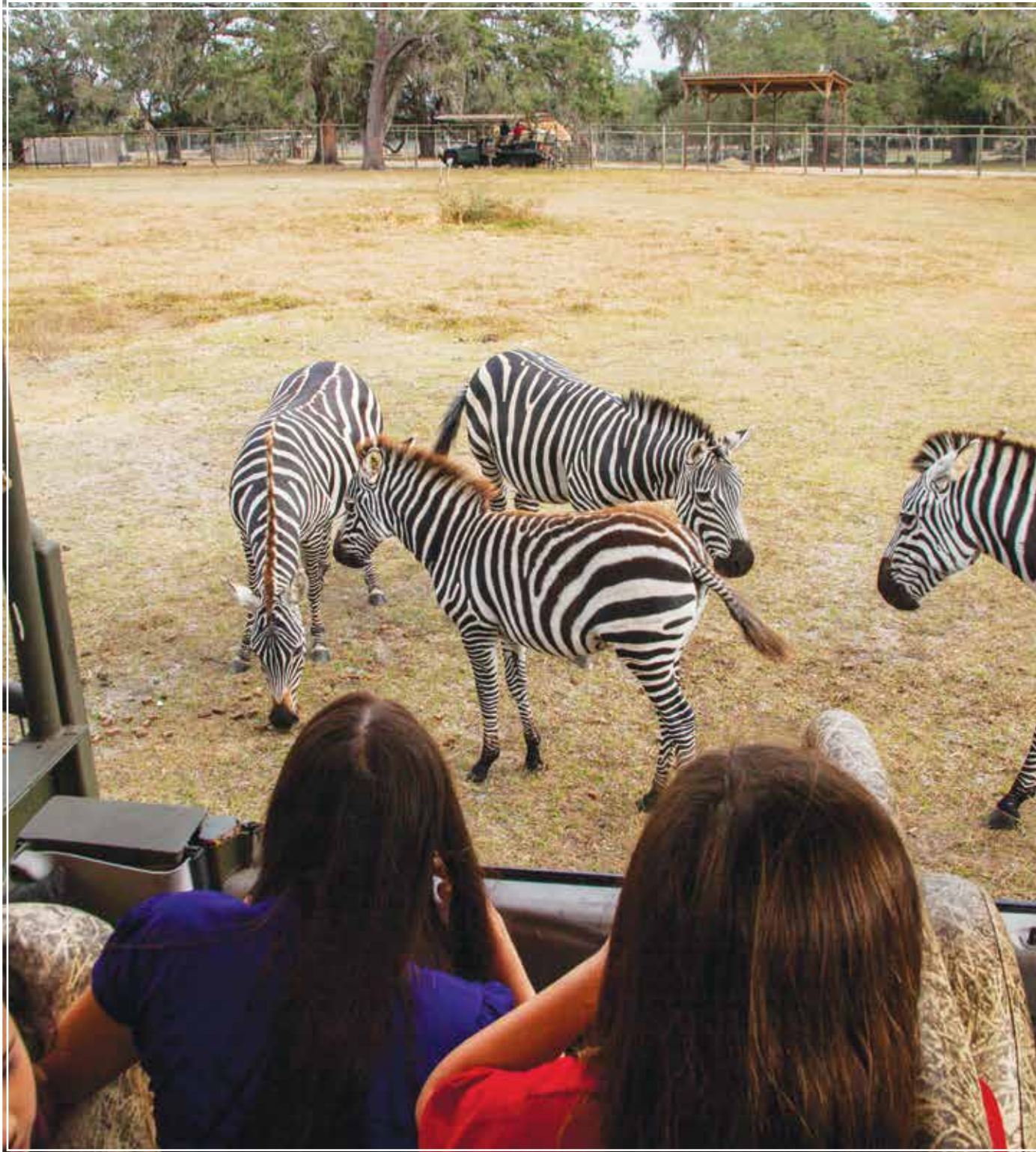


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TRAVEL

// A SOUTHERN SAFARI //



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AFRICAN ANIMALS ROAM IN A DADE CITY RANCH

by Rona Gindin | Photography by Victor Rollins



Ring-tail lemurs eagerly await red grapes

I'm not what you'd call an animal person. In fact, I was even frightened of dogs until I adopted an Australian Shepherd mix in my forties. So imagine my surprise when, in one day, I grew attached to a droopy-eyed camel named Omar, a slobbery rhinoceros that's quite fond of apples and, especially, a couple of ring-tail lemurs who gently rested their tiny hands on my belly as they gobbled up the red grapes I doled out one by one.

The Giraffe Ranch has that affect on even the most animal-shy among us. This personable little compound in Dade City, a two-plus hours drive from Daytona Beach, is a self-enclosed savannah filled with exotic animals. You ride in a tram or on camelback to see the larger creatures and walk through a hands-on area to interact with the little ones.

