The Greener Side of Travel
Eco-Tourism In Tampa Bay
by Jill Adler

My feet are dangling 200 feet above ground. I'm suspended for what seems like minutes, staring straight down; my throat straining a cream, as I subconsciously process the drop to come. Ninety degrees, 200 feet, at 70 mph. This rush gratefully comes brought to me by a "floorless" teeter rollercoaster named SheiKra at Busch Gardens Africa, in Tampa Bay, Florida.

SheiKra is a three-minute, "dive machine" featured in one of the largest theme parks in the nation and the antithesis of my 'green travel' experience. I love the park. Just the ride. And it's checking my pulse.

I had arrived in Tampa in mid-July. Hot, sticky, and completely unfamiliar with Florida's west coast town. I delved into the great green world of Hillsborough County, no place near a natural beach, immediately pon check in at the Quorum Hotel-Tampa.

I dropped my bags, changed out of my flight clothes and nearly passed out from the hum of silence amid the calming greens and yellows in my room. Yes, I felt good being here. Not only because I would get free seated hair massages in the lobby every evening but the boutique business hotel boasts a Green Lodging Certification from Florida's Department of Environmental Protection. I would be doing my part to help save the environment by staying at a place that did theirs!

Welcome to Eco-tourism. With cities across the country looking for rays to attract tourists in a budget-crunching world, "responsible travel" as climbed into the mainstream. Different from "Adventure Travel", eco-tourism highlights natural areas of a locale and shows visitors how they conserve the environment and improve the welfare of the local people. It's not just a hike through a bamboo rainforest; it's a walk that somehow benefits that environment and the people who live there. It's not the Peace Corp.- not yet- but it's an educational experience all the same.

You get to see the underpinnings of a city when you eco-travel. Sometimes there's energy expended — like when we canoed along the Hillsboro River through a 16,000-acre wilderness park. I could take the three hours with Canoe Escape's interpretive guide pointing out Florida's native gators and turtles sunning themselves on logs by the riverbanks and retelling the history and importance of the area because I was active. Trying to spot bottlenose dolphins from the bow of a ferry-like catamaran, on the other hand, put me to sleep. The droning voice of the Florida Aquarium's Wild Dolphin Ecotour guide and the rocking of the boat lulled me silly as he shared how Tampa's bay generates billions of dollars from trade, tourism, and the seafood industry and how those affect the aquatic ecosystem.

At Tampa's Lowry Park Zoo, we pressed noses with endangered manatees as they were assessed for critical care in the nation's only nonprofit manatee rehabilitation hospital. With the Zoo's commitment to educating the public on these mammals, they hope to continue raising support and awareness. Of course, I preferred the adrenaline rush of hand-feeding the baby stingrays. They'd come whizzing by your hand as you held it underwater, and nibble/suck the sardine bits from your fingers.

Back to the mild, the Big Cat Rescue guide walked us around the compound that holds nearly 150 exotic cats in individual wire cages.
escorted from drug dealers, warlords and circuses, these lions, tigers, and very species in between are destined to live out their days in this backwoods. Unlike in a zoo, these cats don’t breed. This is it for them. BCR strives to educate the public and lawmakers about what really happens to the big cats “when they aren’t cute little cubs any more.”

Aside from dining in some spectacular restaurants like the Pelagia rattoria and Jackson’s Bar and Bistro, my time was spent hopping from one ‘preserve’ to another. I began to feel very small in the world of do-good. it I suppose that was the purpose. You can visit Tampa Bay and share a tasty steak onboard the Yacht StarShip dinner cruise and a cocktail at the all Moon Saloon; but you can do that anywhere. In Tampa Bay, they show you how they convert old striped fields and water-filled mine pits back into native upland forest and tidal wetlands in Cockroach Bay and how a 50-acre preserve on the Little Manatee River can educate kids on fossils, salamanders and trees at the Camp Bayou Outdoor Learning Center.

After four days of inspirational yet relatively low-key activities to highlight Tampa’s responsible side, I couldn’t help myself. I drooled at the sight of SheiKra. We entered Busch Gardens Africa to visit Jungala - a new 84-acre section housing (endangered) Bengal tigers and orangutans. G Fund an ecological study on the endangered Bornean orangutan with research on the social system and behaviors of the endangered western lowland gorilla and elusive bongo antelope in the northern Congo. hly support bio-acoustic research on hippo vocalizations, both above and below the water and study the behavioral, reproductive and social systems of the spotted hyena and African lion in Kenya. And the Australian kookaburra’s survival ultimately depend on breeding programs at reserves and zoological opportunities like those at Busch Gardens Tampa Bay. To get the feel of Africa, I hopped a Hummer for a “Serengeti Safari Ride.”

I fed a giraffe, watched antelopes graze and learned how the horn trade brought about the near extinction of the black rhino.

After all of this sitting, listening and watching, it was probably best for me that my eco-tourism trip to Florida end with a rager-like rollercoaster.

---

**BRING ON WINTER.**

**LIFT TICKETS $45/DAY.**

Can’t wait for winter? Good news. It’s time to get ready for winter at Deer Valley Resort where you can enjoy world-class skiing for as little as $45/day with our Locals Coupon Books. So leave summer behind and get here by November 30th, before this offer expires. Books are available at the Snow Park Ticket Desk daily from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. or online at deerlocals.com.

**BUDDY PASS:**
Get one Buddy Pass coupon with a book of five, or two with a book of ten or season pass purchase. Each coupon allows you to bring a buddy to ski for the same rate you paid.

**10 PACK:**
Share a book of ten. Any two Utah residents can ski for $45 a day by sharing a Locals Coupon book of ten tickets.

**SEASON PASS:**
Now is the time to get the pre-season rates on Full Season or Midweek Season passes, through October 31, 2008.

DEER VALLEY RESORT
800-424-3337 | 435-649-1900 | deerlocals.com

*Some restrictions apply. First-time program participants must purchase their Coupon Books by November 30, 2008.*