



SLEEPLESS IN THE ZOO

SURROUNDED BY WILDLIFE AND ARTEFACTS MORE AT HOME IN KRUGER THAN CANBERRA, SLEEPING WITH THE WILDLIFE IS ALL PART OF THE FUN AT JAMALA WILDLIFE LODGE.

WORDS [FIONA HARPER](#)



Up close and personal at Jamala.

Rollicking through the bushveld on African safaris, wild animals' sleeping habits have always intrigued me. How do those at the bottom of the food chain avoid being eaten while taking a nap? Do they have a safe hideout or do they merely rest in situ in the hope they won't be devoured by a predator? How does a giraffe slip unseen into the background while taking a load off lanky legs?

Checking into Jamala Wildlife Lodge I'm curious to find out why sleeping in a zoo in our capital is getting such rave reviews. But, I'm also hoping to find a few answers to my questions. A plush take on traditional African lodges, tucked away in Canberra's National Zoo & Aquarium uShaka Lodge, is the central hub for guests housed in 18 bungalows, suites and treehouses scattered across the zoo grounds.

The uShaka Lodge was formerly the private residence of the zoo's owners Richard and Maureen Tindale and their six children. The much-travelled, environmentally-focused Tindale's were sizing up options to run a big-cat breeding program when the rundown aquarium and native wildlife park came on the market. Since 1998 they've taken in rescued animals from circuses and private collections around the globe, giving neglected animals a leisurely retirement home. Three generations now work with international zoos and breeding programs in an effort to conserve and protect endangered species. Jamala is named after a beloved king cheetah that Richard forged a strong bond with before it died from renal failure. The Tindales make no secret of the fact that the addition of Jamala Wildlife Lodge is a stepping stone to bolstering funds to help protect the future of the animal kingdom.

Immersion and 'animal encounters' are integral to the overnight experience at Jamala. After checking in mid-afternoon, with tea and cupcakes demolished, we set off on an escorted tour to meet the inhabitants while learning about the zoo's breeding and conservation programs such as Free the Bears.

I'm booked into a Giraffe Treehouse in the middle of the zoo overlooking the banks of the Molonglo River. Elegantly appointed with African artefacts, polished hardwood floor and exposed timber beams, a king bed draped with fine muslin dominates the room. In case I forget whose keeping me company, the walk-in shower is adorned with a floor to ceiling giraffe mosaic. Out the back, resident giraffe Hummer awaits.

He's well-drilled in the process of new arrivals who have booked a feed and photo opportunity on the balcony of a Giraffe Treehouse. We're standing eyeball to eyeball as Hummer's enormous head looms over my balcony, his long-lashed eyes dark and inquisitive. His cheek is so close I could reach out and stroke it, were I not reminded of strict instructions to resist the urge. But I am permitted to

hold out a carrot for him. Hummer's black tongue snakes around the carrot, slobbering on my hand as he whips it deftly from my grasp. Within moments it's disappeared down his throat and he's looking for another. I hold out another, then another, which disappear at lightning speed.

As dusk settles over the zoo it's time for pre-dinner drinks and canapes in uShaka Lodge. I've also got a scheduled meeting with white lion brother and sister duo Jake and Mishka. Over chilled champagne on the verandah the guttural roar of lions, known as the Brat Pack, ensures we don't forget our surroundings. On cue Jake and Mishka appear, posing magnificently for our cameras. As we move into the Rainforest Cave for a five course African-influenced degustation dinner they settle down metres from my chair. A sheet of floor-to-ceiling glass is the only thing preventing the diners from becoming dinner. Long shared tables ensure that dinner is a jovial affair. We share stories about our accommodation, or more particularly, 'our animal'. One couple has a Malaysian Sun bear to ogle, a grandmother and granddaughter are sleeping with a tiger.

Returning to my Giraffe Treehouse, Hummer's enthusiasm for re-acquaintance doesn't quite match my own. I pour a glass of wine and observe him from a distance, wondering if he's resting as he quietly patrols the enclosure beyond the glass-railed balcony. What goes on in a giraffe's head? Protected from predators I half hope he will curl up on the dirt and get comfortable for the night.

I fall asleep accompanied by the deep roar of lions, idly wondering if my dinner companions bedding down in bungalows fronting the lion enclosure will get any sleep. With Hummer the star of the show and in such close proximity, I feel as though sleeping is cheating. Like a scene from *Sleepless in Seattle* I toss and turn, getting up throughout the night to check on him. It's the same each time. Standing motionless his elegant neck catches the moonlight. I hope he's sleeping. •

The writer was a guest of Visit Canberra and Jamala Wildlife Lodge

TRAVEL FACTS

The National Zoo and Aquarium is undergoing major expansion to include open range savannah exhibits. Jamala Wildlife Lodge is Canberra's first all-inclusive luxury accommodation experience offering 5 star African-styled accommodation designed to maximise interaction with wildlife residents. Visit: [\[@\] www.jamalawildlifelodge.com.au](http://www.jamalawildlifelodge.com.au); [\[@\] www.visitcanberra.com.au](http://www.visitcanberra.com.au)