

sandiego

AN EVENING WITH THE ELEPHANTS

BY BEKAH WRIGHT
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Traveling to the African savanna is out of my reach at the moment. So recently, I joined a safari of another type — Roar & Snore, a family sleepover program at San Diego Zoo's Wild Animal Park in Escondido ([619] 718-3000, www.wildanimalpark.org).

From February through November, the park hosts Roar & Snore sleepovers for families with children ages 4 and up, as well for groups and individuals, with some nights reserved for adults-only camps. From June to August, the program offers Beastly Bedtime sleepovers for families with children ages 4 to 7. These one-night sleepovers start at 4 p.m. and end the next morning at 10. Program fees range from \$89 to \$209 per person depending on accommodations and include dinner, breakfast and a Roar & Snore mug. Admission to the park is not included.

I dropped my luggage off at a checkpoint, and then followed a map to Kilima Point, the base camp for sleepover guests on the outskirts of the park.



PHOTO BY BEKAH WRIGHT
Mattie White, 6, snuggles up with a springhaas with Wild Animal Park educator Lisa Dvornychenko.

Waiting there were 44 canvas tents perched on a ridge overlooking the East Africa exhibit where rhinos and giraffes grazed and gazelles and antelope played.

Tearing my eyes away from my temporary substitute for Africa, I headed to my tent. Greeting me there were my overnight neighbors, Phoenix resident Greg Scurei and his 10-year-old son, Bradley. "Bradley really likes reptiles," Scurei said. "This seemed like a great way to foster that interest."

Families trickled in, making their way to the three canvas tent options. Premium tents come equipped with queen-sized beds, mini fridges, electricity and hammocks for lazy viewing of pachyderms meandering nearby. Sans bed and electricity are the camp's Vista and Classic tents, identical to one another with prices that vary depending on the view. Sleeping cushions, camp chairs, a storage locker and battery-operated lanterns are supplied.

After campers convened for a dinner of chicken, hot dogs and burgers hot off the grill, several activities were offered. During the first round, participants could choose a hike through the Heart of Africa area, crafts for kids under age 8 or an animal presentation at Tembo Stadium. I settled on the last choice and made friends with 6-year-old Mattie White from Ojai, who was excited about the prospect of petting the animals we'd be learning about.

Educator Lisa Dvornychenko had three animals to introduce to the group — a bird, a reptile and a mammal. The one that took Mattie and me by surprise was Kuruka, an adorable springhaas. Though this South African mammal appeared to be a cross between a mini kangaroo and a rabbit, she was, in fact, from the rodent family.

"Kuruka is a wonderful animal for people to meet because not only does she have a great temperament, but many people have never heard of (a springhaas) before," said Dvornychenko. "It is a great reminder of all the amazing critters out there that share our world."

Later, we got a behind-the-scenes Lion Camp experience, watching the lions turning in for the night.

Next up, hot chocolate and s'mores during a fireside presentation by park staff on the difference between horns, tusks and antlers. A temporary distraction came with the arrival of two unexpected guests: rhinos stopping by for a snack at the fence just beyond the fire pit.

From our setting, it was mesmerizing to watch a line of lantern lights flickering in the distance from other campers making their way to Condor Ridge. The view of the the stars there is supposed to be as much of an attraction as the hike itself.

Afterward, a late-night walk through Nairobi Village gave guests the opportunity to burn off excess energy. I chose instead to turn in early and listen to the sounds of the surrounding animals as they, too, gave last calls and drifted off to sleep.

Sunrise was accompanied by the roar of lions and trumpeting of elephants in the distance. A breakfast of eggs, sausages, pancakes and fruit fueled campers for the upcoming tours, which would introduce us to tigers, elephants and primates. I chatted over hot chocolate with enthusiastic participants Mattie White and Bradley Scurei. Mattie's favorite part of the sleepover was that "the animals aren't in cages." Bradley concurred, excited to have seen animals "up close."

As for me, my dreams of Africa seemed suddenly not so distant.