Giraffe Ranch is the lovechild of Lex Salisbury, who has spent his career running zoos and taking time off once or twice a year to go on — or lead — African safaris. Today the animal guru shares his passion with Floridians by guiding them on small, education-packed yet entertaining tours to see, smell, feed and touch the types of animals most of us have only ever viewed behind bars at a zoo or, from a distance, at Disney's Animal Kingdom. Salisbury and his wife, Elena Sheppa, live on the 47-acre Giraffe



The giraffes poke their faces into the vehicle for a snack

Ranch property. And nearly every group of animals, likewise, resides full-time on designated swaths of land separated from others via low, weathered-wood fences.

After a short camel ride, I was glad to be on a less bumpy 90-minute “safari truck” tour, seated with only a couple of dozen other guests. Sheppa, the driver/guide/pumpkin carver, took us to see zebras (the types you’d find in Kenya and Tanzania, and also the variety found in South Africa) plus ostriches, Axis

deer, pygmy hippos, black buck antelope and Indian rhinos. A highlight is feeding the giraffes: You put leafy branches and pumpkin wedges (all provided) right into the towering creatures’ mouths. The giraffes are safely fenced, yet happily poke their faces into the vehicle for their snacks. Cool, right?

Education is a huge part of each tour. Salisbury and Sheppa load their spiels with facts, yet keep the banter interesting. “Female lemurs huddle together to keep

warm on cold nights,” Sheppa might say. “It kind of blows to be a male lemur.”

Each safari is preceded by a “walking safari” visit to smaller animals such as Reichenow’s helmeted guineafowl, scimitar-horned oryx, fossa, red guenon monkeys and black-faced vervet monkeys. (“If you go to Africa, these are the guys who break into your tent and steal things from your luggage.”) While the truck safari alone costs \$60 (kids \$50), it is worth upgrading (\$20) to feed the ring-tailed lemurs—which are adorable little prehistoric monkeys—and again (\$50) to feed cabbage and apples to the rhinos. If you want even closer interaction with the large animals, opt for the camel safari (\$150) instead of the truck. You’ll be with only seven other visitors.

Giraffe Ranch has a fun little gift shop with a myriad of toy creatures; but serious collectors should make an



Ostrich chicks roam the grassy plains



Elena Sheppa with children's group (www.girafferanch.com)

appointment in advance to visit Sheppa's glass studio, which is in a tiny building on the same property. Since Sheppa spends her days standing on ostrich eggs to demonstrate their strength and teaching the curious how ostriches are "mean as snot," I was surprised to learn the tough cookie who often says "Oh man!" has a master's degree in fine arts. I was even more delighted to find that her glass creations — many enhanced with likenesses of wild game animals — are of museum quality. In fact, her repertoire is featured not only in this Blast Off Studio, but also in galleries and books throughout the country. Most pieces are diamond-wheel engraved or sandblasted and colored by hand.



A Bongo calf with its mother



Glass creations are displayed at Blast Off Studio (www.elenasheppa.com)

Giraffe Ranch tours are at 11 a.m. and 2 p.m. (by telephone reservation only), so plan to wander through Date City itself for a couple of hours before dinner. The crux is one long street lined with antique shops, cafes, and antique shops with cafes inside them. I took a relaxing break at the flowery Angel Tea Room, where a fresh scone and a pot of orange spice tea were a welcome post-safari snack.

I'd had my share of perusing decades-old books, china and glass after a couple of hours and headed over to the personable Pearl in the Grove, a charming small restaurant with a budget decor (painted floor, mismatched chairs) that's open until "8ish" or



Pearl in the Grove Restaurant (www.pearlinthegrove.com)

“10ish,” depending on the night. It’s owned and run by a former IT specialist, Curtis Beebe and his wife Rebecca, a language arts teacher. They’re as passionate about each dish set on your table as the Giraffe Ranch folks are about their four-legged friends. Located near a kumquat grove and orange groves, the restaurant specializes in locally sourced ingredients prepared in interesting ways. My companion and I loaded up on a plate of complementary boiled peanuts that were black (they’re cooked in cast iron) and went on to ravage a plate of tender beef Carpaccio and another of garlicky tomato bruschetta. And, I never thought I’d polish off catfish beignets, but they were so enchanting with a mustard-based remoulade and smoked tomato grit cake. My guest was equally thrilled by his Shrimp Creole smothered in a savory tomato sauce. We ended our dinner with sweet potato ice cream served with homemade marshmallow topping.

Talk about a satisfying day trip: feeding giraffes, perusing museum-quality glass art, and relaxing over a skillfully prepared meal — without flying to Africa. **N**



Catfish Beignets



Shrimp Creole