

= HOTEL REVIEW =

Gir Lion Lodge, ZSL London Zoo

Rebecca Armstrong gets up and close and personal with the king (and queens) of the jungle



The living quarters, like the lion exhibit itself, take an Indian theme

Set in the leafy oasis of London's Regents Park, Gir Lion Lodge doesn't feel as though it's just a whisker away from some of the capital's busiest streets. I have to warn you, though, some of the residents are very noisy – and they're all beastly. Which is exactly why guests to ZSL London Zoo's new overnight accommodation are there.

ZSL's Zoo Lates and Sunset Safaris have seen visitors flock to see animals after hours, and now the zoo, first opened in 1828, is offering bed, breakfast and dinner six nights a week until December.

Delicious though the food is, everyone is here for the animals. As well as sunset, torchlight and morning tours, all of which take place after closing or before opening time, one of the draws of staying over is that just metres from your bed are the living quarters of a pride of lions. If there is anything more thrilling than hearing the throaty roar of a lion vibrating through the dark as you clean your teeth, I don't think I could cope with it. I'm secretly thankful for the guard at the gate of the lodge area.

If feeding the warthogs in the afternoon and watching aardvarks snuffle for their supper at dusk was charming (not to mention the wonder of seeing two female lions recline in the glow of late-afternoon sun), then lingering over

morning coffee while penguins hit the beach is the perfect start to the day. Spotting a dozing sloth is a great antidote to city stress and being within stroking distance – strictly prohibited, of course – of ring-tailed lemurs waiting for their breakfasts feels like a window into a normally hidden world.

Gir Lion Lodge comprises nine cabins housed within the Land of the Lions exhibit. Inspired by India's Gir Forest, where ZSL works with local communities and rangers to protect the only wild population of Asiatic lions, this area of the zoo is a riot of colour, ersatz Indian signage, a samosa stall and piped-in tropical birdsong. The

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latter is baffling, given the proximity to a pond full of flamingos and an enclosure of vocal parrots. Still, the best thing about staying at the zoo is the intimacy with the animals you experience when the crowds have gone, as well as being told insider secrets by the endlessly upbeat guides.

Off-peak it's incredible value for two days at the zoo, two meals, a drink on arrival, three tours and a night's accommodation.

Our brightly painted twin-bed lodge – named Kingfisher – was a tiny delight. Supremely comfortable beds with pristine duvets like white clouds, a spotless bathroom and thoughtful touches (towels made into swans; tea, coffee and biscuits) made what could have felt like a holiday chalet into a luxurious night. While the lions didn't act as an alarm clock – too much late night prowling, perhaps – the sound of the flamingos floating through the open window made me think I was waking up a long way from Camden. THE INDEPENDENT

Gir Lion Lodge is at ZSL London Zoo, London NW1 (zsl.org)

ESSENTIAL INFORMATION

Lodges, which sleep two, start at £378 off-peak for two people, including dinner and breakfast, and entry to ZSL's zoos on both days. There are designated family and adult-only nights. Lodges include a sofa bed. Free parking is included. No pets are allowed.

ACCESS

One lodge is fully wheelchair-accessible. Wheelchair users can bring a carer and receive a 30 per cent discount on the full price of a lodge.



Nakar Hotel Palma

The Nakar, opening this week, is well placed on the bustling Avenida Jaume III for shopping and sightseeing, while the rooftop infinity pool offers views from the cathedral to the Med.

Doubles from £145 with breakfast (designhotels.com)



Pure Salt Garonda Bay of Palma

The 115-room, adults-only hotel looks directly out over the Playa de Palma, and is just a short drive from the city centre. There's also a spa with an indoor pool in the basement.

Doubles from €200 (£157) with breakfast (puresaltgaronda.com)



Fleming Hostel Palma

This 39-room hostel is bang on trend with its judicious use of dark metal, beamed ceilings and encaustic floor tiles. Guests also have the use of a sun deck, reading room and shared kitchen.

Beds from €28 (£22)pp (fleminghostel.com)



Barcelo Formentor Port de Pollença

Opened in the 1920s, this hotel resides in a Unesco-listed nature reserve by the sea. Last year, it added six villas, each with their own charm. THE INDEPENDENT

Two-bedroom villa from €320 (£250) with breakfast (formentorvillas.com)

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LUXURY

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Simon Calder

THE MAN WHO PAYS HIS WAY

In (futile) pursuit of the four-mile-a-minute supertrain

Much about the fastest railway on the planet is odd. To see how blurry the outside world looks at nearly four times the motorway speed limit in Britain, fly to Shanghai. The Maglev link runs from the Chinese city's main international airport, Pudong. It is a magnetic levitation line that reduces friction by suspending carriages just above the track. That enables the train to run at 267mph, covering more than four miles in a minute.

Yet the elevated line doesn't even go to the centre of Shanghai. It stops about four miles short beside a suburban Metro station called Longyang Road. It's the equivalent of the Heathrow Express ending its journey at Ealing Broadway, obliging luggage-burdened passengers to change to the London Underground. And the line from somewhere to nowhere is only 19 miles long. It's frankly weird to offer astonishingly fast trains on a track so short that the time saved compared with a conventional train is negligible. And the speed of Mach 0.35 (more than one third the speed of sound at sea level) can be attained only briefly before the slowdown begins.

I've travelled on the Maglev, but only at 186mph. That might



sound churlish, but for the past few decades I could do three miles a minute any day of the week, strikers permitting, on a French TGV. I wanted to get closer to experiencing what life is like inside a Large Hadron Collider, when time outside appears to slows down.

But because of something else really odd about the Maglev, I missed the chance. Drivers put the train fully through its paces only a dozen times a day in each direction: the first eight trains after 9am, then the first four after 3pm. For the rest of the day it behaves like an ordinary high-speed train. So you have to time your touchdown

carefully. Of the 24 flights a week to Shanghai, only the Virgin Atlantic afternoon departure from Heathrow delivers the supertrain-spotter to Pudong at the right time to connect to the railway rocket: 9.25am.

What could possibly go wrong? Well, the Chinese airport is right next to the East China Sea, and sometimes the morning fog rolls in. So it proved for flight VS250. At about the time the Boeing 787 should have begun its descent, the captain turned the plane around and headed for Nanjing, half-an-hour away. Unfortunately, by the time we got close, Nanjing had decided it had had enough diversions for one morning – and

the pilots set a course for Beijing, 700 miles back the way we had come. We were now heading for the capital – where Virgin has neither representation nor a ground handler.

We landed at Beijing and were directed to a remote stand, where we waited for another 80 minutes for refuelling before the two-hour flight to Shanghai. The crew were close to reaching their maximum hours, which would have made things very messy. Fortunately, we made it to Shanghai, after the longest time I have ever been incarcerated in a plane: 16 hours. But by then I had comprehensively missed the morning Maglev's turn of speed.

I could have waited another hour for the afternoon high-velocity performance, but my first day's plans for Shanghai were in tatters. So I settled for the 186mph version.

I discovered one more odd thing about the Maglev: it drops you beside a suburban shopping centre with no clues about how to find the Metro station. To go back to the Ealing Broadway analogy, it's as though someone has removed all the signs showing the way from trains to Tube.

Looking back, it all seems a blur – but one induced by jet fatigue rather than a hyperfast hover. THE INDEPENDENT