



## Contest winners encounter animals - real and imagined

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PHOTO GALLERY

The Blair and Armstrong families began their tour of Disney's Animal Kingdom at Discovery Island Thursday afternoon, with an inspection of the Tree of Life, a 145-foot manmade tree with more than 300 different animals carved into its trunk.

After examining the outside, the families moved inside the giant tree, to the Tree of Life Theater for a private viewing of "It's Tough to Be a Bug." (Disney's Animal Kingdom - 6.47 MB QuickTime video)

Flik, the animated ant star of the Disney/Pixar film, "A Bug's Life" welcomed the families and proclaimed them "honorary bugs." The families donned "Bug Eyes" (specially designed 3-D glasses) and were treated to a firsthand experience of what it's like to be a bug - in constant danger of being eaten by other bugs or squished by humans.

The honorary bugs faced many obstacles. They had to duck to avoid an attack by the acid-spraying soldier termite (the "Termite-ator," who vowed, "I'll be back."). They held their noses as the resident stinkbug, Clair DeRoom, demonstrated her strategy of drowning prey in a fog of sensory-convincing stink. Giant spiders dropped from the ceiling, and angry "hornets" buzzed all around.

Pat Blair experienced the handiwork of Disney's Imagineers when he was "stung" in the back during the show. Like Mickey's PhilharMagic, the 3-D effects were enhanced by smoke, water, air and a creepy mechanism in the seats that mimicked scurrying cockroaches.

While the bug movie left the families with a new appreciation of why it is, indeed, tough to be a bug, the main attraction at Animal Kingdom would be the "animal" part of the kingdom. (African elephant calf enters new world on the savannah at Disney's Animal Kingdom - 3.37 MB QuickTime video clip)

"Can we see the zebras?" asked Kelly Blair. Unfortunately, the answer was no. It was early evening, and most of the wild animals in Animal Kingdom were already in their barns for the night.

The families were, however, able to view some of the animals that live at Discovery Island. They saw an African cone duck and a capybara, which is the world's largest rodent. They learned the difference between a turtle and a tortoise (turtles swim and tortoises don't), and they saw the resident 80-year-old giant Galapagos tortoise as it made its way "backstage" to its house for the night.

Jordan, 4, the youngest Armstrong, had more toothy creatures on her mind.

"Do you have crocodiles or alligators?" she asked.

The answer: Crocodiles, yes, alligators, no.

Christopher was concerned about the animals' welfare. He asked, "Do you rescue the animals? Where do you get them?" Karen, the tour, explained that many of the animals are born in captivity and that Disney employs hundreds of animal experts who travel the world and participate in studies and programs that encourage conservation and propagation of endangered species. She also said that lots of "regular" animals (such as birds and wild rabbits) show up at Animal Kingdom because they know they will be able to find food. As if on cue, a baby rabbit and its mother made an appearance.

The Blairs and Armstrongs continued their tour with a stroll over the bridge to "Harambe," an East African village where they were to have a safari dinner. On the way, they pointed out the giant baobab tree, native to the savannahs of Africa, which serves as the starting point for the Kilimanjaro Safari Tours.

As the families arrived at Tusker House Restaurant, their hostess for the evening, Mama Dacia, welcomed them with a friendly "jambo!" (Swahili for "hello!").

She assured them that they wouldn't be dining on "grubs and termites," but macaroni



and cheese and chicken fingers (for the kids), and East African-inspired cuisine for the adults. The dessert menu would include baklava and chocolate cake. Kevin spoke for everyone when he said, "We have room for chocolate cake!"

As the families filed in, their waiter, Luis, informed them that there would be plenty of distractions for the kids so the adults could enjoy their dinners in peace. Another tour guide, Sarah, deemed a "rock star" by Julie, entertained the kids with stories while the adults sampled the Safari Ale. Dinner conversation ranged from what kind of animal Goofy is (a dog), to who will win "Survivor." Pat showed his loyalty to the local guy and picked Boston Rob.

While the adults enjoyed a large dinner of lamb, roasted chicken, and prime rib, Mor Thiam, an entertainer from Senegal, clapped and danced to African music, then led kids in a parade around the dining room. Timon and Terk from "The Lion King" arrived, and the kids scrambled to get photos and autographs. This was especially exciting for Abby, who dubbed herself, "Timon's biggest fan."

After Timon and Terk left, the kids had a close encounter with a Komodo dragon and tarantula that were on display in the courtyard. Christopher even got to pet the Komodo dragon.

The night wrapped up, and everyone celebrated Kevin's birthday with the aforementioned chocolate cake.

*( The Blair family of Hingham was the winner of Bostonherald.com's Disney Magical Gatherings contest. )*

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