

PSITTACINES, ORCAS AND MORE

Ken Kawata enjoys Tenerife's
zoological bounty

LORO PARQUE

WITH A POPULATION of 965,857 (January 2025) Tenerife is the largest community of Spain's Canary Islands, off North-west Africa. Tenerife is also a zoo enthusiasts' delight, home to Loro Parque. Herman Reichenbach presented an insightful overview of this park in 2014. This account hopefully supplements and updates Herman's report.

Opened by Wolfgang Kiessling in 1972 with 150 parrots to see, Loro Parque has grown into one of the largest attractions of the Canary Islands with 2022 seeing over three million visitors pass through the park. "It is indeed one of the zoos of the world that every zoo enthusiast should visit at least once in his or her lifetime" (Reichenbach, 2014). Behind this image the park staff candidly talk about unfortunate incidents. A bird curator was convicted in 1990 of conspiracy to smuggle birds to the United States during the 1980s. Also, on Christmas Eve 2009, 29-year-old Alexis Martinez was killed by Keto, a Killer Whale. This wasn't the only fatal Killer Whale incident; "In the short history of Killer Whales in captivity, four people have been killed, albeit three by a single bull in the possession of SeaWorld Orlando since 1992" (Reichenbach, 2014).

Unsurprisingly, Loro Parque has been criticised by a number of organisations including PETA (more on that shortly). Controversies often have roots in the general public's imagination of the ocean. Oceans, and the creatures that inhabit them, nurture admiration, romance and imagination. Even marine fish as sea-food remind us of their home by hinting silently about the deep sea. Marine mammals, their fellow aquatic



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creatures, share the same environment and the larger ones, such as cetaceans, have a powerful appeal. In clear contrast terrestrial giants such as elephants, generate less intense passion even with their rapidly declining *in-situ* populations. There exists a profound disconnection between the elephants the public sees in captivity and the reality of the situation in their native home. Perhaps the public associates elephants with the circus,

A bird's-eye view of
Loro Parque



Thai-styled
architecture at Loro
Parque's entrance

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something they rarely take seriously. Also the savannahs and forests (jungles) where wild elephants are found might be viewed as less important than the sea? It might be noted that the term 'jungle' stirs automatic responses such as 'impenetrable', 'unruly' and 'lawless'. The public's attention to nature is thus uneven and inconsistent.

But back to oceanic giants. Crowds flood the park. According to the concierge of my hotel, the slowest tourist season in Tenerife is in May and June, the reverse of what takes place in the USA and Europe. However, this was late January 2025. Your writer joined the stream of tourists... demographically senior citizens stood out but there were also family groups with small children. A variety of languages was heard, much of which sounded unfamiliar, and English is uncommon there. Almost everyone was Caucasian and they were cordial and smiled to each other.

Back in 2014 Herman Reichenbach made another interesting observation: "Loro Parque probably gets more British visitors annually than any zoo in Britain other than Chester Zoo! I think this has a lot to do with the dolphinarium and even more so 'Orca Ocean' at the park. Britons abroad like to see animals that in their own country they are not permitted to see".

Smoking is prohibited in the entire park. Despite the large crowds the grounds are spotlessly clean; I saw an attendant pick up a tiny piece of litter. The park opens at 9.30am and an hour later, a sizeable crowd was already there. From the initial 1.3 ha (3.2 acres) the grounds currently occupy 13.5 ha (33.3 acres) yet due to the varied topography (pretty steep at times), the rich vegetation, and the winding and twisting paths, the crowd does not mingle all that much. Exhibit labels are tri-lingual: Spanish, English and German. Please note, by the way, there is so much to absorb here that an attempt to describe all you might see would resemble the first volume of *Encyclopedia Britannica*. Therefore here are my observation highlights.

Cheers, laughter and applause, orchestrated by show attendants, came from the amphitheatres and echoed around the park throughout the day. The Loro Parque website indicates five sea-lion shows, four Bottle-nosed Dolphin shows and three of the 'holy grail' Orca shows daily. Large crowds rapidly moved from one show to another, filling the bleachers. From a husbandry viewpoint these shows do reduce boredom – an enrichment that animals look forward to in my opinion. Also the amphitheatre attendants can inject education in a 'backdoor' way, so to speak. For example, during the sea-lion show they explain the differences between sea-lions and seals. You might wonder, however, just how much of this information the public retains and takes home with them! At any rate, as expected, the shows do generate criticism. The first Orcas arrived in February 2006 and a calf was born in October 2010. The mother rejected him and hand-raising was necessary, which raised animal welfare concerns. Possibly some members of the public think of nature as a Utopia, slamming the door to the *in-situ* reality of high infant mortality, diseases, parasites, predation, starvation, poaching, natural disasters... the list goes on. Their rose-tinted glasses turn towards wildlife in captivity, hence anything going against their misconceptions can irritate these well-meaning folk and become

