



by Judi Burton


Shortly after I hung up the phone with the world-renowned Dr. Bhagavan Antle, aka “Doc,” I received an email disclosing the secret location of the T.I.G.E.R.S Preserve in Myrtle Beach, along with instructions for the VIP Wild Encounters Tour I was set to embark on there. To discourage people from dropping by unexpectedly, there is no sign or even an exact street address for the preserve. It is only open by appointment. I was told not to carry a camera or bring a purse; not to wear open-toed shoes, a dress or any loose-fitting clothing; and, in capital letters, told that when I got there, I MUST WAIT IN MY CAR! I have to admit, I was pretty excited about visiting this place of magic and adventure.

### **ANIMAL AMBASSADORS**

Doc is a conservationist who trains tigers, lions, panthers, wolves, apes and elephants to become what he calls “animal ambassadors.” Doc and his team of highly skilled animal trainers spend just about every waking hour working with these magnificent beasts. As animal ambassadors, their role is to make an emotional connection with whom they come in contact. Hopefully, they will impact members of the public enough to encourage them to help fight species extinction. Doc’s animals have starred in many movies, including *Ace Ventura Pet Detective* and *Dr. Doolittle*, but his main focus is raising money for the Rare Species Fund (RSF), which provides conservation programs for such places as

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the Samutprakarn Wildlife Preserve in Thailand and the Raptor Research Project in South Africa. All proceeds from the fee for the tour go toward the RSF.

The Institute of Greatly Endangered and Rare Species (T.I.G.E.R.S) Preserve is home to more than 60 big cats, along with many other animals, and is situated on a spacious 50-acre well-manicured piece of land. The organization takes the tigers to the North Myrtle Beach-based shopping/dinning/entertainment complex Barefoot Landing every day for a few hours to be photographed with brave tourists and to publicize the program. But the real show takes place on the preserve, where visitors are taken on a three-hour tour, complete with refreshments and hundreds of photos taken by professionals. This is where I showed up—in front of the 20-foot-high bamboo gates—for my once-in-a-lifetime hands-on, cage-free experience.

### **LIGERS ARE NOT A MYTH**

After filling out the voluminous array of legal forms to acknowledge that I understood I could actually lose a limb when visiting the preserve, I was given a shot of Cuban coffee. If you've never imbibed this brew, it is absolutely divine, and a great way to perk you up before a three-hour trek. We were told to gather round the lobby area, which

sported a safari motif and dripped with flat-screen TVs everywhere broadcasting footage of Doc's animals on past TV shows. A man of athletic build, with thick, long, blonde hair, braided in the back, and wearing a wide-brimmed safari hat, spoke in a voice similar to that of a game show host, amplified by a small microphone in his shirt pocket. We were shuffled together to hear a quick overview of the preserve, peppered with well-rehearsed jokes to get us loosened up. Facts about ligers, which are hybrids of lions and tigers, were being recited by an attractive woman wearing safari garb and red lipstick. We were told to turn around, and behind us was the largest, most beautiful cat I had ever seen. Nine hundred pounds of pure feline magnificence sauntered casually across a bench on the other side of a window and peered in at us. His muscles rippled as I heard one of the tour guides say, "Tigers are 300 pounds, lions are 500 pounds and ligers are the size of both their parents." Doc's teenage son was climbing a ladder up to a perch, with a stick in his hand—a huge piece of raw meat on the end of it. The liger, named Zeus, climbed deliberately up the ladder reaching the 10-foot height while his hind paws were still planted firmly on the ground. "Oohs" and "ahhs" were heard across the room as we all got our first taste of the tour. The liger gingerly pulled the piece of meat off the stick with his huge teeth and dropped down making the floor vibrate underneath us. Soon, we were escorted out of the room and into the same yard with the humongous liger. I was the first out and, consequently, the first to sit next to Zeus for a photo op. I could feel his panting breath behind me, and experienced chills as I smiled awkwardly at the camera. "We feed more chicken to the animals every day on this preserve than served by any KFC," said one of the tour guides. "He has the capacity to eat a hundred pounds of food in one sitting,

but if he did that he would sleep his life away." I got up quickly and was shuffled around so that others in the group could have their turn.

### **BEARCAT LAP DANCE**

Instructed to sit down and lift our hands, palms down over our thighs, as if we were going to play piano, a large, black, furry-looking animal with a huge tail was walked across our laps. My hands brushed its coat as it stealthily worked its way across my legs. "This is a bearcat, also

called a binturong; a dominant predator that evolved in the Malaysian rainforest treetops," said one of the guides. "It is a very rare creature." The woman next to me smelled her fingers and remarked that "it smells like popcorn!" I laughed and took a sniff of my own fingers. Sure enough, they smelled uncannily like movie theater popcorn, complete with butter. "How strange," I muttered as the tour guide went on: "Why do they smell like popcorn, do they hunt in movie theaters?" he asked, generating laughter from his observers. "It's just the way the pheromones smell. But be aware to avoid buying wood harvested in Malaysia where



deforestation is causing the extinction of these amazing animals.”

### **HOWLING, CHASING AND EMBRACING**

I can't take you through the full-day visit without writing a book, so I will try to recap as best I can. Plus, I want to keep most of it a surprise for those of you who plan on taking the tour. I did see tigers; little tiger cubs frolicked and played on my lap and chewed at my shoes, all the while melting my heart. I saw adult tigers run at top speeds across the lawn while I stood munching in the shade on excellent hummus and crackers, and drinking delicious sweetened bush tea from Africa. I howled with a pack of teenage wolf pups, and walked past full-size alligators sunbathing lazily in the grass next to small ponds. I was handed a gibbon, a small primate, who brushed his little fingers through my hair. I met an orangutan who held my hand and looked intently into my eyes as photos were snapped and onlookers cooed. I could have spent all day with that orangutan, but the most spectacular part of my experience was yet to come.

