

Lions and Tigers and Learning, Oh My!: Educational Opportunities at Disney's Animal Kingdom

by Keely Hutton, PassPorter Guest Contributor

Keely previously brought us her insights into educational opportunities at the [Magic Kingdom](#), [Epcot](#), and [Disney's Hollywood Studios](#), and joined us in a [PassPorter podcast to discuss these very topics](#). Here is her take on Disney's Animal Kingdom!

Using animals to educate is a long-standing tradition for Disney. From bringing live deer into its studios to teach animators anatomy and movement to creating memorable cartoon characters to teach important life lessons, animals have proven to be effective teachers for Disney cast members and guests. It is a tradition that started with Walt Disney, who taught the world to laugh through an unlikely animal, a mouse. It is a tradition proudly carried on in Walt Disney World's fourth theme park, Disney's Animal Kingdom, where education comes to life

It is not difficult to decipher the theme of Animal Kingdom; it's spelled out in the name: ANIMALS! The 500-acre park is teeming with wildlife, making it a science student's dream. Walk down one of the park's beautifully landscaped trails, such as Maharajah Jungle Trek, The Oasis, Discovery Island Trails, or Pangani Forest Exploration Trail and look for the distinguishing features on the animals you find. See if you can determine whether you are looking at a mammal, reptile, amphibian, bird, or fish. With over 1,000 animals calling this park home, it can be a truly "moving" lesson in classification.

While enjoying the winding paths, don't overlook the lessons in botany blooming all around you. There are over 4 million plants growing at Animal Kingdom, encouraging discussions about the important role plants play in our world. What do they provide all animals (humans included) that make life sustainable? Explore the exhibits, and talk about how the animals use the plants. Oxygen production, food, protection, recreation, shelter…children will be amazed how important plants are to all creatures, big and small.

It is impossible to discuss plants at Animal Kingdom without talking about the Tree of Life, where lessons branch out into both science and art. With 325 animal carvings found on its trunk, branches and roots, this man-made tree breathes life into the normally boring lesson of identification. Stick together as a group, or break into teams for a wild scavenger hunt for animals. Budding artists can study the intricate

craftsmanship carved by 20 sculptors and appreciate how each animal carving blends seamlessly into the next to create this amazing work of art.

Having honed your identification skills on sedentary animals, it's time to spot their live counterparts on Kilimanjaro Safaris. This bumpy ride takes guests through a 100-acre African savannah, where the game of matching evolves into the ultimate "I Spy." Guests are challenged to match the animals roaming freely around them to the pictures and names located on each safari vehicle. The beauty of this I Spy is that every game you play changes with the whims of the animals. Another fun lesson to try on safari is guessing which animals are herbivores, omnivores, and carnivores. Hint: The carnivores are the animals licking their chops as the vehicle full of people rumbles by.

Ready to take on some animals with a bit more history? Head over to Dinoland, USA, where Disney's Animal Kingdom takes you back $\frac{1}{2}$ way back to the Late Cretaceous Period for a lesson in pre-history. Young archaeologists can unearth interesting facts about the prehistoric period and dinosaur bones, and dig up fun at The Boneyard.

If your little historians are a bit more daring, wander over to Dinosaur, where they can see some large as life Audio-Animatronic dinosaurs interact with their environment and each other. Guests will also learn an important lesson in prehistoric food chains, including how low the human rung would have been when they come face-to-jaws with a hungry Carnotaurus.

After a hair-raising lesson in history, it's time to plunge into math at Kali River Rapids, where lessons in estimation, fractions, and percentages are "current." Before you begin your journey down the turbulent Chakranadi River, encourage young guests to estimate how many of the 12 riders in your raft will get completely soaked. Arriving at an accurate estimate is not tough if you note the evidence flowing by you in line as guests exit the ride squish past.

At the end of the ride, see who among you had the closest estimate by counting how many people are wet and how many remained dry. Next use those numbers to determine what fraction and percentage of the riders need a towel pronto and what fraction and percentage will need to take another dip on Kali River Rapids.

Now that you are dripping with knowledge, continue on to Expedition EVEREST for a lesson in language arts. Like the other famous mountains dotting the Walt Disney World landscape, Expedition EVEREST provides guests with a thrilling ride and wonderful lesson in storytelling. Aspiring

young Agatha Christies and Alfred Hitchcocks can learn a great deal about crafting a successful suspense story from this forbidden mountain.

The setting of this story begins the moment you enter the park. An ominous looking mountain looms in the distance, and its message is clear: Danger Awaits! Throughout the queue area, you and your children will find the conflict of man versus nature introduced through the skillful placement of tattered signs and ancient art depicting a strange creature, warning riders to proceed at their own risk. The antagonist of this story is shrouded in mystery, but as you step onto the train, you hear its bone-chilling roar echo in off the mountain.

The suspense builds as the train climbs the tracks past more and more evidence that danger is drawing near. An explorer's abandoned equipment, torn up train tracks, a freefall backwards through darkness, the silhouette of a massive beast and runaway trains are visual clues that take your family to the summit of this harrowing tale.

With a pounding heart and white knuckles, you reach the climax of this story, and there is only one thing standing between you and safety, the Yeti. The runaway train is speeding directly into the beast's waiting claws, but a well-placed dip in the track pulls you out of reach just in time. As you glide through the resolution of the story and back into the station, howls of frustration can be heard over the screams of fellow passengers. Like any good suspense novel, Expedition EVEREST leaves you exhilarated from the suspense, relieved to be safe and ready to ride again.

Be it an abominable snowman with territorial issues or a baby elephant with giant ears, Disney animals have always filled our hearts and minds with valuable lessons. It is a practice that continues daily at Disney's Animal Kingdom, where education takes root the moment guests step into this lush park. So take a lesson from Walt and explore nature's vast classroom, where learning runs wild.

About The Author: Keely Hutton is a mother of two, writer of children's books, teacher of English and fan of all things Disney. When she is not planning her next Disney vacation or in front of her computer or class, she can be found at the local karate dojo, working out the stress brought on by a tough day of revising.

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