

The Suburban

magazine

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**Myrtle Beach Safari represents
a once in a lifetime experience**

Hercules the Liger is more than 900 pounds.



By Mike Cohen
The Suburban

MYRTLE BEACH – When I finalized plans last winter for a family vacation to Myrtle Beach, I knew there was a wide array of activities to choose from. Getting to hold baby tigers, wolves, chimpanzees and other endangered species was not something I necessarily connected to this area.

So here is an important tip for animal lovers headed to Myrtle Beach anytime soon. Put the Myrtle Beach Safari and T.I.G.E.R.S. (The Institute of Greatly Endangered and Rare Species) on your radar screens.

The man behind this operation is Doctor Bhagavan Antl, who started out training animals for movies and TV and they wanted a place where many went to essentially retire. They offer a guided safari like experience through a 50 acre preserve where many of the animals crawl right on top of your lap. A percentage of the revenue from the T.I.G.E.R.S. experience goes to the Rare Species Fund, which provides funding for on the ground international conservation programs. Where is this specifically located? I cannot put that information in print. Those who sign up are given a rendezvous point of where to show up. You will have to experience it to learn more about this part of the journey. In order to maximize the peace for the animals and the privacy for guests, this preserve cannot be found on Google or MapQuest. Any address that you may find for this company is the one to Preservation Station in Barefoot Landing - 15 miles south of the actual location.

The VIP Wild Encounter Tour does not have the capacity to accommodate wheel chairs or walkers. You must be able to walk/stand for 20 minutes and make your way up a flight of approximately 20 steps.

Needing assistance of a cane and/or family member would be fine. You must be at the preserve no later than 9 a.m. on your chosen day. No late arrivals are accepted, so give yourself plenty of time to get there. Any children (18 or under) on the tour must either be accompanied by a parent or guardian or arrive with a fully completed and signed release. The minimum age is six.

No personal cameras, video cameras, or cell phones are allowed on the tour. Professional photographers shoot studio quality photographs and video. This gives you the opportunity to take home a set of portraits and phenomenal videos that are incomparable to any other photo opportunity. The \$200 fee is well worth it. Tours run three to five days a week, from mid-March to early October, and cost about \$300 per person.

Close-toed shoes are required. That means no flip-flops or sandals. It is recommended that you do wear pants that come down to your knees. The animals will be crawling across your laps and they do have

nails and although trimmed this can still be uncomfortable. No dresses or skirts are allowed on the tours. Avoid anything hanging off of you that an animal could get caught, which means no straps, purses or backpacks.

Any item that may be needed due to a medical condition (i.e. insulin/small prepackaged snack for diabetes, medicine/epi-pen for severe allergies etc.) should be brought in and left behind the desk. White clothing is also frowned upon as it can interfere with flash photography and you will also be outside on the ground with animals.

It is recommended making your reservation at least two weeks in advance. Tours are generally more popular during the summer months and holidays. No matter the size of the tour, it is an intimate experience. They adjust the time you spend with the animals accordingly, so every tour gets the same experience. It also operates rain or shine. A large majority of the tour is covered and they have the capacity to move portions of it inside if needed. They do have complimentary umbrellas available, but recommend that if it is raining that you bring your own rain jacket/poncho and wear clothing you do not mind getting a little damp in.

this is a fully interactive activity. You will get to meet, pet, and hold a large variety of the animals. After filling out the necessary forms and getting a pep talk from long-time animal ambassador/trainer Rob Johnson, our group was introduced to a liger - a 900 pound hybrid between a male lion and a female tiger. We first watched it march around through a glass window and then got to look at in the flesh from about 12 feet away before they snapped our photo with the big cat in the background. Our group was then told to sit as tightly as possible on a horseshoe configuration of benches and then put our hands out. Soon after a binturong walked across our laps, allowing everyone to pet her. A binto what, you ask? This is a medium sized carnivore, also known as the Asian bearcat. Their fur is thick, coarse and black in colour and they have a long, bushy tail.

The animals on each tour vary depending upon the day and the time of year, but you will always get to spend time with the tiger babies, hang out with the monkeys or apes and meet exotic animals you've probably never even heard of before.

All of the animal actors can be seen up close and uncaged in close personal contact with their trainers. The trusted relationship they have with their handlers can be seen and felt by the audience. This makes them perfect for live shows or personal appearance. Because Dr. Antle and his train-

ers have hand raised these animals, they are cooperative and safe and that saves valuable production time and money. People often think it is dangerous to get so close to wild animals like these, but the handlers at T.I.G.E.R.S. have been with these animals since they were babies and have developed a special friendship based on love and respect. In fact, Dr. Antle and his partner Kheira have actually delivered many of the cubs in the enclosure with the mothers because of their special relationships. T.I.G.E.R.S. has a proven method of training these animals: Never treat them as pets, lots of tender loving care, and thousands of hours of one-on-one handling. They even live with the animals 24 hours a day. As Rob Johnson told me, many of the staff like him live on the property and are literally married to their job. Antle's son and daughter grew up here and are part of the team.



Mike Cohen holds a baby lynx.

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The tour itself lasted about three hours. Early on we sat in a covered enclosure and they brought us baby tigers, lions, lynx and wolves to touch and hold. They were all so gentle. During a refreshment break in a tree top location we observed some members of the cat family let loose and running upwards of 45 miles per hour to try and catch a snack on a rope. Rob Johnson introduced us to a very intelligent eagle, which followed all of his commands.

During these one of a kind shows, you see the animals interacting with their handlers who have developed a very special rapport with them. You will not see our animals sleeping or pacing in cages, as you may find in "traditional" zoos. Instead you will have a look at some of the most magnificent creatures on earth up close and uncaged doing all of the natural activities

they would normally do in the wild. Why go to such great lengths? Because the team at T.I.G.E.R.S. feel that if people can get an up-close and educational view of these glorious beasts, they will be eager to learn of the plight of endangered species.

During the Myrtle Beach Safari tour guests will have the opportunity to watch the trainers swim with the tigers. This is not something that they can allow the public to do so bathing suits are not required on the tour.

There are some incredible personal/private encounters. A long standing favorite is to swim with Bubbles the elephant in the intra-coastal waterway on the edge of the preserve. You may want to spend more one on one time with the cubs, have an adventure through the forest or paint with the great apes. These encounters start at \$5,000. We all got to meet, pet and feed the gigantic and gentle Bubbles.

T.I.G.E.R.S. works closely with international wildlife conservation projects in Africa and Thailand. In addition to providing much needed funds for these programs, personnel have been involved in field research as well. Through our appearances on the Discovery Channel, Animal Planet and NBC's Tonight Show they have been able to reach hundreds of millions of people with an educational message of the importance of wild animal conservation. The animal actors have appeared in over 500 films, television shows, commercials and advertisements worldwide. You have seen some of these animals in great films such as Ace Ventura, Forrest Gump, Dr. Dolittle, Mighty Joe Young and many others.

For more information, log on to <http://www.myrtlebeachsafari.com> and <http://www.tigerfriends.com/RSF.html>.



Mike Cohen with monkeys.