### **ELEPHANT BREATH**

Doc came lumbering into view astride the most beautiful elephant I have ever set my eyes upon. Massive, gray



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... but when the body wins, it is so reassuring to know that a problem can be corrected. I became a patient of Dr. Fico 13 years ago after trying different types of physical therapy due to an auto accident in 1990. I quickly discovered that he has a passion for total wellness to include nutrition and exercise, but most of all he is dedicated to improving one's ability to live life to the fullest. Thanks to Dr. Fico and his dedicated staff for keeping me moving!”

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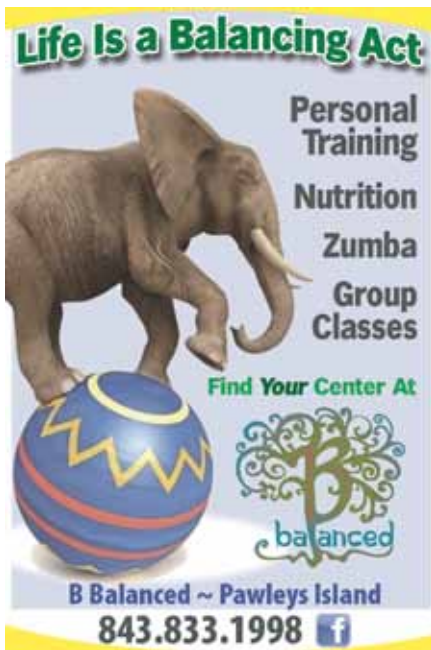
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and full of deep wrinkles, she flapped her ears wide in welcome as she approached. Recently, there have been YouTube videos of trainers violently shocking elephants with electric Tasers, preparing them for appearances in the movie *Water for Elephants*, which, ironically, addresses elephant cruelty. Another video was about the CEO of GoDaddy.com on his African vacation killing a “problem elephant” in the middle of the night. I saw those videos and cried so violently at home that I scared my dogs, and myself. Gazing upon this gigantic elephant in the flesh was a shock to my system. Tears started to form as Doc lightly dismounted from the beast. He was carrying a big, blunt wooden hook—a communication tool for leading elephants—and hooked her leg briefly to signal which way he wanted her to stand. “This is Bubbles.” “Oohs” and “ahhs” and laughs from the onlookers commenced. “Bubbles is my little girl. I first met her in South Africa 28 years ago. We were childhood friends; she slept with me, ate with me. I even had to hold her trunk at night to get her to go to sleep.” The facts about elephants continued as I witnessed her eat an entire watermelon, play a harmonica and sip down gallons of Hawaiian Punch in two gulps. “A hundred gallons of water a day; uses dirt as a sun reflectant; loves a piece

of candy; they are self-aware, meaning they know who they are when they see their reflection.” Doc spouted an array of amazing facts while Bubbles demonstrated almost every one. We were each handed a carrot, and told we would be feeding her. A few people went before me, and soon I was also approaching the gargantuan beast. I stood in front of her and stuck my hand out. She thrust her massive trunk out, and her soft, fleshy skin brushed across my hand and grabbed the carrot from me. I was told to come around her side as she commenced to grope me, from my belly to my breast to my armpit, my neck, even my behind. Finally, she stopped her “introductions” and raised her trunk up to my face. Hot, sweet, Hawaiian Punch, watermelon breath blew across my face, blowing my hair back and making me smile until this day. I will never forget that feeling.

### **A CONVERSATION WITH DOC ANTLE**

I had a chance to talk one on one with Doc after the show while he was in a swimming pool with another orangutan and a dog named Roscoe. Evidently, this particular orangutan is the only one in the world who loves dogs and can swim underwater. “You can’t find these types of animals doing these types of things anywhere else on Earth,” Doc said, as he lightly guided his orangutan away from my hand, which was holding my voice recorder. “Sometimes, I don’t know what to think,” I said to Doc. “My instinct tells me these animals should be in the wild.” He nodded and said: “There used to be islands of people in a sea of a wild world, now there are seas of people and tiny islands of wildlife. Even lions in Africa have become rare. We are at the Omega Point, the point of no return. The genetic diversity in a lot of these animals is so small, it is very hard for them to breed.” I thought of all the hillbilly jokes on incest and understood. “These animals might not have disappeared, but they are headed that way. The passenger pigeon disappeared when there were still a million

of them left, because it required tens of millions to provide a freely breeding, developing colony. If you’re going down that dark road of ‘We already ruined Earth,’ it’s a big, sad road because we’ve already hit that point in many ways.”

The orangutan wrapped her hairy arm around his neck and clung to his back. She looked up at me with those huge, intelligent eyes. As I stared back at her, I began to understand that for many of these animals, this is the best place they could be. They are well protected, loved, and fed, cared for and adored. No animal poachers or rainforest-destroying palm oil companies could kill her or displace her. She might actually have a mate someday, and babies, and be able to care for



them without the threat of deforestation. The Omega Point began to sink in like a piece of lead hitting the bottom of my stomach. A sick feeling washed over me as the truth sank in. “We are beyond the point of no return”; his words resonated in my ears. I couldn’t imagine a world without elephants, or tigers, or lions, or bearcats, or any of the other wild, amazing creatures who are a part of our planet. Sadly, it is projected that within the next 20 to 30 years, tigers and other rare species will be extinct.

*For more info on the T.I.G.E.R.S. Preserve, visit TigerFriends.com, or visit the tigers for free at Barefoot Landing in North Myrtle Beach, evenings in July from 5 to 9 pm. To go on the VIP Wild Encounters Tour, call 843-361-4552.*