

Amazing sights in our backyard

Column by John Wright (jrwright@puntagorda-chamber.com)
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It's truly amazing what we have in our backyard.

In recent articles, you may recall I have been telling you how the Punta Gorda Chamber has continued to grow in leaps and bounds, despite tough economic times for our small business community.

Among the list of recent additions last week was Octagon Wildlife Sanctuary. It was Sandy O'Grady of Suncoast One Title that first introduced me to Octagon recently. Having lived here for more than five years, I was mad at myself for never having known or visited this place before. I was so overwhelmed by my initial visit that, last Sunday, I took a second trip out to see the animals and enjoy the atmosphere that the owner, Lauri Caron, has created.

For anyone looking for a place to visit this summer, I strongly recommend taking a trip out there. They are open to the public Saturday and Sunday 11am-4pm or by private arrangement ahead of time by calling 239 534 1130. You can also visit their website at www.octagonwildlife.org.

From Punta Gorda, take US17 East, take a right on Bermont Road all the way to US31 South. Once on US31, watch out for the sign to Octagon. It will be a right turn onto Horseshoe Road, number 41660.

Octagon has a mission to provide a healthy recovery and living environment for abandoned and abused exotic animals. Currently they are housing over 200 animals that are all there because of neglect, abuse or abandonment of their previous owners.

Among the animals on view are lions, bears, tigers, cougars, primates and exotic birds.

When I got to meet Lauri Caron, I was immediately smitten by her compassion, knowledge and dedication to the cause for which she stands. As a Non-For-Profit organization, every single penny raised by Octagon goes back to the animals in her care.

When you walk through the park with Lauri, shaded by a canopy of lush trees, I was amazed at the animals' reaction to her presence. They all know she is their savior and hold her in such respect. Each one has a compelling story of survival and recovery, yet all of them look content and happy to be where they have now settled.

Without Lauri's commitment and dedication, these animals would all have been euthanized. Once you visit and see for yourself these beautiful creatures in such a great, tranquil environment, you'll all pick your own favorites, but I fell for Sahara – the fennec fox and Darwin, a 14 year old male Bengal/Siberian tiger.

Spike, the baboon, is amazing too. His previous owners had him neutered and gave him half of a lobotomy! He now enjoys a great lifestyle and even has his own TV to watch in his enclosure, to keep his brain active!

The great thing about Octagon is that it is ideal for adults and kids of all ages. Since I was so inept at not knowing about this place before, I hope by reading this you'll be encouraged to take the trip out there to

enjoy time and time again these wondrous animals - all of which is right in our own backyard and a very pleasant drive away!

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