

Africa Live! at the San Antonio Zoo

By Ken Tucker

Africa Live! at the San Antonio Zoo, San Antonio, TX, immerses visitors in the wonders of Africa including its diverse plants, animals, and people. The central theme of the exhibit is water—both its scarcity and its abundance—with exhibits arranged seasonally from trickling streams to flash floods. Visitors are able to see how plants and animals have adapted to changing amounts of water.

Hippos are visible through underwater viewing windows so guests can see them in beautifully replicated natural habitats representative of the

environments in which they spend most of their lives. Africa Live! creates a wild trek where the animals appear to roam free and the visitors are on safari. The immersion-style exhibits empower guests to feel as though they have been transported into the wild.

The shotcrete design begins in the Hippo Viewing Building where, entering through a large rock wall beside a waterfall, the interior details give the impression of being on a river bottom looking into the hippo pool. As visitors walk through the building, they gradually rise to be closer to the river edge experience, passing crocodile, aquarium tanks, and snakes as they emerge into a large aviary filled with birds. A colobus monkey mesh enclosure is within the bird aviary and people can walk beside the shotcrete stream that flows from a waterfall at the far end of the aviary. Emerging from the aviary, the visitors pass the rocky cliff that conceals the Okapi holding, buried on top with a planter and viewing area high above.

The rockwork gradually changes from fractured rock to kopje that now begins the mound areas. Views from within the huge termite mound look out onto African dogs in a large exhibit space that is shared with the hippos. More kopje await as the visitors walk past hyraxes and elephants to climb the path up to a large terraced dining area shaded by a trellis. The visitors can sit and relax with food and beverages while looking at the African panorama of landscapes and rockwork.

The same team that fabricated the rockwork and replicated the natural environments throughout



Africa Live! Phase 1—Hippo pool



Africa Live! Phase 1—Hippo pool and viewing area



Africa Live! Phase 1—Crocodile pool

Shotcrete Corner



Africa Live! Phase 2—Waterfall in aviary



Africa Live! Phase 2—Colobus aviary and stream

Africa Live! Phase 1 is currently on site completing Africa Live! Phase 2. Using 5000 psi (34.5 MPa) shotcrete, the rock is hand carved with trowels and rubber-coated paint rollers to achieve the look and texture of rock. When constructing earth banks, larger roots and rocks are first tied to the structure wall, and then integral color is added to the mixture. The texture is achieved by applying the shotcrete from different angles with the shotcrete nozzle to achieve the dirt look. Smaller rocks are placed on the wall after it is shot to achieve an authentic-looking environment.

Africa Live! Phase 2 construction continues on schedule and on budget and is scheduled to open in the spring of 2010. Africa Live! Phase 2 will feature an African primate exhibit, a walk-through aviary filled with trees and birds of every color and variety, a pack of African wild dogs, and a walk-through termite mound where visitors will see larger-than-life models of chambers, tunnels, a queen, and other types of these amazing social insects. With fluffy long tails, the colobus monkeys will perform acrobatic leaps from tree to tree. Further down the trail, guests will encounter the mysterious “forest giraffe”—the beautiful okapi. A giant “termite mound” will provide fun for kids to crawl through as they watch mongooses poke their heads through the mound’s ventilation shafts. Wild hunting dogs will be next along the path, where guests will come face to face with the pack. Rock formations will become the playground to rock hyraxes, as monitor lizards lie in the crevices. All the while, pygmy falcons fly overhead watching the excitement below. Up the hill, the Baraza Café will offer guests rest and delicious food from the outdoor grill with a grand view of the river valley and forest below.



Africa Live! Phase 2—Colobus building path and stream

Acknowledgments

Ken Tucker received contributions for this article from Steve McCusker, Zoo Director at The San Antonio Zoo and Dave Matthews, Architect with Jones & Jones Architects and Landscape Architects.



Ken Tucker, Rockwork Superintendent with The Nassal Company, has more than 30 years of experience in the Project Management and Superintendent roles involving the fabrication and installation of artificial rock formations, natural earth formations, clay banks, textured rockwork, artificial trees, water features, landscapes, sculptural elements, natural habitats, and immersive environments. As Superintendent, Tucker is the on-site supervisor and manages the project crew(s) as well as coordinates with other trades in the completion of the project. Tucker and The Nassal Company’s team deliver immersive and themed environments for entertainment, leisure, museum, zoo, and aquariums venues.