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A new look at an old roadside attraction: New Braunfels' Animal World and Snake Farm Zoo

ON THE ROAD AGAIN

Jul 24, 2012, 4:45 pm By Blythe Jewell

ne of the biggest fights I have ever had with my husband was over a roadside attraction. "Oh my God, pull over!" I shouted, as we passed through New Braunfels on a road trip.

"Snake Farm! I haven't been since I was a kid. It's wild! It's wacky! We have to go!" The husband, on a mission to reach friends in San Antonio, remained steadfast. "I'm not pulling over for snakes. We'll be late."

"But... it's snakes," I said, confused.

"I can see snakes anywhere," he replied, as we breezed past the huge, iconic sign on I-35.

"You never want to do anything fun," I moped.

This quickly escalated into an ugly argument over our vastly different travel styles, eventually leading to epic pouting on my part, complete indifference on his and a really, really long drive to the River Walk.

point here. The point is, I never did make it to the Snake Farm that day. Instead, it went on my (somewhat extensive) list of Things I Will Do Someday Just to Spite Him, and a few weeks ago, thanks to a friend who's always up for some nostalgic, quirky fun, I was finally able to cross it off.

But my husband's stubborn refusal to ever let me see anything awesome isn't the

the way.

And I'm very glad I did.

somewhat ramshackle building just off the highway, filled with glass cages of snakes, spiders, crocodiles and other creepy-crawly things. The view from the highway is pretty much the same as it's always been, but the place has also undergone some pretty major changes, and it continues to evolve.

In many ways, the Snake Farm is the same as it was when I was a kid: a

and Snake Farm, a distinction current owner Dr. Eric Trager takes very seriously. While previous owners have always kept a few odd warm-blooded creatures in

For a start, Snake Farm is no longer just Snake Farm. It's now Animal World

residence, Trager began aggressively pursuing full zoo accreditation as soon as he bought the business back in 2005. He started with a major expansion, shifting the park's focus away from the quirky weirdness of old to emphasize wildlife care, conservation and education instead. Accreditation was finally achieved in November of 2011, and now more than 500

the resources to care for them. Nearly all of them reside in new or vastly improved habitats, with additional improvements either planned or already underway. With rescue and education now sharply in focus, staff members often do off-site

demonstrations at schools and summer camps, teachers can download lessons

about endangered species for their own presentations, and the park regularly

animals call the park home, many taken in as rescues from other parks without

hosts field trips. The team also works closely with Animal Control and Texas Parks and Wildlife to help capture or care for animals in danger. During its regular season (Memorial Day to Labor Day), four daily shows allow visitors to witness the feedings of crocodiles, snakes, hyenas, wolves and other

warm-bloods, with staff taking questions and dropping interesting tidbits along

New walking paths and redesigned exhibits make the park seem more like a zoo than a roadside attraction. A fully equipped veterinary clinic is now being finished out to provide better care for the park's inhabitants. You might not see all of these changes, but they go a long way to make the place a functional home

Still, with all this done, the park is very much a work in progress. Trager continues to pour money in as he looks to the future, trying to improve overall conditions for guests (more summertime shade, please!) and planning to develop 20 acres of land behind the park that he also owns.

There, he envisions nature trails and a water recycling program centered around

a three-acre, spring-fed lake on the property: ambitious projects that might be

for the animals in residence, creating a better experience for everyone.

nothing more than pipe dreams, if the owner was anyone other than the doggedly determined Trager. "This is a labor of love," he told me during my visit. "I was always the guy that picked up the stray dog, took it to the vet, put the posters up. I donated money to

shelters and to save the sea turtles. Even as a doctor, I treat a lot of people for

free. When I saw Snake Farm, and saw that it was so run down, I knew I could turn it around and make a difference. I didn't know it would cost so much in terms of time or money, but I'm happy to do it and I'm not going to stop." Even in its transitional state, Animal World and Snake Farm's present form is leaps and bounds beyond anything I remember from childhood visits. My son and our friends had a smashing time asking

questions of the staff, gawking at mammals, snakes and an odd social scene of crocodiles, turtles and other assorted cold-bloods... and happily commiserating with hungry llamas, goats and piglets in the petting zoo. And I was happy because, finally... snakes! Big ones, small ones, long ones, short ones... lots and lots of snakes. I spent minutes exchanging intense looks with an

angry Black Mamba. A Black Mamba, y'all. I hummed a Bob Schneider song —

you know the one — while staring at tarantulas. I lost a staring contest with a lizard (but to be fair, I'm pretty sure it didn't have eyelids). Years of brooding over my missed opportunity washed away. I was only sorry the husband couldn't come along to see what he'd made me miss, all those years ago. (And I'm sure he was sorry, too. He never said so, but I could tell he was jealous

when I showed him the pictures.)

We made the trip thanks to a Groupon special, but the regular \$9.75 admission price (\$6.75 for kids aged 3-12), while a bit steep for your typical roadside attraction, would still have been well worth it. Proceeds from admissions and

additional donations through the website go toward park development and the best possible care for the animals, so it's money well spent. The next time you find yourself on that long stretch of I-35 between here and old San Antone and you see that huge sign beckoning, take hold of the wheel and

steer yourself right on over. It's worth the detour.

Admission is \$9.75 for adults, \$6.75 for kids (age 3 - 12), free for 2 and under.

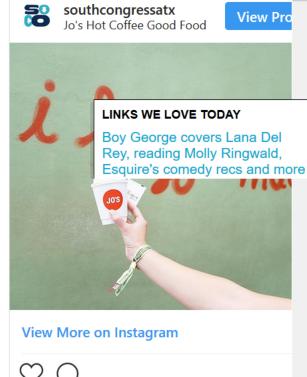
Animal World and Snake Farm Zoo is located at 5640 IH 35 S. New Braunfels, TX. Open 10 a.m. – 7 p.m. daily. Closed Christmas and New Year's day.











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