizard. Run away then. I don't care much for your kinds' impersonal ways, anyway."

The sweet sounds of singing birds, somewhat haunting (yet intriguing), roar of a distant lion and other elements of a barnyard cacophony are melding with my memories of city commotion.

Nearly all of these animals have seemingly adapted well to their new homeland. Some are lying around lackadaisically, literally with half-amused facial expressions regarding the sight of yet another tourist observing them, perhaps as though they're part of some freak show. However, it's becoming apparent that we're equally curious of one another. And just who's the freak, anyway?

The flock of pink Greater Flamingos standing one-legged in a shallow pond appear to care very little about my presence. However, a Blue and Gold Macaw perched in the upper region of its wooden, mesh-enclosed cage has a different idea. And this is where my Night Safari adventure is taking form as an authentically wonderful experience.

After an initial 'hello,' this vibrantly colored bird and I are silently staring each other down; whereas, she is now downward scaling her abode to meet with me face-to-face, I am traveling into the mystical allure of her sparkling gray eyes that gently gaze in my direction.

Safari: An overland journey, usually involving a trip taken by tourists to Africa. Traditionally, this term is used for a big-game hunt, while today it often refers to an adventure not for the purposes of hunting, but to observe and photograph wildlife.



26 :: CHIANG MAI TOURIST GUIDE

CHIANG MAI TOURIST GUIDE :: 27

The next cage over is home for a brown owl equipped with jet black, bottle cap-sized eyeballs placed inside a dish-shaped face that is being moved back and forth like the pendulum of a grandfather clock - no doubt, scanning me.

Since this highly-evolved predator is offering me neither advice nor a lollipop, I am now pushing through a curtain of dangling, metal chains before entering an expansive aviary where a strong ammonia-like smell announces the array of birds flying about there.

Feeling fully part of life's jungle, I'm remaining cautious about my surroundings. For I have no idea what these feathered friends are going to do. However, this scene is all seemingly routine for both the Black-Crowned Blue Heron and the Saurus Crane - the tallest crane in the world, standing at 6-feet with an 8-foot wingspan.

I can't help but wonder what the Lesser Mouse Deer hiding under this wooden bench is experiencing. It's frozen in motion while looking up at me. A strange sort of critter, it has a small, furry body that weighs 1.5-2.5 kilograms, is 45-55 centimeters high and supported by stick-thin orange legs that seemingly belong on a duck.

Now beyond that realm, I am nearing the end of my adventure walk while being posed with the challenge of deciding what the heck I'm going to do about this male peacock sprawled across the trail! It's nearly two meters in-length and has a beak resembling a small gardening trowel. Sneak by? Wake it up? Uhh...no. I will stay put for a few moments. Sure enough, it's moving on in its own time. And, I didn't know that peacocks made noises like that!

My sentiments: "Hey pal. Did you see the signs that are penned with, 'Do not follow the animals...Do not go inside the cages?' Perhaps we should all follow the rules, eh?"

Anyway, I must have taken a wrong turn at the turtles because I have somehow bypassed the end-section of the walking trail where apparently there are more monkeys.

I am back where I started. However, this time I am somewhat repugnantly observing a Malayan Tapir (which freakishly looks like the mixing of an elephant and a hippo), as it's squirting streams of urine out its backside at high velocities. It has blasted its cage mate in the face. And to my amazement, she calmly shakes it off before continuing with her leafy meal.

Life lesson learned: When life hoses you down, shake it off and keep going.

I have passed on to her a carefully selected, previously ground-bound stick, and she is contentedly peeling away its bark a layer at a time. After more eye-gazing and a short conversation involving a couple of squawking noises, I am meandering on from this enlivening experience.

Pondering: While some people maintain somewhat critical moral sentiments regarding zoo-like attractions, another viewpoint is that we have a chance to cultivate our global awareness and compassion for life by experiencing the power of these worldly creatures up-close (and live through it).

Moving on as I am from these philosophical sentiments, the all-encompassing array of unidentifiable sounds is leading this safari adventure to a point where I am thoroughly enjoying myself. I have a slight skip in my step, as I am being pulled along by the unknown adventures located around the next corner.



