

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Zootopia and Disney World

Elisa Leonelli · Wednesday, March 9th, 2016

When I was invited to Orlando Florida to interview the voice talent (Ginnifer Goodwin, Jason Bateman and Shakira) of the animated film *Zootopia*, I gladly accepted because I was curious to see *Animal Kingdom*, the fourth amusement park built at *Disney World* in 1998.

I remember fondly the first time I had been to Orlando, in April 1989 for the grand opening of Disney-MGM Studios, the movie-themed park now called *Disney-Hollywood Studios*, where landmarks like the 1927 Chinese theater were recreated.



Disney Hollywood-Chinese (c) Elisa Leonelli 2016

In those years, I was the Los Angeles correspondent for the Italian film monthly CIAK, so I wrote and photographed [an 8-page layout](#) about this event. I traveled to Disney World again in June 1990 for the movie *Dick Tracy*, to interview Warren Beatty and Dustin Hoffman, and wrote [a cover story for CIAK](#).

In 1989, I also visited [EPCOT](#) (Experimental Prototype Community of Tomorrow), originally conceived by Walt Disney as a utopian city of the future, but modified after his death in 1966. In 1965 Disney had bought several parcels of land near Bay Lake, to attract East Coast residents, who did not wish to travel as far as Los Angeles to visit *Disneyland*, built in Anaheim in 1955. A replica called *Magic Kingdom* opened in Florida in 1971. EPCOT Center opened as an amusement park in 1982. When I finally got to visit it in 1989 I was excited to see, recreated in miniature form, landmarks of 11 countries in the world, like China, where I had [traveled in 1981](#), and Italy, where I was born and raised. This year, I went with some of my colleagues to EPCOT for dinner at Marrakesh, a restaurant in the Morocco section, and watched the night-time fireworks show in the lagoon.

I also boarded the [Great Movie Ride](#) at *Disney-Hollywood Studio*, that starting in 2015 is narrated by Robert Osborne of Turner Classic Movies, but still takes you through several movie sets, from *The Wizard of Oz* (1939) to *Alien* (1979) with audio-animatronics figures like in *Disneyland's* Pirates of the Caribbean.



Animal Kingdom-Tree of Life (c) Elisa Leonelli 2016

But *Animal Kingdom* was the biggest discovery for me on this trip. Live animals roam free in large areas with real trees and bushes, and you can see them up close on walking tours or by riding in jeeps, just like you do in an African Safari. The park is divided into four sections, in Asia you can spot wild animals like tigers, in Africa you see lions, giraffes and zebras. There are also rides, like

the roller coaster Expedition Everest, and live musical shows like the *Lion King*.

I was surprised to see so many families with very young children in strollers, and I wondered about the cost of such a trip for 4 people. Park admission is around \$100 per person per day, a 4-Day park hopper ticket is \$374 for children between ages 3 and 9. The [30 Disney-owned hotels](#) have rates averaging from \$200 to \$500 a day. To that cost you have to add meals. Transportation from the airport on the Magical Disney Express buses and between hotels and parks however is free.

I stayed at the [Animal Kingdom Lodge](#) (\$318 a day plus tax), which was a unique experience, because the resort is surrounded by a savanna with real wild animals, that you can see from your balcony. The architectural style of the lobby reminded me of the safari lodges where I had stayed in Kenya in 1998 with my then 11-year old daughter. And I wondered if the cost of traveling to Africa could possibly be cheaper than a Disney World vacation. But I realize that many American families feel safer inside this artificial world created by Walt Disney.

The added bonus of this experience for me was that the movie *Zootopia* is excellent. It presents an empowering story for little girls, of a rabbit named Judy, who succeeds in her dream of becoming a police officer, despite her small size, and solves a mysterious case of animal disappearances with the help of a sly fox. The hopeful message is that both predators and prey animals can live together in harmony in this utopian city of Fantasyland.

To learn more about Walt Disney's fascinating life story, you should watch the informative [2015 PBS documentary](#).

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