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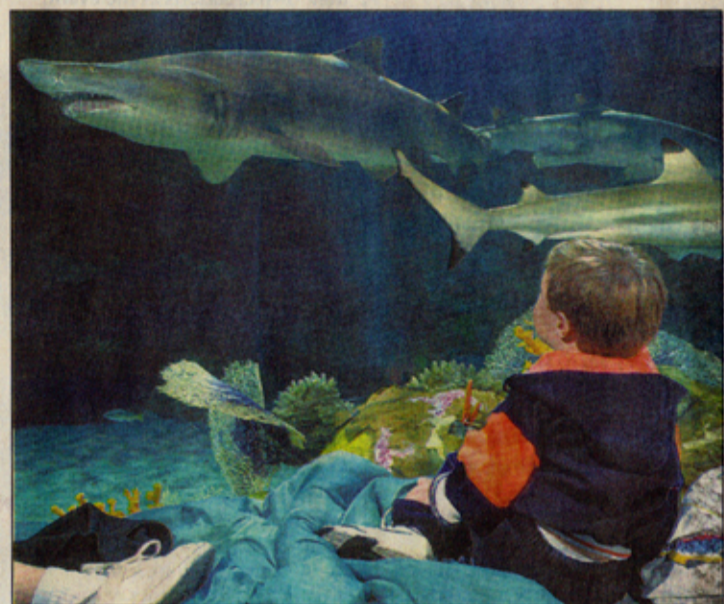


PHOTO BY BEKAH WRIGHT
At SeaWorld San Diego, guests at the sleepovers can situate their sleeping bags under the Shark Encounter tank.

OTHER OVERNIGHT STAYS AT FAMILY ATTRACTIONS

Sleepover adventures are offered at a number of San Diego attractions this summer:

- Answer the call of the wild with an overnight stay at the San Diego Zoo's Camp Timbuktu ([619] 718-3000; www.sandiegozoo.org).

Available to families with children ages 4 and up, the Safari Sleepover program is offered Saturdays in July and August from 4 p.m. until 9 a.m.

The month of October brings Spooky Sleepovers with an itinerary befitting this haunting month. Look, too, for themed and adults-only sleepovers held throughout the year.

Prices are \$89 per child and \$109 per adult and do not include admission to the park.

- Families can sleep with the fishes year-round at SeaWorld San Diego ([800] 25-SHAMU, [800] 257-4268, Ext. 4; www.swbg-adventurecamps.com). Open to groups and families with children ages 4 to 18, the marine park's sleepover program has been going strong since 1994.

Sleepover activities can range from dissecting squid and making necklaces out of shark teeth to petting and feeding bat rays. Also fun are games such as Trainer Relay and dress-up with penguin and polar bear costumes during which an animal anatomy lesson takes place.

At bedtime, different park venues are available for unfurling sleeping bags, among them the Journey to Atlantis exhibit, the Manatee Rescue area, the Wild Arctic exhibit, the World of the Sea Aquarium and Shark Encounter, where 12 species of shark swim in a tank above slumbering campers.

- The Maritime Museum of San Diego ([619] 234-9153, Ext. 124; www.sdmaritime.com) takes families back in time with sleepovers aboard the 1863-built ship Star of India. Although the vessel never actually gets underway, the night is "like an imaginary immigrant voyage from England to New Zealand that would have happened during the 1870s," said Michael Shanahan, a Maritime Museum spokesperson.

Dressed in period costume, museum staff members lead guests through the rigors of shipboard life from swabbing the deck and moving cargo to cooking dinner and standing watch. As for breakfast and dinner, "rat stew" and "gruel" top the menu. And when it's time for bed, a sea chanteuse sends participants off to slumber.

Star of India family sleepovers are held on June 30, Aug. 4 and Sept. 15, beginning at 3 p.m. on Saturday and concluding at 9 a.m. on Sunday. The \$65 admission (\$45 for Maritime Museum members) includes dinner and breakfast.

- For more than 20 years, the San Diego Natural History Museum ([619] 255-0203; www.sdnhm.org) has invited families to enjoy late-night activities at its annual family camp-in. Families can sign up starting Aug. 1 for next summer's event to be held on June 13, 2008. "Participants can sleep under an Albertosaurus or snuggle up next to the baby mastodon in the exhibits," said Sarah Ganiere, the museum's youth programs manager.

Guests must be at least 6 years old. Prices start at \$79 for each child/adult pair.

—BEKAH WRIGHT

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