

Busch Gardens Tour: Saving A Species

by Cheryl Pendry, PassPorter Featured Columnist

It's not often that you get a chance to see a rhino up close and hand feed a giraffe, but that's exactly what is possible at one of the special tours at Busch Gardens Africa in Tampa.

The tour is called Saving a Species and it immediately caught my eye just because it was so unusual. I have to also admit to being ever so slightly jealous of those people I had seen on previous visits to the park, heading out into the Serengeti Plain, getting close to the animals, in their own private vehicles. One day that was going to be me - and finally I had my chance!

We were met by our guide, driver and official photographer, who would be accompanying us. There were certainly plenty of staff to go round for the small number of people who would be taking the tour and we were made to feel like VIPs. As we headed on to the savannah, our guide pointed out animals to us - many of them known to her by name. It was clear that not only did she love her job; she has a lot of affection for the animals she comes into contact with.

We learned about the ostrich that's joined a herd of kudu and is now not only convinced that she belongs with them, she also scares off any animal that threatens the herd! Then there's the pair of grey crowned cranes that can't be parted from each other - and if that happens, they will literally die of a broken heart. It was truly like being taken into the heart of Africa and entering the community that lives out on the savannah.

However, this was only the start, with the highlights still to come. Our first came when we met Dolly, one of the oldest giraffes on the plains. It soon became clear that Dolly is a real softie and I suspect has played a big part in their tours for a long time, as she knew exactly how to pose for photos with us and how to seek out the people with lettuce, which we had been given to feed to her. Everyone had plenty of time to hand feed her, stroke her and get their photos taken with her. There was even the opportunity to get a giraffe kiss by holding a piece of lettuce in your mouth. Not something that I was interested in, but my husband, along with a few other brave souls, was more than happy to give it a go!

The experience with the giraffe is perfect for children, even if you have young ones who may be apprehensive. There was one child in our group and she was easily persuaded to have a go at feeding Dolly and seemed to really enjoy it, which didn't surprise me, as Dolly was one of the most

docile creatures I'd met and she's probably less likely to scare youngsters than many other animals. Our tour then continued through the savannah, before we were taken to an area in the middle of the plain to meet Forest. He's a black rhino and I must admit I was a little skeptical about how close we would actually be able to get to this great beast. Surely there would be glass between us or fences? Nothing like that. Instead, we were greeted with the sight of a trench in front of us, where one of the keepers was feeding Forest by hand, while another explained all about him and his species.

I'm ashamed to say that I don't remember a word of what we were told, but in my defense, there's good reason for that. I was just totally captivated by the sight in front of me and couldn't take my eyes off Forest. All my concentration went into watching what was going on. Again, it was clear that the keepers had excellent relationships with the animals in their care and had both the deepest respect and affection for them.

Considering this was the main selling point of the tour, I really was expecting to just jump back on the jeep and head straight back, but instead we were taken on a drive around the rest of the savannah, before getting another chance to try our hand at feeding the animals. This time, our guide attracted a tame eland to take lettuce from us. It seemed that the treats just kept coming on this tour and it really did exceed my expectations.

Having experienced this tour, I can fully understand why one of the couples on it had been on it three times before. I can easily see us heading back for another encounter with Dolly and Forest on our next visit to Busch Gardens Africa.

Saving a Species lasts for 45 minutes and costs \$44.95, with discounts for Platinum, Gold and Silver Passport Members at Busch Gardens Africa. Bookings can be made at the [Busch Gardens web site](#) up to six months in advance. The tour is open to those aged five or older.

About The Author: Cheryl and husband Mark live in England and love to travel, particularly to America. They are in the process of visiting every Disney theme park around the world, having already been to Disneyland Resort Paris, Hong Kong Disneyland and both American Disney resorts. They are now planning for their trip to Japan in the spring to visit the Tokyo Disney Resort. [Click here to view more of Cheryl's articles!](#)

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