weapons against animal welfare. Captive shows also strike some people as a kind of commercial exploitation of animals. Perhaps, but not so fast, I say Loro Parque is in the *business* of exhibiting captive wildlife. The same business is practiced with different tone and style by the most prestigious zoological institutions of the world. In short, the zoos of Berlin, Hamburg, Regent's Park and the Bronx all belong in the same camp as Loro Parque. Against criticism concerning captivity itself, a somewhat familiar voice insists that the complex necessities of cetaceans make them unable to adapt to captive settings, despite the useless efforts to enrich their environment with balls and toys. To this, Dr. Javier Almunia, the director of Loro Parque, responded "the statement is totally absurd, cetaceans thrive in dolphinariums as is scientifically proven by the fact that they live as long as, or even longer, than in the wild... The environmental enrichment of zoo-housed animals is not simply throwing them some balls and toys to play with, it is a complex science that aims to

Opposite: Hands-on contact between keeper and Killer Whale

Parrots at Loro Parque today

By Tim Brown

As is well-known amongst zoo people, Loro Parque has the foremost collection of parrots in the world, listing 350 taxa at the current time. It might be added, however, that only 220 or so of these are on show (there is an off-show breeding station a mile or so away). The way the parrot collection is presented has also changed over time, with many of the former long rows of aviaries housing different taxa having now been replaced by larger communal multi-taxa aviaries. This makes identification of species and subspecies more difficult, certainly of the smaller parrotlets and conures (for example). On the other hand, there is probably a beneficial circumstance for the birds themselves in being given more commodious surroundings. There are even a number of walk-through aviaries; enchanting, but even more challenging for the determined psittacine observer.

All is not lost for the taxonomist however, and there are still rows of traditional aviaries that contain mighty selections – ones for Amazon parrots for instance that contain almost 30 different forms. The allure of these aviaries for the general public is/was limited, and the contemplation of rows of parakeets by the zoologist may well be quite a solitary pursuit, with the public trundling along behind him/her at quite a rate of knots, scarcely giving a glance at the feathered treasures living behind wire mesh only a few

feet away from them.

Needless to say, over the years a number of rarities have vanished from Loro Parque, sometimes with the net effect of vanishing from captivity altogether – forms such as the Buru Racquet-tail Parrot (*Prioniturus mada*) or the Red-necked Amazon (*Amazona arausiaca*), but it is still possible to view extremely rare and unusual parrots at Loro Parque which cannot be seen elsewhere. At the time of writing and following my visit of 29/01/25 these include:

Little Lorikeet (A) (*Parvipsitta pusilla*)

Malabar Parakeet (B)

(*Psittacula columboides*)

Andaman Moustached Parakeet (C)

(*Psittacula alexandri abbotti*)

Gustav's Cobalt-winged Parakeet (D)

(*Brotogeris cyanopectus gustavi*)

Carriker's Conure (E)

(*Psittacara frontatus minor*)

Pale Blue-winged Parrotlet

(*Forpus xanthopterygius flavissimus*)

Santa Cruz Conure

(*Pyrrhura molinae restricta*)

Maroon Shining Parrot

(*Prosopeia tabuensis tabuensis*)

Tanimbar Eclectus Parrot

(*Eclectus [roratus] riedeli*)

Vernal Hanging Parrot

(*Loriculus vernalis*)

Maroon-fronted Parrot

(*Rhynchopsitta terrisi*)

There are other rarities that are not quite so exclusive but are certainly noteworthy, such as **Yellow-fronted parrot (F)** (*Poicephalus flavifrons*), **Glossy Black Cockatoo**



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(*Calyptorhynchus lathamii*), **Tasmanian Yellow-tailed Black Cockatoo** (*Zanda funerea xanthanota*), **Long-tailed Parakeet** (*Psittacula longicauda*), **West Timor Iris Lorikeet** (*Saudareos iris iris*), **Seram King Parrot** (*Alisterus*

amboinensis amboinensis), and **Eastern Bluebonnet** (*Northiella haematogaster*). A number of rare taxa supposedly kept at Loro Parque could not be seen and presumably live off-show.

promote natural behaviours in the animals by means of a variety of devices and mechanisms”.

