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monkeys around

at the



Lions and tigers and bears, oh my!

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at the same time without having to travel all over the world? Just drive over to the Houston Zoo.

Have you ever noticed the smile on the faces of kids — and kids at heart — when they see the monkeys playing in cages; or the look of awe across their faces when the lion paces slowly back and forth across its den, stopping occasionally to cast an “I dare you to come in” look at passers-by?

If so, then you can understand what the Houston Zoo is all about — people of all sizes and ages learning about the behavior of animals and

ions and tigers and bears, oh my! How can you see all of these animals

having fun at the same time. Much of the zoo has been reconstructed to make the animals' living quarters more realistic and comfortable. In addition, many cages have been redesigned to make viewing and picture taking easier.

To a child, almost everything looks big, especially animals like giraffes and elephants.

The giraffes, which used to be enclosed in a chain link area, now live in an open, grassy area surrounded by a moat instead of a fence. This makes observation and picture-taking easier.

When you get tired of bending your neck backward to look up at these tall animals, the elephants are right around the corner.

While elephants have the

biggest feet in the world (even bigger than many basketball players), they have tender soles. So even though elephants can weigh up to seven tons, they're more likely to try and crush their enemies by kneeling rather than stamping on them.

And if you think your grocery bill is high now, try cooking for an elephant — up to 700 pounds of food each day. It's a wonder that they can still run as fast as 25 miles per hour with all that weight.

Even hippopotamuses are less than half the weight of elephants.

Weighing up to three tons, the hippo is considered to be the second largest land animal, even though it's at home on land or in water.

Compared to elephants,



hippos eat like birds — only 100 pounds of food a day — and they feed mostly on aquatic plants.

Also, a hippo's young weighs only about 80 pounds at birth as compared to the elephant's 175 to 200 pounds. So I guess at seven pounds, four ounces, I wasn't such a big baby after all.

Just in case you bring young ones to the zoo who seem to be going through that “carry me” phase, the zoo provides strollers to rent. And new signs at the zoo make it easier to find what you're looking for.

The zoo has also installed new animal information signs near the cages to give viewers a better understanding of the habitats and behavior of the animals.

David Letterman's stupid pet tricks can't compare to some of the things being done by animals in the small mammal house at the zoo. I didn't know it was possible to sleep in some of the strange positions these animals have

discovered.

The small mammal house is one of the few indoor viewing places at the zoo. It houses animals such as squirrel monkeys, flying squirrels, night prowlers and other mammals found in the monkey and squirrel families.

One of the most impressive features of this “house” — besides the air conditioning — is a section known as night prowlers. Here you can see animals like the tropical fruit bat, which has a wing span of five feet, or vampire bats, which feed only on fresh blood.

If you think living in a dorm room is crowded, you should see some of the living quarters these zoo animals have to share — five bats with five-foot wing spans in one cage, sharks in aquariums and five elephants in one backyard.

The reptile house is another air conditioned area where you can cool off while still enjoying the animal antics at the zoo. This area has about 100 enclosures, each with a

different type of snake, lizard or turtle inside.

I often wonder what the non-venomous python thinks of the small children that press their faces up against its cage; after all, this snake is used to eating small deer, monkeys and even leopards.

And speaking of eating . . .

You can see alligators devour fish every Thursday and Sunday at 2:00 p.m. at the alligator pond; or vampire bats being fed daily at 2:30 p.m. in the small mammal house; and finally, sea lions fishing for food every day at 10:00 a.m. and 3:00 p.m. at their pool near the zoo's entrance.

Other animals to see include zebras, goats, bears, exotic birds and various members of the cat family. And if you step into the indoor aquarium, you can see all sorts of marine life; you also get another shot at the air conditioning.

If you're like me, you'll also have a good time watching the children at the zoo as they try to peek through fences, bars