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WHO
WOULD
HAVE
KNOWN?

The Houston Zoo— Your next corporate event with gorillas, giraffes, lions...oh my!

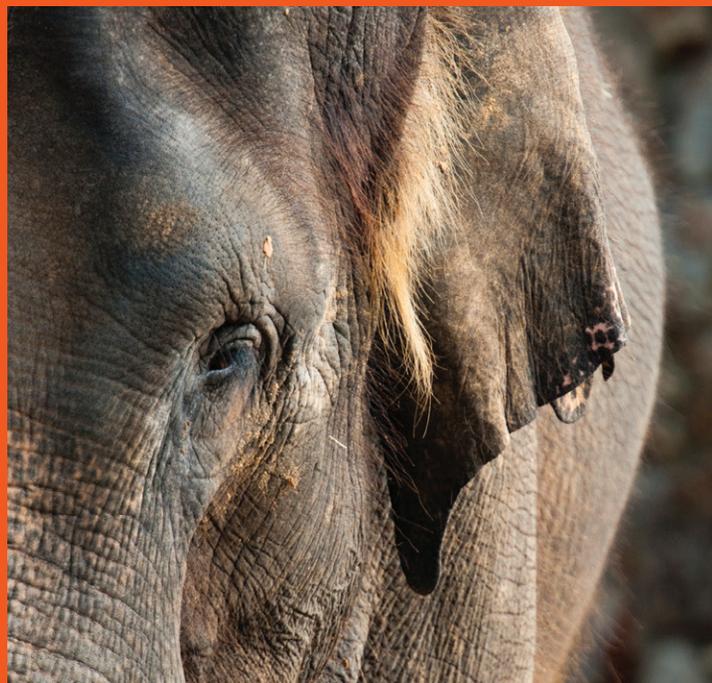
By Greg Varhaug
Photos © Stephanie Adams, Houston Zoo

There is no shortage of great venues for special events in Houston, but many people are unaware that the Houston Zoo offers an array of fantastic venue options for corporate and social events, weddings, and birthday parties. Many of the zoo's animal exhibit areas also double as event spaces, accommodating gatherings of all sizes, from 10 to more than 2000 people. The 55-acre zoo complex has no fewer than 13 different indoor and outdoor venue options. For very large events, you can even reserve the entire zoo.

Prime Venues Near Primates

Some of the zoo's most exclusive venues provide guests with views of their primate habitats. The Nau Family Gorilla Treehouse is the zoo's premier event space and can seat up to 60 dinner guests. During the day, it offers guests an exclusive view of the gorilla habitat. The zookeepers say that the gorillas are always "very curious" about what the humans are doing in the treehouse. The treehouse is also fully equipped for audio-video presentations.

There's also the Robert and Janice McNair Foundation Great Ape Gallery. As you walk in, you're greeted by natural stone floors and an elegant parquet ceiling. The Great Ape Gallery can be set up to seat up to 60 people. Large windows look out to the gorilla's day room, outfitted so they have plenty of places to climb, jump, and swing throughout the daytime hours.



Adjoining the Great Ape Gallery is the Onstead Foundation Chimpanzee Habitat. The rustic, rough-hewn beam ceiling is fitted with 10 mirrored globes and mounted projectors. They allow light music during evening hours after the chimps have been put inside for the evening.

The Gorilla Arrival Building is smaller than the Great Ape Gallery but arguably more spectacular. The floor-to-ceiling windows in this room

provide an up close and personal encounter with the zoo's troop of seven western lowland gorillas. During the day, visitors can watch them run, forage, groom, and wrestle only a few feet away. Sometimes, the gorillas watch back.

Corporate Events with Cats

What if you're more of a cat person? Then you're sure to enjoy an evening on the large patio overlooking the

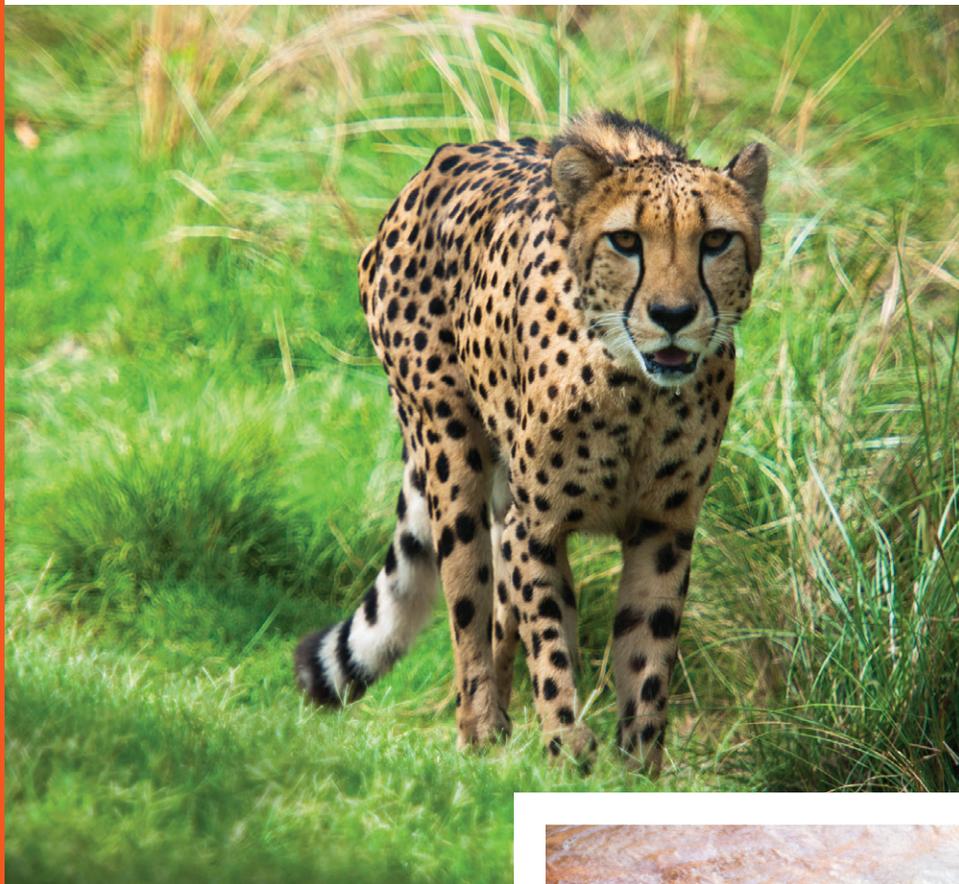
Jaguar Habitat. Kan Balam, the zoo's 18 year old jaguar, is naturally curious and likes to monitor his surroundings. It's common for him to look in on visitors when they congregate next to his lair. With all outdoor venues, the zoo has a backup option in case of rain. They also have heaters for winter parties in some of their outdoor and open-air venues.