Along the same lines PETA Deutschland stated that dolphins are highly intelligent, sociable and sensitive animals with a self-understanding similar to our own and consequently suffer in captivity. Dr. Almunia, in part, replied “the results of most of our research into such topics have been gained from animals in dolphinariums. However, at present we have no clear indications that dolphins are closer to human beings than other animals, such as parrots for example. Nor should we expect this because a direct comparison with human beings makes little sense. The evolution of all adaptations is characterised specifically by the environment and biology of the animal and therefore results in a multitude of adaptations which do not follow directly from each other. This is also why it is impossible to create an intelligence ranking... Moreover, the ‘suffering’ of the animals is something that has to be elucidated from animal welfare science. The most recent approaches to measure animal welfare in cetaceans considers social and emotional aspects of the animals, which takes into account their intelligence and sociability”. And one more: The shows are against the dignity and spirit of these intelligent creatures making them act as clowns. Almunia also responded to this: “The perception of visitors to the presentations does not suggest any attack on the dignity of animals”. Which side to take is up to you, of course. Anyway, here follows a historical overview, summarised by yours truly in 2018:

The terror of the deep. That was how the Orca was portrayed. “The most bloodthirsty of marine mammals, fiercest of the clan”, “...no animal is more aptly named than the Killer Whale” and “...more dreadful than the shark” stated none other than the Associate Curator of Mammals at the American Museum of Natural History in 1954. Considering these assumptions shows that the public’s fascination for the Orca is a relatively new phenomenon.

We now jump to Canada. In Stanley Park in Vancouver, British Columbia, what was initially called the Vancouver Aquarium Marine Science Centre was in the blueprint stage, it was intended to be a symbol of civic and regional pride. For impressive exhibits in world-renowned museums, back then, the common practice was to kill the animal, be it a gorilla or an elephant or whatever, to create a replica for public display. Eight years after the Vancouver Aquarium opened they wanted a Killer Whale. On 16 July 1964 a crew sailed out and a young specimen was harpooned. The harpoon entered the left side of its body and passed through, and it was towed back to the dock. It lived for 86 days. Two authors commented about this whale named ‘Moby Doll’ (they were unaware that it was a male): “The most astonishing aspect of the behavior was the complete lack of ferocity or aggressiveness. At no time did it make any hostile moves towards any human involved in the capture, treatment, netting or feeding operations. The boldness and ferocity which is so much a recognised part of the behavior of the wild Killer Whale was contrasted greatly with the apparent harmlessness of the captive specimen. The experience indicated the feasibility of maintaining and possibly training Killer Whales in captivity”.

In this historic event, just one individual animal dispelled the image of the evil sea-beast, and morphed the species into a media sweetheart. In 1967 Vancouver Aquarium acquired another Orca and the number of visitors took an enormous leap upward, opening the floodgate for other aquariums to “get on the bus”. Naturally, never missing a beat, anti-captivity campaigners found a golden opportunity for their cause. Somehow, to me, the antis relentlessness appears similar to thirsty vagrants on the street, eager for a handout.

Now back to Spain and the animal shows. I joined the tourist horde and sat down on a bleacher seat. To build a festive mood in the audience a Hyacinth Macaw flew repeatedly across the amphitheatre to the tune of “What a Wonderful World” by my favourite jazz man Louis Armstrong, causing unexpected nostalgia. The show was enjoyable and the crowd’s enthusiasm infectious.

After the show, I went to sample the general atmosphere and see the grounds and the collection. Lush foliage and towering trees supplement and support the animals here, although the public, hopping between exhibits from one species to the next, may not be aware of the vegetation’s subtle effect. Grass is trimmed as if it came back from the barbershop the day before. Wondering if it was man-made or not, I pinched a blade and found it was a real plant. Level land covers a limited portion of the park since much of Tenerife is on steep topography and the park’s exhibits are often on a hillside, yet the visiting public is not annoyed by these slopes. What helps is that visitor and staff/service paths are segregated, providing an impression that the park ‘belongs’ to the public. The dominant mode of separation between visitors and animals is a physical barrier, mostly made of wire mesh, in contrast to the use of moats in other zoos. But there are some exceptions, including the white Tiger kept behind a moat.

