

TRAVEL / WERRIBEE

# WILD AT HEART



The safari bus takes you up close and personal with all the animals on the savannah, including everyone's favourites, the giraffes.

Hear the call of the wild these school holidays at Werribee Open Range Zoo, where going on safari is a fantastic way to meet the residents, writes **TANIA PANOZZO**.

**P**ERCHED high on the top of the savannah, peering down below to the vast grasslands, for a moment it's hard to believe we're not on safari ... in Africa, that is.

The arid beauty, and the cool breeze synonymous with the sub-tropical eco-system, has us wrapped in blankets in our open-air four-wheel-drive, ready to get up close and personal with giraffes, zebras, rhinos and antelopes.

And we did.

Werribee Open Range Zoo, just a three-hour drive from the Border, is home to some of Australia's most iconic animals but it is also the native wildlife of Asia, North America and Africa that draws visitors from all over the world — more than 5 million in the past 30 years since it began as an agistment area for animals from Melbourne Zoo in 1983.

The 235 hectares are home to about 350 animals, with 57 species. And it's the zoo's popular safari tour, departing regularly throughout the day, that provides a unique way of meeting the animals on the savannah.

The tour is included in the zoo's general admission but for a more intimate experience you can upgrade to an off-road adventure, with a specially designed open vehicle accommodating up to 14 people and your own personal guide. An experience I highly recommend.



**ABOVE:** Zoo keeper Kelly during the serval cat presentation.

**ABOVE RIGHT:** Lioness love at the Edge exhibit, which includes a real jeep to encourage children to jump on and get a better view from behind the glass.

Pictures: TANIA PANOZZO

Going cross-country we were completely immersed in the sights, smells and sounds of the savannah as we travelled across the zoo's open plains.

Our guide Lauren had done it all before: she was a fountain of information and parking within grasp of the animals often meant a photo opportunity was foremost on our minds. Harold the giraffe was more than a willing subject. Ears up, ears back and finally, both ears out to the side, I captured my new friend in all his beauty.

The giraffes, in particular, enjoyed our visit.



The curious creatures never took their eyes off us and we were lucky to see them sit, something which takes amazing but awkward co-ordination and is often not done in the wild where predators lurk.

Photo opportunities are at the turn of every corner: camels in need of a back-scratch fighting for a tree, a zebra mum and daughter having a tussle (or was it a cuddle?) and lazy rhinos belying their formidable stature.

Werribee Zoo is particularly proud to raise the awareness of this often misunderstood herbivore. The poaching situation in Africa is heart-breaking: more than 1000 rhinos were killed last year, comparable to back in the 1900s.

Werribee Zoo is also home to one of the largest gorilla exhibits in the world. At 6000 square metres, the spectacular exhibit — complete with wading pool and large climbing poles — allows silverback Motaba and his two sons, Yakini and Ganeyka, the space to behave as they would in the wild.

And then there are the lions at the Edge exhibit,

with lioness Jarrah, and males Tonyi, Tombo and Johari. But it is the Kubu River space that has perhaps attracted the most attention during the past month: spanning more than three hectares, it is a paradise home to six hippos — Harry, Primrose, Tulip, Lotus Brindabella and her new baby, Pansy, born in December.

The hippo "gallery" is packed when we visit, and the waiting game seemed to go on forever.

But when Pansy finally raises her head from beneath the swamp it's all worth it. Her little head, still nuzzled next to her semi-submerged mum, pokes out to greet the tourists.

Some who have been waiting for hours, let out a cheer and the rest of the crowd shifts in unison to get a better view.

**O**THER special experiences offered at the zoo include a Tall Order Giraffe Feed, Lion Encounter, African Cat Encounter, Mini Zoo Keepers and the overnight stay known as the Slumber Safari. During these school holidays, kids can take a journey through the savannah with a new indoor play space called Ranger Kids, where they become a wild-life ranger or a vet and explore life in an African village with a range of fun dress-ups and props to play with.

