

Giraffe Ranch ~ A Safari Surprise In Dade City

By Karen McBride

Giraffe Ranch was years in the making before it opened to the public in 2008. The ranch is not only home to giraffes, but a variety of exotic and domestic animals including rhinoceros, zebras, ostriches, tortoises and so much more. When you arrive at the ranch, a feeling of peace, happiness and harmony with nature surround you on the 47 acre ranch. The rolling hills and grass lands of Dade City are the perfect environment for the animals. Large oak trees provide the much needed shade for the animals and visitors on the ranch.

Lex Salisbury and his wife Elena Sheppa own Giraffe Ranch. Salisbury has devoted his life to the care of animals. His love of creatures big and small has led him to create a ranch where the

you hear little known facts about these creatures, you may catch a glimpse of the long legged giraffe peering above the trees in the adjacent gated area.

It is such an unusual sight to see these stunning, graceful creatures walking around on the serene ranch. Giraffes range in height from 14-19 feet. Giraffes have seven cervical vertebrae, just like humans. They can fully extend their heads to reach the leaves on the tallest trees. One way to differentiate males from females in the wild is by the ossicones (horns) on top of their head. Females will have tufts of fur on the ossicones, while males do not, because they keep it worn off while fighting for dominance with other male giraffes. Their beautiful markings are like finger prints and no two are alike. Giraffes don't like to be petted, but they do like to be fed. Hold onto

the branch tightly or they will pull it right out of your hands!

Mother giraffes give birth while standing up and visitors of the ranch were witnesses to this miraculous event on June 16, 2011. The baby was born while the mother was being

fed by the visitors on a safari vehicle. "That's how comfortable the animals are here", said Elena Sheppa, Salisbury's wife. It is important for the baby to nurse shortly after birth. The male giraffe lifted up the baby with his ossicones (horns) to encourage the baby to nurse. "We had never seen it before, and it was amazing to see and get it on video."

The ranch is home to several species of camels, including Dromedary (1 hump), Bactrian (2 hump) and Tuli, which is a hybrid (a cross between a Bactrian and a Dromedary). The camels were the greatest surprise. When you think of camels, you may think of biting,



spitting creatures with an attitude. Camels don't spit at all, but they may regurgitate on you if they are angry (kind of good news, bad news bit of information.) The camels at Giraffe Ranch are so friendly, more dog-like than camel-like as they run up to greet you. They enjoy a good back scratching. Guests can pay an additional fee to ride the camels. Dufus is one of the largest camels, so he usually gets picked last by hesitant riders. We had the opportunity to meet another camel named Forest Hump. He spotted the safari vehicle and ran up to

greet us. I had been distracted looking at the ostriches, when he gently nudged my back, as if to say "hey, pet me!" We each took a turn petting the gentle giant.

Camels are domesticated,

which means they have been bred in captivity for over 500 years. Long ago, it was thought that the hump stored water, but in fact it stores fat. Camels have cushpads on their chest, like a step stool. So when they lay down, it keeps them slightly elevated so they get airflow to cool off.

A good sign of a successful ranch are the number of babies born. The ranch has had many babies over the years. A baby zebra was born in August. When the baby was born the zebras forced the



animals have ample room to roam. In addition to getting his Master degree in Environmental Science, he worked at zoos in Australia, the United Kingdom, spent 21 years at the Lowry Park Zoo, and went on many safaris in Africa, which increased his knowledge and led him to his own ranch.

Education is an important part of Giraffe Ranch. As you embark on the tour, you will learn interesting information about the animals on the ranch, each area is gated to keep the animals safe. In the small animals section you will see a variety of animals including monkeys, lemurs, porcupines, tortoises, and even guinea pigs. As

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Nature lovers and horticulturists will enjoy seeing the 450 year old live oak tree that lives on the ranch. A 100 year old Orchid is growing high in a tree, but it is protected by a cage to ensure it isn't dessert for the wandering Giraffes.

Our tour guide informed us that a wilted Resurrection Fern will come to life when sprayed with water.

The wetlands serve as a native wildlife preserve, where 200 birds come to roost at night in the shallow water. This is a way to protect themselves from predators. If a bobcat tries to attack, the splash of the water will awaken the sleeping birds and give them the opportunity to escape.

Reservations are required, with tours at 11:00 am and 2:00 pm. The cost to enjoy a day on the ranch is \$59.99 for adults (12 & up); \$49.99 for children (ages 2-11), \$54.99 for seniors (65 &

older sibling out of the herd. "It's like sending them off to college," said Alex, Salisbury's son and a tour guide on the ranch. Zebras run in the large open grassy area and enjoy cooling off in the shade of the many oak trees.

Axis deer, blackbuck antelope, pygmy hippopotamus, Indian rhinoceros, and many more animals call Giraffe Ranch their home. Exotic animals are not the only species, on this working ranch. Geese, hens, and other domestic fowl have their place on the ranch. The hens produce free range eggs, up to six dozen per day. They sell the eggs to help support the ranch.

up) with discounts available for groups. Visitors can also tour the ranch in safari-type vehicles with stadium seating. The jeep like trucks with covered awnings hold 20 people and allow for up close and personal encounters with the animals. For the more authentic safari feel, guests can tour the ranch on camel back. Two experienced guides lead the 60-90 minute tour and the cost is \$150 per person, for this (possibly) once in a lifetime adventure. The camel tour is offered for children 3 years and older, and 3-5 year olds must ride with an adult.

For an additional \$20 per person, visitors get the opportunity to feed Ring-tailed lemurs. The gentle creatures don't like to be petted, but they will hold your hand while you feed them grapes to munch on. Salisbury relayed the first time he held a guerilla's hand, in 1981. "The experience is burned into my brain. It is such an emotional experience to

holds hands with a primate," said Salisbury.

Be sure to wear close toed shoes, and a hat, sunscreen and long pants are recommended. The cost is comparable to what you pay at other animal parks in the area, but you don't have to endure long lines and crowds.

It is amazing to discover how we are connected with the animals on the ranch. From the Giraffe that shares the same number of cervical vertebrae with humans, to the horns of the rhinoceros that are made of keratin (like our skin and nails), to the gentle way Lemurs and monkeys like to hold your hand. We are put on this earth to take care of it and other living creatures, and places like Giraffe Ranch are a great reminder of this important purpose.

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