The aforementioned 150 parrots were at the genesis of the park which is now home to 4,000 parrots in 350 species and subspecies according to the website (2025). So you might call it an Olympus for psittacine enthusiasts. They are on exhibit throughout the grounds and with every turn you make their voices stay with you. Common and showy species such as large macaws are in larger cages. Others such as Pesquet’s Parrot are kept in individual cages, each measuring approximately four cubic metres. Another cage showed the Moluccan Eclectus (*Eclectus roratus*), well-known for its sexual dimorphism – the male green and the female red. I first learned about this biological phenomenon decades ago so it felt like I was meeting old friends.

A small flock of Humboldt’s Penguins attracts attention, they whet your appetite for what comes next – a huge climate-controlled building where, within, visitors are taken into a dream-like ambience. The glass-fronted exhibit appears to be half-moon shaped. Concrete mounds, some resembling icebergs, receive artificial snow from the ceiling. At the front, penguins ‘fly’ underwater. Up against the glass barrier there is a narrow, moving walkway, designed, I presume, to stop people monopolising the view. Those who choose to watch longer stay behind. Visitors are mesmerised, their eyes fixed on the birds, and it’s so easy to anthropomorphise penguins. There are dozens of Kings and Gentoos in addition to a smaller number of Southern



Rockhoppers. Somehow, I missed the Chinstraps, that I assume were also there.

Loro Parque’s climate-controlled penguin facility

I stepped out of the penguin kingdom into bright sunshine, and more birds. With an average temperature of 20°C (69°F) in January it is pleasant and you don’t need a jacket. In a nearby building it was nice to see three dozen or so Atlantic Puffins, something you don’t find too often. Waders are represented by Caribbean, Chilean and Lesser flamingos in addition to Demoiselle Cranes. The collection focusses on birds but mammals are here too, the aforementioned Tiger and Jaguar, the black variety. The order Chiroptera, the bats, is the second largest mammalian order in terms of species so I appreciated the building called La Gruta (‘cave’ in Spanish) for Seba’s Short-tailed Bats, however, it is so dark inside it took a while for me to see one. It was time for a coffee break, so I sat down for a moment. Immediately a pigeon, an urbanisation indicator, landed on the floor for a handout.

The absence of large mammals here stands out. The likes of elephants and giraffes, the bread-and-butter components in most zoos, in my biased mind. Only one species represents the hooved Perissodactyla and Artiodactyla – a Pygmy Hippo. The same can be said about the absence of some birds as well; no ratites or raptors. However, that is by no means meant to be a criticism – the inventory of species is up to the zoo’s management. If they specialise, just as this park does, I certainly respect their choices and still enjoy their collection.

In a ‘laid-back’ part of the park are a few reptiles (I didn’t see any amphibians), Galapagos Tortoises with juveniles and American Alligators. What doesn’t get much spotlight, regrettably, is the sole delegate of invertebrates, jellyfish, in a dark building which gives visitors a change of pace. There is also a new aquarium



featuring corals and tropical marine fish, but it suffers from a lack of labelling.

That evening when I had dinner with Tim Brown and his companion Linda, he mentioned two other animal attractions on the island, Jungle Park and Monkey Park, both with smaller collections than Loro Parque. Of the two, he recommended Jungle Park.

JUNGLE PARK

This attraction, operated by a Spanish tourist group, is on a 7.5 ha. (18.5 acres) site located in southern Tenerife. It was less crowded than Loro Parque and many of the exhibits are also built on hillsides. Located in a lush forest I might mention at this point that familiarity and willingness for hiking would help make for a more pleasant visit to both facilities – there is no tram or mini-train at either.

Visitors mostly consist of families with children, and couples, both young and middle-aged. Quite surprisingly, one building is devoted to mycology (the study of fungi) with interpretive bilingual Spanish and English graphics which is so interesting, especially in a zoo. All other exhibits are outdoors. Visitor traffic is directed to a winding, narrow trail, well shaded which leads to an orchid garden – a treat to the eye.

Machismo is not found in zoos in Tenerife. No big, masculine beasts typified by pachyderms and ungulates. Again, this is not meant to be a criticism. The largest mammal in this park is an adult hybrid orangutan mixed with Siamangs in a large exhibit with double-decker viewing. A group of Ring-tailed Lemurs represents prosimians in a walk-through wire-mesh enclosure. The public could easily touch them, although I did not see that happen. Unusually, a Spotted Thick-knee (*Burhinus capensis*) shared this enclosure.

Familiar primate faces continued. A group of



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Above: The entrance to Jungle Park.

