

Rafiki's Planet Watch: A Hidden Attraction at Disney's Animal Kingdom

by Cheryl Pendry, *PassPorter Featured Columnist*

Every Disney theme park in the world is packed with a combination of what used to be called E-ticket rides that almost every visitor heads towards at some point in their trip and less popular areas that are often more hidden away from the crowds. Rafiki's Planet Watch certainly falls into the latter category.

To get to Rafiki's Planet Watch, you need to board the Wildlife Express Train, with regular departures from Harambe in Africa. Take a close look at the theming on the platform as you wait for your train or step aboard. Just like everything else in Harambe, you really feel as if you've stepped into an African village. You may not have time on the way out to Rafiki's Planet Watch, but when you return, it's worth taking some time to note all the little details, like the luggage lying around and the various signs on the platform.

The trains leave regularly, and just like the platform, you can imagine that it's probably just like the trains you'd find in Africa, complete with luggage on top of your train. Again, it's worth taking a moment, perhaps when you arrive, to look back at the train and take in all the detail.

It's a really enjoyable journey, with all the seats, long wooden benches, facing one way, and offering views over the animal enclosures as you travel out there. If you're lucky, you might catch a glimpse of a rhino, giraffe or an elephant on the way. On our last visit there, two rhinos were in their paddocks, right in front of us. I always find it a fascinating glimpse into the backstage world of Disney and one of the few opportunities you get for such a glimpse, without paying to take a tour.

When you arrive, again take your time to wander towards the main building. As you head along the path, you'll find various signs scattered along the way, some explaining how seriously Disney takes conservation, while others give you details of what you can do to help nature in your own backyard. They all make a fascinating read and you'll probably learn some interesting facts along the way.

Finally, you'll arrive at the Conservation Station building, with various animals above the entrance to welcome you inside. As you enter, it immediately becomes a lot darker, although brightened up by the colourful murals of hundreds of animals. Let me say here that it's worth checking out the restrooms here, if only because it's a bizarre experience to hear the background noise, which includes birds tweeting

and the sound of an elephant trumpeting! There aren't many places you get that.

There's so much to enjoy here that you probably won't have time to see it all in one short visit. We spent the best part of a morning here on our most recent visit and still there were attractions we didn't have time to see. One of those is the Sounds of the Rainforest, although we had experienced this in the past. As the name suggests, it envelopes you in a rainforest and all the noises you'd hear there.

What took our attention when we first entered though was the sight of a Cast Member with a beautiful owl on her arm. We couldn't tear ourselves away from talking to her about the owl, who was called Mr. Magee, because of his exceptionally short sight. The beauty here is that any Cast Member you encounter with an animal will always have a wonderful story to deal about that animal and this was no exception. It turns out that Mr. Magee was involved in a car crash on Disney property about 17 or 18 years ago and that's how he ended up being cared for by them. You may have heard this before, but the veterinary team at Disney doesn't just look after the animals in the various attractions. They're also responsible for any animals that venture on to property, so their work can include indigenous alligators or birds or animals such as Mr. Magee that are injured on property.

It's worth spending some time viewing the various live animal cams that they have here. You'll usually be able to find some species around, although not all the cameras will yield success and you may have to do some work, turning them round, to find your target.

The beauty, and sometimes the problem, with Rafiki's Planet Watch is that what's happening there isn't really something you'll know before you get there. The main attraction for many people is the Veterinary Exhibit, where you can see operations and check-ups being carried out right in front of you. Understandably, when something exciting is going on, it will draw the crowds, as this is the biggest attraction here. Having said that, you may visit and find that everything is quiet on this front for the whole duration of your visit.

We were lucky enough to see some routine examinations carried out on two geese, and what amazed us was how long it took to get them to sleep. The Cast Member narrating the procedure explained that the problem is that birds can hold their breath for long periods of time when they're underwater, so it's not a quick job to administer anaesthetic to them.

Although the veterinary examinations are a major attraction, step

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outside and the kids will love the Affection Station, where they can get up close and personal with a variety of farmyard animals. You don't need to worry about any hygiene issues, as there are plenty of hand washing facilities here, if the younger members of the family want to pet any of the animals here. I must admit to developing a very soft spot for Joe the sheep, who was very happy for me to stroke him, before he was taken away to be the star in a show, highlighting recycling. Only at Disney could you find a show like this!

Keep an eye out for Cast Members with animals that you can stroke, as we found one with a python. I politely declined the opportunity to get too close to him, but there were plenty of willing takers for that experience!

If you prefer your animals to be a bit tamer than that, you can also find Disney characters up here. Unsurprisingly, given the area's name, Rafiki is a regular and we've also found the likes of Jiminy Cricket, Meeko and Pocahontas here as well.

It's worth knowing that, while you can easily spend a number of hours at Rafiki's Planet Watch, if you get hungry, you'll need to head back to Harambe to get some food, as there's nowhere to eat here.

If you haven't been to Rafiki's Planet Watch or if, like us, you don't get there that often, don't forget to add it to your list. Although it's very easy to miss this place although on a visit to Animal Kingdom, once you get here, you'll find plenty to entertain you and will probably find yourself wondering, as we did, why you don't come here on every visit.

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: 11-30-2010

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