Mingle at the Masihara Pavilion

The Masihara Pavilion is a framed, canvas structure covering 7,500 square feet with no center poles. Empty, it looks like an ordinary white tent, but during nighttime events, it comes to life in a festive display of form, color, and light as the sides and ceiling are transformed into huge projection screens. A variety of visual themes range from glittering snowflakes against the bright pastel blues and purples of a winter sunset to giraffes and jungle foliage in browns, oranges, and yellows, all accomplished by imaginative lighting and staging.

Aquarium Assembly

The chimps and gorillas are put up each night, and the jaguar comes and goes as he pleases; but the zoo's fish, lizards, and snakes are on display all the time. Passing through the doors of the Kipp Aquarium, you'll be greeted by gentle light emanating from walls of glass tanks containing





aquatic creatures of all descriptions. The gentle motion of brightly-lit fish against the aquarium's dark walls and dimly-lit ceiling create an enveloping, tranquil ambiance. The aquarium's layout insures that every table is close to the tanks, and each direction offers a captivating view. The best restaurant aquariums pale by comparison.

Reposing at the Reptile House

If you want something a little more exotic or even frightening, consider the Reptile House. Here you can dine within arm's reach of the zoo's community of rattlers, copperheads, mambas (black and green), gila monsters, and Blanco, the zoo's rare white alligator. Blanco lives at the zoo because his white color, the result of a rare genetic condition, means he isn't safe in the wild. If you like the prospect of a relaxing meal opposite something that's eyeing you as a potential snack, the zoo staff can arrange it.

Membership Benefits

The Houston Zoo has several different membership packages, including upscale memberships like the *Ambassadors* and the *Flock*. Zoo members get discounts on the many special events the zoo holds each year. *Feast With the Beasts* is an annual culinary and entertainment event featuring live entertainment

and food from more than 70 different Houston restaurants. This year's *Feast With the Beasts* was attended by more than 6,000 people and raised over a half-million dollars for the Houston Zoo.

In 2016, you can enjoy a cocktail with the gorillas at the *Ambassador's Gala* on February 20th. You don't have to be an Ambassador to attend, but if you are, admission is free. In fact, four Ambassador events are planned for 2016. *Zoobilee*, an annual, two-day, members-only event, takes place April 30th and May 1st. *Zoo Lights*, a dazzling display of holiday lights, starts in late November and runs through the end of the year.

When you host your event at the Houston Zoo, attend one of their ticketed functions, or purchase a membership, you're supporting a group of dedicated professionals and volunteers with a laudable mission—conserving threatened animals, plants, and habitats; training a new generation of animal specialists; and educating ordinary people about how they can support conservation.

Visitors learn, for instance, that recycling their cell phones can help protect gorillas in the wild, since the production of rare minerals threatens their habitats. They also learn that not buying products with palm oil can help to protect orangutans and other wild life because in Asia, people are destroying orangutan habitats to plant palm trees. Plastic bags and bottles hurt turtles and fish. Asking for responsibly-caught, sustainable seafood can help to protect the health of the world's oceans. Buying locally produced foods is good for wildlife and for the local economy.

Long-time Houston residents can remember when the zoo was operated by the City Of Houston, and admission was free. Since they privatized in 2002, they have expanded and made numerous, significant improvements. They now have a larger staff, more extensive education programs, and greater outreach to the community and the world than when the zoo was operated by the city. **N**

Greg Varhaug has written software instruction manuals and procedural manuals for many Houston companies. He operates HoustonGuitar.com, a commercial music-instruction website.



Enhancing Your Event at the Zoo

There are differing policies regarding music and dancing in and around the zoo's events venues. The Onstead Chimpanzee Habitat, Caruth Natural Encounters Building, Reptile House, Sea Lion Deck, and Kipp Aquarium all allow "light music." Other venues like the Twiga Cafe, Jaguar Habitat, Brown Education Center, Karamu Outpost, Masihara Pavilion, and the Reflection Pool allow music and dancing.

The zoo also offers several options to enhance your special event. For instance, you can arrange to have a zoo keeper bring small animals to your space, allowing you and your guests to see them up close. In some cases, you may even touch and interact with them. Among the other extras you can order are scavenger hunts and low-cost conservation wristbands. They can even arrange to have a DJ or a live band at your event.