Left: The largest mammal in the park is an orangutan

Common Squirrel Monkeys, then two Lar Gibbons on an island. Lush forest is the backdrop and it sure looks as if the gibbons could disappear into it at any moment. On the next island lives *Cebus capucinus*, called Colombian White-faced Capuchin ('white-throated' sounds more familiar to me). Following the trail I came across two sea-lions performing in a show (more on that later). An attendant told me they are California Sea-lions. Apparently this is not a traditional zoogeographical arrangement, but again, I am not critical about it. North American Raccoons and Ring-tailed Coatis were both very active under the midday sun – not so active were the Crested Porcupines. At this point it occurred to me that the inhabitants were allotted a generous amount of space. It would be another story if they are herded into small quarters at night, but for three porcupines (sound asleep at the time) the enclosure is quite roomy. It also occurred to me that the grounds and exhibits were spotlessly clean. Another point: the graphics and signage are excellent. Scientific names and common names are followed by natural history information, bilingual of course. Next was a cactus garden which gives your eyes a break.



Islands for Lar Gibbon on the right, capuchins in the middle with a sea-lion pool on the left at Jungle Park

In terms of herpetology there isn't much; Common Boa and American Alligator. So, back to the feathered guys. The largest here is the Emu, and there is a male Andean Condor who was all on his own. The same as the the aforementioned thick-knee and a Keel-billed Toucan. Then, just to remind me of the waddling bipedal types, there was an exhibit for Humboldt's Penguins. When I first stepped into the park I noted seven Bald Eagles, mostly adults, each tethered and provided with a water tub. One was bathing. They seemed full-winged and I wondered what they were for. An interpretive panel included information about these eagles being the national birds of America. I Peeked at an off-show area that revealed Marabou Storks and at least three King Vultures - their rich colour had given them away from a distance. Later they turned out to be show performers.

A small crowd began to gather for a sea-lion show. Frankly, it is not something you'd want to write home about, a pretty much standard act. But the bird show

is different; during the half-hour show a bilingual narrative is given, informing the public in quite some detail on each species. The act (or 'trick' some might say, but nowadays folks call it 'behaviour') itself is not necessarily the charm of it; it is the wide range of species that drew my attention. Ranks of stone seating surround a grass-covered arena. At the end of the open area there is a tower, with an attendant standing on it. Two Harris' Hawks keep circling the area as the talk resumes. The Marabous come in next. Because of their size and bare head and neck, they certainly make an impression, especially when that massive body flies up to the tower. Then a King Vulture and three American Black Vultures join the hawks. Repeatedly they fly low over the audience, from one end of the arena to the other. Children are thrilled, thinking that talons might scratch their heads at any moment.

This was such a treat for this long-time circus fan. There is no piped-in music; no need for it. Birds land close to the audience at times and look around. Once,



'Duck!' A King Vulture wows the crowd at Jungle Park

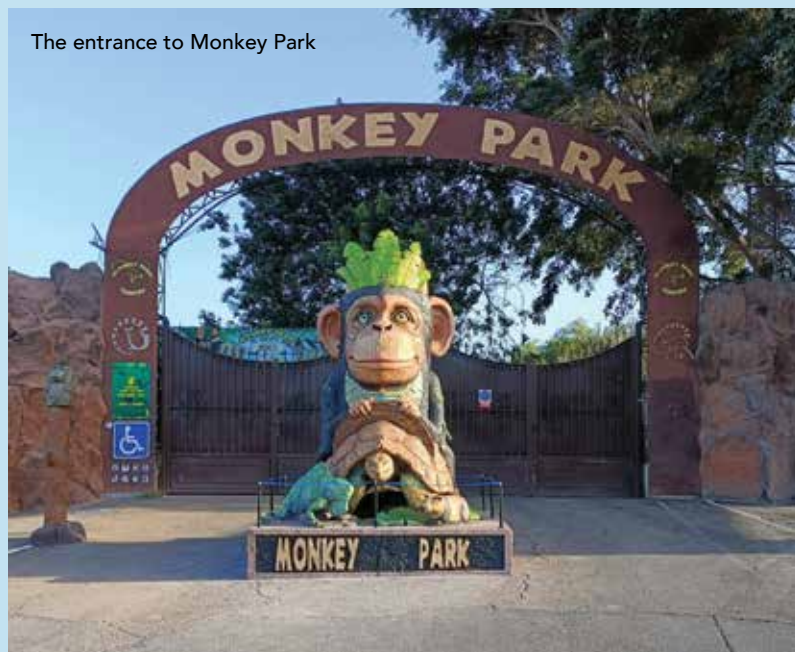
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a Bald Eagle flew away, disappearing over a grove of trees, only to reappear after a while. These acts seem to be ‘voluntary’ – there is a motivation, goodies, the little pieces of food. Also, birds are not sitting in a cage; they are kept busy, an occupational therapy of sorts. Ten spoonbills have a role for the finale – they hop in to the arena; not a comical act but a hint that the show is coming to an end. Mingled in with them is an unexpected cameo appearance by a Straw-necked Ibis.

