

Zoos of the World: San Diego, Washington D.C., and London

by Cheryl Pendry, PassPorter Guest Contributor

It's a well known fact that zoos around the world are big visitor draws. A bit like Disney theme parks, there's nowhere else quite like them -- that is unless you've got enough money to head out on an African safari or into Asia and the Far East to see the animals in their own habitat.

Of course, as well as being tourist attractions, zoos also play a vital role in conserving animals that may otherwise be extinct by now. One of the best -- and perhaps most high profile -- examples of that in recent years has been the panda breeding program, which has led to delightful arrivals at two of America's top zoos.

San Diego Zoo is generally considered to be one of the best in world and with good reason. Open every day of the year, including holidays, its 100 acres are home to something like 4,000 animals. Highlights include tigers, gorillas, polar bears, elephants and, of course, their world famous pandas.

Pandas first came to San Diego in 1987 and since then, the zoo has seen the building and expansion of the Giant Panda Research Station, which is currently home to four of these awesome black and white bears. Their latest arrival is Su Lin, who was born in August 2005 and now weighs around 80 pounds. She is beautiful to watch in the panda area. We were lucky enough to see her climbing a tree and being followed by her protective mother on our visit, and she's certainly an active thing when she's in the mood! Of course, while she's undoubtedly the cutest resident in there, she's not the only attraction in the panda exhibit, and the paths you walk along offer great panda watching opportunities.

That's part of the attraction of San Diego Zoo, the way the paths are laid out. There are various routes you can take around the place, allowing you to see the animals in the different parts of the park. But remember, not only is San Diego Zoo spread out over a big area, it's also laid out over very hilly terrain! Fortunately, the zoo keepers have thought of everything, so when you enter you get a great map that not only shows you how to track down the animals, but also tells you whether the route to get there will be an easy one with gentle slopes or whether you're going to be on your last legs after hiking up a steep hill!

They've also installed moving walkways to make getting around easier, and you can also hop on the Express Bus - double or single decked buses

that stop at five locations around the park. If you want to get your bearings before you set off exploring on foot, then the zoo's 35-minute narrated bus tour is the perfect way to be introduced to everything that you need to see during your visit.

For a truly stunning view though, you can't beat the Skyfari Aerial Tram, which takes you between the top of the park and the main entrance. These gondola cars take you soaring 180 feet over the zoo. You'll see some of the animals from up high, and you'll get a great view of neighboring Balboa Park.

What we enjoyed the most here was the way this is set out over such a huge area and how much room the animals have to enjoy. We'd rarely seen such active animals, and watching a polar bear play with a traffic cone was a definite highlight for us. If you're in San Diego, a visit to their magnificent zoo is something that's certainly worth doing.

Another zoo worth seeing on the other coast of America is the National Zoo in Washington D.C. Just like San Diego, one of its biggest draws in the last year or so has been a beautiful black and white bundle of fun called Tai Shan. This panda cub, born in July 2005, has attracted considerable worldwide attention. We were lucky enough to get tickets to be amongst the first to see him when he was introduced to the public in the winter of 2005.

But there's so much more to the National Zoo than just its pandas. The pandas are part of the Zoo's new Asia trail, which is home to species such as red pandas and sloth bears (who also have a cub, who's just turned one). Another "cub" that's worth seeing is the Asian elephant calf Kandula, although he's hardly a baby anymore, having now turned five! But the cutest current inhabitants have to be the three Sumatran tiger cubs, who are just eight months old and only made their public debut in September.

Perhaps one of the nicest -- and most unusual -- aspects of the National Zoo is that unlike many others, it's free of charge to visit. But do remember that while San Diego is beautifully themed, D.C. lacks some of the theming and good weather that San Diego enjoys. The day we visited, D.C. had been carpeted in snow, something that most of the animals have to get used to, even those who wouldn't usually experience snow in the wild!

You can't talk about zoos without mentioning London Zoo, the oldest scientific zoo in the world. First opened in 1828 for scientific study, it was opened to the public 20 years later and to this day, still attracts thousands of people each year. Set in the Regent's Park in North

London, today it's undergoing a huge investment, with new areas being added all the time to bring it up to the same quality as the world's other finest zoos.

This spring, the gorillas will get a new home called Gorilla Kingdom and visitors will be able to walk through the forest aviary, which will also include rainforest birds and monkeys. Another new addition at around the same time will be the Clore Rainforest Lookout, which will be home to South American monkeys and birds. Of course, the old favorites are still there. The tiger area remains one of the best places to have up-close encounters with these magnificent big cats, and you'll also be able to get close to the stunning reticulated giraffes and zebras in the zoo's Edge of Africa area.

We were pleasantly surprised on our recent visit to see just how much has been done to turn this zoo back into a great family favorite. There's a lot of ground to cover here and you can't help but feel you're enjoying history as you walk around the zoo. Many of the buildings here are protected as landmarks and the giraffe house, built for that purpose, dates back to 1837. So, it's also worth looking at the structures as well as the animals within!

Wherever you go in the world, zoos all share one thing in common -- an amazing array of animals, a dedication to conservation and a great day out for the whole family. The next time you're in San Diego, Washington D.C. or London, it's certainly worth checking out each of these city's zoos. You won't be disappointed with them!

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!](#)

Article last updated: 2/15/2007

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