We finished our day at the Rhythm of Africa concert series. Centred on the zoo green, the evening runs each Saturday over summer and brings together a magic mix of live African music, wild animal encounters and picnics on the grass. Throughout the night families can take part in an Ethiopian coffee ceremony, make their own music with free drumming workshops and children can have their hair braided and faces painted, all animal-like, of course.

## A testament to days gone by

**IF** the walls could talk, Werribee Mansion would be a constant source of chatter.

Talk of greyhound racing, duck shooting, lunching and lounging, and of unrequited love.

Victoria's answer to Downton Abbey, Werribee Mansion stands tall and proud in the extensive Werribee Park grounds. The 60-room Italianate building took three years to build and was finished in 1877; it is still the state's largest and most elaborate private residence but began life as the passion of brothers Andrew and Thomas Chirnside, leaders of the Victorian squat-tocracy.

The home remained in the family until 1922 when the park was sold and a year later became home to Corpus Christi College, a training ground for young men entering the priesthood.

About 1972, the college started to defer students to a new campus on the other side of Melbourne and sold it to the Victorian government. The seminary lay desolate for almost 30 years until one of the mansion's wings was transformed into the award-winning boutique hotel it is today: the Werribee Mansion Hotel & Spa.

At a stone's throw away, it is the perfect base from which to explore the park.

Other areas of interest include the Victorian State Rose Garden, which was established in 1986 and features more than 4000 roses; the National Equestrian Centre and Chirnside polo ground; and the Werribee Open Range Zoo.

More recent additions to the precinct are Shadowfax Winery, in 2000, and the Werribee Park Sculpture Walk, in 2004.

Strict heritage guidelines have prevented much of the Mansion Hotel & Spa from changing but that only adds to its appeal.

Like the mansion itself, one can almost feel the days gone by in the guest rooms, the billiard room and the library — the former chapel still has its original stained glass windows, archways and doorframes.

Today the spa wing comprises 32 king deluxe rooms and eight suites (there are 91 rooms in all), The Spa and a 17-metre indoor heated pool. The award-winning Joseph's Restaurant takes on the seminary's name.

In its relatively short life, the Mansion Hotel & Spa has been recognised as one of Victoria's best deluxe hotels and was inducted into the Victorian Tourism Awards' prestigious Hall of Fame in 2004 for its services and contribution to tourism.

• Entry to Werribee Mansion is included in your stay at The Mansion Hotel & Spa.



## Beads make a difference

**THERE** are only 2000 Grevy's zebras left in the wild — and Melako in Northern Kenya is home to almost 10 per cent of the population. Competition with livestock for food and water is the biggest threat to their survival. But Beads for Wildlife, a Zoos Victoria initiative, alleviates the impact of grazing on native habitat by providing women with an alternative source of income.

Beautiful handmade beadwork created by the women of the Melako Community Conservancy is sold to provide employment and alternative income. This money reduces family dependence on maintaining large numbers of livestock, which then benefits species such as the Grevy's zebra.

Since the partnership began in 2009, Zoos Victoria has raised more than \$300,000 and the number of participants has increased from 40 to 900 women.

Bangles, necklaces and ornaments can be bought at the Melbourne, Werribee and Healesville zoo gift shops, or online at [shop.zoo.org.au/shop](http://shop.zoo.org.au/shop).



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Travel on the Zoo express, the most fun way to travel to Taronga Zoo, these school holidays and receive a free upgrade to a Hop On Hop Off, 24-hour Sydney Harbour Explorer cruise including Taronga Zoo entry valued at \$65 an adult. Rocket ferries depart every 45 minutes from Jetty 6, Circular Quay and Darling Harbour Pier 26 and are \$51.50 for adults and \$25.50 for children including return rocket ferry, entry to Taronga Zoo and Sky Safari cable car.

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## MELBOURNE



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