MONKEY PARK

I didn't get to Tenerife's other zoo, but Tim Brown visited in late January this year. Here is a short report from him: Situated a couple of miles down the mountainside from Jungle Park in a rather unattractive, scrubby area is Monkey Park, formerly known as Tenerife Zoo. It has been there for around 35 years occupying a long, narrow site of some five acres. Next door is the abandoned (and rather underwhelming when it was open) Cactus and Animal Park. I suspect this belongs, or at least belonged, to the zoo's ownership, because in early *International Zoo Yearbook* (IZY) entries they list a further 50 acres as being available. The Cactus Park has been left to rot for at least 20 years.

The entrance to Monkey Park



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The Jardin Botanico

For those into all aspects of natural history, the Jardin Botanico will fit the bill. Sparsely visited and filled with bird song, it is quite a switch from the animal-oriented parks. A young woman was lying down on a bench, something unthinkable in a busy zoo atmosphere. There is no greenhouse, possibly thanks to the mild climate. The collection appears cosmopolitan, with trees and shrubs from Australia, Indonesia and Mexico. Signage is basic with scientific names and geographical distribution.

Sometimes an illustration is used, for instance, when explaining how strangler figs propagate themselves. A towering example of one of these trees – *Ficus macrophylla* – stands in the middle of the botanical garden as if to claim the throne.

Visitors here appear to be eager learners with serious interest, a clear contrast with most zoo visitors who are geared more for entertainment. That comparison probably applies across ethnic, cultural and racial differences throughout the world.

From the very onset Tenerife Zoo listed its IZY speciality as primates, so the transition to its current name is not surprising. The zoo is quite near to the major tourist hub of Los Cristianos and quite clearly seeks to pull much of its clientele from that resort. It offers animal feeding via its own brand of comestibles, for instance, and these are very popular. In its early days such large species as Bornean Orangutan, Chimpanzee and Jaguar were kept there, but sensibly the danger level has been downscaled to a large number of Patas Monkeys and a lone male Entellus Langur. Rarities of the recent past such as Roloway Monkey, Northern Talapoin and Wolf's Guenon were nowhere to be seen.

This is basically a ‘cages’ zoo, but it is neatly laid out and rather clean: I suspect that over the years this element has changed for the better. Callitrichids inhabit glass-fronted, wire topped, perfectly adequate cages and there is significant repetition amongst the taxa; namely Golden-headed Lion Tamarin, Black Tufted-ear Marmoset, Geoffroy's Marmoset and Common Marmoset. The collection of primates is perhaps a dozen species these days. Birds occupy straightforward reasonable aviaries for the most part, showing species such as Ferruginous Pygmy Owl and Green Araçari, whilst the avian zoo-rarity of the collection – Rufous-vented Chachalaca (*Ortalis ruficauda*) – supposedly live in a Ring-tailed Lemur walk-through cage but could not be observed. Another row of walk-through aviaries contain Ring-tailed Lemurs too, and a few birds, but primarily innumerable Guinea Pigs. The delight of the general public with this cavy carnival could not be greater if it were a walk-through Dodo exhibit. Many purchased animal pellets could be seen scattered around the floor as the rodents gurgled in delight at the surfeit of nutrition. No Guinea Pig will starve here!

The reptile collection is small but interesting. Cuban Crocodiles live in a long reed-infested, open-air enclosure that is the first visitor exhibit. There is no Reptile House as such, but one open-topped corner held vivaria for no less than three taxa of *Uromastix* lizards, namely *acanthinura*, *flavifasciata* and *ocellata*. Of course, these agamids are very suited to the climate here and require little more than an enclosure and sand/soil substrates. They surround a Degu ‘mountain’ which offers more rodent proliferation.

I nearly forgot some lofty macaw/cockatoo aviaries, a spavined Black-crested Mangabey, Mandrills and White-handed Gibbons. All in all, enough to pleasantly occupy a couple of hours, but the fact that there is no café/restaurant indicates that visits might not be lengthy ones for most people. ■

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