

## The Wild Side of Life

*An African-style safari, in Texas*

**NATURAL BRIDGE WILDLIFE RANCH**, a 400-acre, drive-through safari park north of San Antonio, heralds spring with three new attractions: a new restaurant, an expanded petting zoo, and an open-air, cage-free habitat—dubbed Lemur Island—for the ranch's growing troop of Madagascar ring-tailed lemurs (shown at right).

Spring is a good time to visit, as the ranch's zebras, emus, elk, gazelles, giraffes, and other creatures begin to slough off winter and luxuriate in warmer weather. Calves and other animal babies abound, as well—keep a lookout for young zebras, addax and eland antelope, and baby donkeys. As you take the 4.5-mile drive, proceed slowly; around almost every corner you'll witness mating rituals, territorial disputes, and other marvels of animal behavior.

Which brings us to lemur stink fights. Lemurs, it turns out, use scent glands—located behind a spur-like fingernail on the inside of their wrists—to mark territory when they're not sunning, snoozing, or grooming each other. Defensive males will often impregnate their tails with scent and wave them at opponents in a gasconading gesture that intrigues kids and adults alike.

Call 830/438-7400; [www.wildliferanchtexas.com](http://www.wildliferanchtexas.com).

—Lori Moffatt



First stop, directly across Caddo Street from the hotel, I found another restored structure built by A. J. Wright. Known as Wright Plaza, it now houses a small mall with a restaurant, several apparel boutiques, and two portrait studios—one for artsy photographs and one for Old West shots.

On the side of a nearby building, I was amazed by the giant mural painted by well-known Cleburne artist Stylee Read. The 216-foot-long work depicts local history, from early explorers and Caddo settlements to courthouses, pioneers, the Chisholm Trail, and railroad culture to 21st-Century gas drilling. One section highlights Slat's Rodgers, the maverick Cleburne airman who in 1912 constructed possibly the first airplane built in Texas, and A.J. Wright, standing by a Chaparral automobile manufactured in Cleburne.

Though it appears the mural is painted on a brick wall, Read actually painted 10,000 bricks on the stucco wall.

I learned more about Cleburne's past at the Layland Museum of History, on Caddo Street just north of the courthouse square. Housed in one of Texas' remaining Carnegie Library buildings, the 1905 Greek Revival structure is likely the only museum in Texas named for a plumber.

Up the steps and past the stately columns, a photo blowup of W.J. Layland greets visitors in the museum's entryway. "Mr. Layland would close the plumbing business every summer and take one of his eight children on a tour of the West, collecting Native American artifacts and other relics," explains museum director Julie Baker. "He would display the materials in the shop, and any time a child came in, he would stop and

show them all the artifacts." Much of the collection eventually found a home in the museum, including an 1820s grain jar from Acoma Pueblo and a circa-1900 cradleboard crafted by Sioux or Cheyenne.

Encompassing prehistory to the 1970s, the museum also exhibits a mammoth tusk found in a field in the Johnson County town of Godley. And in addition to all the photos, mementos, and antique items that depict local life back in the day, the building itself is a museum piece. "We're restoring the interior to historic colors, and replacing some lighting with Edison bulbs," adds Baker, pointing to the retro sci-fi-looking ceiling lights with crackling filaments.

Behind the Layland, on Main Street, the museum's recently opened Smith History Center features a research library in a restored 1914 commercial structure. The Smith Center's window display really wows at night with neon signs that light up vintage autos to re-create a succession of automotive-age time periods.

Every vintage Cleburne building seems to have a story. At the Comic Boxx on East Henderson, a repository of pop-culture memorabilia that occupies a former automobile dealership, folks can show you the elevator that lifted Pontiacs to the second floor in 1927. The tiny Burger Bar on North Anglin housed the pioneer wagon yard and livery stable office (and later a taxi dispatcher). And on Main, a brightly painted secondhand bookstore called Bill's Books is housed in the first commercial brick building in downtown Cleburne.

Ready for dinner, I headed for the Caddo Street Grill, which offers a varied menu of steaks, burgers, wings, seafood, salads, fajitas, and more. Sorely tempted by the salmon—not to mention the General Cleburne Center-Cut Steak, named for town namesake Confederate General Patrick Cleburne—I opted instead for the zesty, mesquite-grilled chicken breast and vegetable plate, the latter a tasty mix of brown rice, broccoli, cauliflower, and carrots. The restaurant's adjacent sports bar features a smaller Stylee Read mural along with a bank of high-def TVs. On

the night I visited, excited fans converged here to watch the Texas Rangers defeat the New York Yankees and earn the team's first-ever trip to the World Series.

After dinner, I strolled over to yet another Howard Dudley restoration, the Plaza Theater, housed in a former Western Auto store on Main Street, to take in a spirited performance of the gospel musical *Smoke on the Mountain*. The talented Plaza cast delighted an all-ages audience, and an update on the Rangers game was

The spacious, inviting lobby made me wish I had time to sit and daydream.

announced at intermission. (Another local theater troupe, the Greater Cleburne Carnegie Players, performs nearby at the new Performing Arts Center, offering fare ranging from *Dracula* to *It's a Wonderful Life*.)

That evening, I conked out fast in the Liberty's luxurious bedding. The next morning, before leaving town, I parked at Buffalo Creek BBQ on US 67 and spent a few moments at an adjacent spot on Buffalo Creek. An historical marker explains that a spring at the site was instrumental in the town's founding and that Sam Houston often visited the spot after traveling to nearby Alvarado to see his daughter. And like Sam, I thought, I'll be back. **TH**

### Cleburne

is about a 30-minute drive south of Fort Worth, at the intersection of US 67 and Texas 171, about 11 miles west of I-35 West. For more information, visit the Cleburne Chamber of Commerce, 1511 W. Henderson, or call 888/525-3287; [www.visitcleburne.com](http://www.visitcleburne.com).

