

# A night at the ZOO

A trip on the wild side offers a look at what happens after most visitors have gone home

• LIAT COLLINS

**A**ny trip to the zoo that starts with the greeting, “Pitch your tent on the grass opposite the flamingoes,” is clearly not going to be an ordinary visit.

Last week, my nearly-10-year-old son and I got a chance to see what happens at Jerusalem’s Tisch Family Biblical Zoo after most of the visitors have gone home.

The fun began at 8 p.m., when we put up our tents and gathered with the other families (some 25 people in all) for light refreshments. Most of the participants had come from the greater Jerusalem area, although there were also a father and son from Holon who’d heard about the camp-out from friends. (Non-Jerusalemites should be warned that nights in the capital can be chilly.) I was struck by the number of super-cool grandparents sleeping out in the almost-wild.

Our guide, zookeeper Noa Lehman, was to take us on a magical tour, although it was not exactly what we had expected.

My son and I, both used to falling asleep with a cat each on our beds, harbored dreams of finally seeing the night life of the big felines. This trip, however, was not a safari – although we found plenty to interest us.

Early on, while watching the swans, we learned a useful tip if you are, for instance, ever locked in a zoo without as able a guide as Lehman. She explained that the swans have very developed survival instincts and can tell if there is a predator about

– which in the Jerusalem zoo includes jackals, foxes and snakes. If they feel safe, they’ll sleep on the grass; if they’re threatened, they’ll go into the water. We learned, too, that what we thought was part of the grooming process of these regal creatures was actually their way of covering their outer feathers with oil from a gland near their tails, to stop them becoming waterlogged.

The full grace of the flamingoes can only be fully appreciated as the colony settles down for the night. We also discovered what gives them their color – a case of “you are what you eat”: The pink or reddish hue



comes from their diet, and the zoo is careful to add the correct carotenoid proteins to their food, which has to be ground into tiny particles as flamingoes filter the food from their water.

As nocturnal visitors, we also enjoyed looking at some of the zoo’s most unwanted guests – flocks of cattle egrets, extraordinarily unfussy eaters who spread out all over the city during the day but flock back to the same three trees at night, where their acidic droppings take their toll.

Before leaving the water’s edge, we discussed the cormorants – fishers supreme – who won their 15 seconds of poignant international fame during the First Gulf War.

YOU CAN never tell what will excite people: Lehman recalls a group of Dutch zookeepers who were so thrilled to find a millipede (as we did) that a swap was arranged: bags of the arthropods in exchange for a bird of paradise.

Our group sought greater thrills, however, and we found them in, among other places, the Australian section, where we saw the “flying fox” bats. Incidentally all the Biblical Zoo’s original colony of the large Australian bats was disabled, having been adopted from sanctuaries that were unable to return them to the wild. Their offspring taught themselves to fly.

We also saw a pair of bird-brained common crowned pigeons; among the places the male chose to build a nest was the female’s head!

The kangaroos provided an unexpected show – a boxing match. Since Joey, the dominant male, died recently, the younger males have been fighting over who will succeed him.

In the petting corner, I fell in love with Elton, a hairy armadillo who liked being tickled.

My son was more impressed, in zoologist Pini Amitai’s room, with Michal, the poisonous frog. He also bravely held Carmella, a tarantula the size of his hand. The venom, we were taught, causes more of an irritation than anything more sinister.

From here, we passed the sleeping train on our way to the area above Noah’s Ark, where we had a late campfire, baked pitot and heard the zookeeper’s equivalent of horror stories – tales of animal escapes.

Well past midnight, we went back to our tents to catch a few hours’ sleep before our wake-up call at 5:30. Actually most of us woke up a little earlier, given that the sound of flamingoes inharmoniously contrasted with the dawn chorus.

We had a pre-breakfast snack and then set off to watch something I’d never seen before: the feeding of the lemurs. Lehman’s instructions, before we entered the large enclosure with a container full of grapes and other goodies, were: “Don’t touch the lemurs and don’t touch their food.” She obviously didn’t give similar instructions to the little primates, which had no problem coming up to us and poking. Lemurs, by the way, star in zoo escape stories, and seeing them effortlessly leap from branch to branch, I understood why.

A high point for five-year-old Gal, from a tent next to ours, was seeing Simon the red panda eating breakfast. Simon rarely leaves his air-conditioned home, and it was a pleasant surprise to get to see him close up. Our attention, however, was diverted when the elephants, carrying their mahouts, ambled past, surprisingly quietly. Tamar, the matriarch, is in particular need of the exercise, apparently. The veterinarian has determined she needs to lose 400 kilograms (approximately 880 pounds) before she can become pregnant again.

The zoo takes feeding its animals (and overnight guests) seriously. Before our own breakfast (by the lake), we got a behind-the-scenes look at the Small Animals House and the zoo’s kitchen.

The Biblical Zoo is characterized by an only-in-Israel phenomenon – much of the high-quality food is donated by major concerns, which have to put aside a “tithe” for reasons of kashrut. As they have no one to give it to (until the Temple is rebuilt), it ends up with the animals instead of the priests.

As we were taking down our tents at 8 a.m., the zoo’s day campers arrived. This being “The summer of 2011,” a 10-year-old looked at our camp and exclaimed: “What! You had a tent protest here?”

At NIS 111 for zoo members and NIS 127 for others, the overnight experience was not cheap, but as we packed our things, none of us was complaining.

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A rare glimpse of Simon the red panda in active mode. The lemurs had evidently not been instructed ‘Don’t touch the visitors.’ Tamar, the matriarch elephant, needs to lose 400 kg.

(Photos: Liat Collins)