An example is the distant sighting of a sloth bear. Yes; the Melursus Ursinus - a slothy creature indeed, with its insect-based diet, coupled with a peculiar sound that resembles a high-pitched metronome emanating from its cage area.

This black-furred beast is flanked by a fox that is 20 cm. tall - not counting the 15-centimeter-long ears and 25-centimeter-long tail - that weighs in at a welter-weight of 1.5 kg. If you've watched the Star Wars movies from the 1980s, this lil' guy sort of resembles one of those Ewok characters. While next up is the Meerkat in its sandy cage area, stretching upward on its hind legs in the attempt to sniff me from afar.

During this initial experience, I'm evolving from a somewhat stressed-out city dweller into being thoroughly reminded of how much I love life. All I want to do is recommend this Safari experience to everybody. Because whether the critters here are scaled, furry, bristly or feathered, most all are relaxed, friendly and traveling the road of life just like the rest of us. And you just never know what you will experience if you take the time to relax and be present.

I'm now standing in front of the Rhinoceros Hornbill bird, with its long, lady-like eyelashes surmounting a multi-colored bill that is emitting a throaty, squawking noise. Perhaps a bit nervous, this oddly-constructed creature is seemingly attempting to intimidate me, launching its mussy body between different points in its cage while jabbing toward me with its broad sword-like mandible.

I'm challenged with taking this fella seriously however, mostly because of its additional, faceless, upside-down beak stacked on top of its main bill. Regardless, it could probably mess me up if ticked off and this barrier wasn't between us. So, I'll just pay my respects and move on.

In the meantime, the day and night-time trolley-bus adventures provide different experiences. I'm discovering that the ability to feed the zebras, pigs and horned critters that are non-shyly herding toward and encircling this trolley-bus is the most profound aspect of this wheeled trek.

To sum it up: My innards were swirling as a fully-grown giraffe was staring me directly in the face, prior to using its long, sticky, saliva-soaked, purple tongue to thrillingly snatch the carrot from my hand. Thrilling! And the joy-filled shrieks from the other tourists affirmed my sentiments.

While I felt sort of disconnected from the animals at first, I changed my tune because ya can't get much closer than this...



Beyond a cabaret-style dancing and fire spinning show, buffet-style dinner and a laser-lit fountain show, the Night Safari is also offering a profoundly unique experience at the "Giraffe" restaurant where - beyond scarfing down your own meal - you can provide a snack for such animals as goats, sheep, deer, zebras and giraffes. No concerns though. Is out of your dinner plate, unlike while you're on the trolley-bus. Is grub on their reach.

Additionally, there is a children's zone playground, and a digital zoo where interactive, high-tech games involving musical instruments and digital are available.

Yet more attractions include the Tiger Kingdom, showcasing 10 different species of tigers; paddle boat rides, a photo corner, souvenir shops; and for those who wish to lengthen their stay, accommodations including a campground and safari-themed guest rooms are available.

Finally, a new activity available at the Chiang Mai Night Safari is scenario paintball where - throughout a playing field of over 24,000 square meters - players participate in a story scenario including historical re-enactments as well as futuristic, video game-like simulations.

Safety equipment is provided and high-grade, non-toxic paintball bullets that will not harm the players are used, so it's very safe! This is the first and only offering of scenario paintball in Thailand.

Surely, these escapades have something for everyone, whether on a day or night-time safari.



Journal Entry #2: Jurassic Park trolley-bus ride

The Chiang Mai Night Safari is also offering trolley-bus rides through South and North Zones - each respectively offering a drive-by viewing of a plethora of animals from wildebeests, giraffes and hippos to zebras, emus, kangaroos, lions, tigers and bears. Oh my!

This adventure is a completely different experience than the one in the walking zone. I'm feeling a bit more disconnected from the animals. However, it's still thoroughly interesting viewing Roger and Goyaa the rhino couple elope; the eyelash-batting vintoloper; baby animals, stretching lions; a white-bellied sea eagle, with its body pointing in one direction and its head in another; and vultures.

I've certainly never lobbed a banana to a striped hyena before. Nor have I ever observed an Asian Black ('Moon') Bear put on a muscle-flexing show in exchange for a treat.

28 :: CHIANG MAI TOURIST GUIDE

CHIANG MAI TOURIST GUIDE :: 29