

Backstage Tour: Wild By Design

by Cheryl Pendry, PassPorter Featured Columnist

There are many opportunities to step behind the scenes at Walt Disney World, from mastering a Segway to exploring the Utilidors underneath the Magic Kingdom and learning about festive traditions from around the world.

When you think about the array of tempting choices, it's no surprise that the Wild by Design tour ended up being one of the last behind the scenes tours that we've sampled. At first glance, it doesn't seem to be the most interesting way to spend three hours. My trusty PassPorter told me that it was a three hour walking tour, which would give us the chance to "learn about the represented cultures, historic artifacts and storytelling" of the Animal Kingdom. I thought it would be interesting, but not a great deal of fun. It just goes to show how wrong you can be!

You meet outside the entrance to Animal Kingdom and it didn't take us long to realize that there weren't going to be many of us on our tour. The fact that there were only four of us made it that much easier for us to ask questions of our guides. Yes, you read that right -- even with only four of us, we had two guides to take us around the park.

As you might expect, our tour started where your journey into Animal Kingdom begins, in the Oasis just beyond the entrance gates. It's an area that many people race through, anxious to make their way over to Kilimanjaro Safaris or Expedition Everest, but it's somewhere to explore at your leisure. If you do take that time, you might notice the rich theming here that gradually transports you from the world outside into the park that awaits you. That's just one of the things that were pointed out to us as we made our way towards Discovery Island.

If you've ever admired the bright colors of the shops on Discovery Island, then next time you visit, take a very close at each of them in turn. They all have their own specific theming, representing different aspects of the animal world. In one, you'll find animals full of spots and stripes, while another showcases animals from all points of the compass.

From there, the tour takes you into three of the different areas of the park in turn, starting with the one that I've never been entirely sure about -- DinoLand USA. I don't know about you, but I don't feel that it fits into Animal Kingdom and I've never really understood why it's in such a beautifully themed park. Now having learned the story behind DinoLand, I can't say I like it any more than I did before, but at least I

now appreciate why it's there.

The whole thing revolves around Chester and Hester, a pair of lovable rogues, and their attempts to make money from the dinosaur skeletons that were found here. Like any good story, there's a moral to it and, in this case, it's all about over-commercialism and making money from the animal world. There's no such moral needed in Asia, but there is still a story to this area of the park. It's perhaps one of the more subtle ones to be found in Disney. Look around carefully on the ground - and the park's newest attraction - and you might get a clue as to what it's all about. As you approach Expedition Everest, you're near the top of the mountain, and on the ground around you are hoof prints. Head towards the Kali River Rapids and those hoof prints become cart tracks as you enter the town at the base of the mountain.

Even though this tour is called Wild by Design, it's not all about the theming of the park. You can't talk about Animal Kingdom without referring to animals and this tour is no different. During our three hours, some of the highlights were talking to the animal keepers and, in particular, our meeting with Debbie, who is one of the team looking after the gorilla families in the Pangani Forest Exploration Trail. Talking to her about their interactions was absolutely fascinating and I could easily have spent three hours with her alone. I got the impression that whatever you asked her about the gorillas, she would have an answer ready for you. She's clearly a lady who enjoys her work. The same thing could also be said for our guides, Tony and Julie. We were stunned to find out halfway through the tour that this was only Julie's second tour. It really didn't show at all and had this not cropped up in conversation, we would have guessed that she had been giving this tour for years.

All in all, we feel this is a great part of the line-up of tours at Walt Disney World. Sure, it may not have the glitz and glamour of some of the other tours on offer and it may not take you backstage (the closest you'll get is access to parts of the park before they open to the public), but it's still a worthwhile and fascinating way to spend three hours. If you've got an interest in Animal Kingdom and how it was designed, then this is a tour that is well worth taking. The Wild by Design tour is offered twice a week, on Thursday and Friday mornings at 8:30am and lasts for three hours. It costs \$58 and is only available to those aged 14 and upwards. A light continental breakfast is included in the price of the tour.

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

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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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