

G R E A T E S C A P E S

This wildlife preserve brings an animal safari to Florida

BY PATRICIA HORWELL
Florida Weekly Correspondent

Giraffes and camels and zebras — oh my!

You don't need to fly halfway around the world to experience a safari. Just visit Giraffe Ranch in Dade City, about 45 minutes north of Tampa.

Lex Salisbury and Elena Sheppa are your hosts on their 47-acre ranch, which adjoins the state's second-largest wilderness area, the Green Swamp. The property is lush with huge live oaks, native orchids, green pastures and ephemeral wetlands. The couple lives on the grounds, always keeping an eye on the animals in their care.

This is not a zoo or theme park but rather a hands-on, working game farm and wildlife preserve where animals have room to roam. Area sandhill cranes come to visit each evening to roost on the grounds. Sheppa describes the couple's work as "conservation through commerce." The animals here live and breed on their own as they do in the wild.

We took the custom safari vehicle tour, which lasted close to two hours. The safari jeep has a canopy to shield its 20 passengers from the Florida sun, while the sides are open and provide a clear view of the animals — which number about 400 — on the property. Sheppa's Norwich terrier, Doug, joined us for the ride. The trip is all about having fun in the great outdoors while learning a variety of interesting facts about the animal world.

An ostrich family paraded by our jeep, with father ostrich being trailed by his chicks — Salisbury calls them "eggs on legs" — while mother ostrich followed behind. Because dad guards them at night, Mother Nature gave him a coat of dark feathers as camouflage. Mom has lighter feathers and is the chicks' guardian during the day. We all had the opportunity to hold an unfertilized ostrich egg — large and heavy.

What do you call a herd of zebras? A dazzle — and dazzling they are. The dazzle at Giraffe Ranch also includes what Salisbury calls a zedonk. Apparently, one

of the resident donkeys left his area and mated with a zebra, resulting in the unusual offspring. Said donkey no longer has access to his lady love. (We did hear his donkey serenade as he called to her.)

And who knew that an Indian rhinoceros always deposits its waste in the same spot, building up its own midden? Sheppa said the waste is composted and eventually becomes rich fertilizer.

So many animals, too numerous to list here, roam the grounds. Visitors are treated to closeup encounters with camels, zebra, Père David's deer (a rare Asian deer with the head of a horse, antlers of a deer, hooves of a cow and tail of a donkey), bongo antelope, pygmy hippos, warthogs, tapir, ringtail lemurs and more, all from the safety of the jeep.

By now, you are wondering, "What about the giraffes?" Visiting the tower of giraffes (the term used to describe a group of giraffes) is the highlight of the tour. These graceful animals actually seemed happy to see us, likely because they knew they'd be hand-fed by enthusiastic tourists. The animals eagerly but gently munched away on the live oak leaves we fed them. (Warning: Giraffes drool.)

In addition to her knowledge of wildlife, Sheppa is an accomplished fine artist who works in glass. Her functional glasswork is custom blown using a two-color overlay process. It is then sandblasted and diamond wheel etched. The glass panels for her wall sculptures are sandblasted, diamond wheel engraved and reverse painted. She often adds small carved sculptures to the framed wall pieces. These are carved by hand and painted.

Her work is in several museum and private collections. Some of her pieces are sold in the ranch's gift shop. She also has a larger gallery onsite for visiting serious collectors. You can see her art at www.ele-nasheppa.com.

There are several ways to tour Giraffe Ranch. Besides the Custom Safari Vehicle tour, visitors may book the Drive-Thru Safari, where participants drive their own cars while following a guide in a lead vehicle who narrates to guests through



PATRICIA HORWELL / FLORIDA WEEKLY
ABOVE: A visitor hand-feeds live oak leaves to a giraffe. RIGHT: A curious giraffe peeks into the tour jeep.



their FM radios. This tour was conceived during the pandemic. Or stand eye-level with zebra, pygmy hippos and more on a Segway Tour. Finally, become a part of the herd by touring on a camel. This tour is led by two experienced guides/camel handlers.

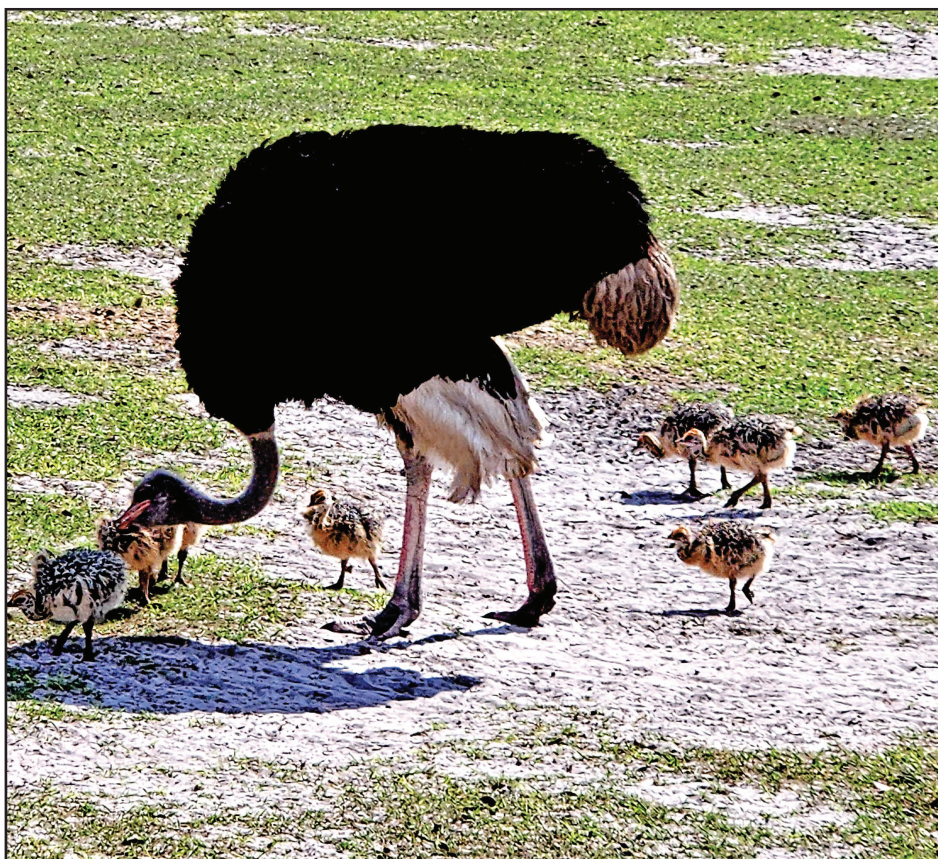
Giraffe Ranch is not open to walk-ins. All visitors must reserve a tour in advance online. The gate is always locked, so tourists are advised to arrive only a few minutes before their reserved time. The tours run rain or shine, so be sure to dress for the weather.

You're sure to have a wild time. ■

In the KNOW

Giraffe Ranch

- **When:** Custom vehicle tours, camel and Segway tours, 11 a.m. and 2 p.m. daily; drive-thru safaris hourly from 9 a.m.-4 p.m. All tours must book online.
- **Where:** 38650 Mickler Road, Dade City
- **Contact:** www.girafferanch.com or info@girafferanch.com



ABOVE: A daddy ostrich taking care of his chicks
TOP RIGHT: An Indian rhinoceros
BOTTOM RIGHT: A male Père David's deer cools off in the lake

JEANNE SMITH / COURTESY PHOTO

