

We've been to the zoo, zoo, zoo

Before we went to the zoo this weekend, I asked our boys which animals they were excited to see. I thought they might talk about lions and giraffes, elephants and bears, maybe even a crocodile.

"A turtle," Leo said. Daniel—who likes birds—asked to see a duck and a goose. Somewhere during that conversation, I must also have mentioned that the zoo had a train. When one of the staff asked Leo what he had come to see when we were walking in, he was ready. "The train," he said.

So, after impatiently stopping to see one of the iron lions near the entrance and riding the tram, we skipped the polar bears and went to find seats on the Jones Falls Zephyr.



I vaguely remember a train from my childhood visits to the zoo, but this is a different train, and none of us had ridden it. This was Leo's third trip to the zoo, Daniel's first—and their father's first trip since childhood.

We happen to have a few train fans in our family, and they thoroughly enjoyed the ride. The adults may have been wondering where the animals were—you don't see many from the train—but our boys didn't care. They thought it was terrific to clickety-clack across a bridge, hear the conductor say "All aboard!", and pull back into the station. Leo—who is making plans to visit a Chicago museum that houses the Burlington Zephyr—loved the train's name. He would have been content to ride it all day.



That's the difference between being a child who can see the wonder in the small moments and being a grown-up who wants to milk the cost of zoo admission. I wanted the boys to see the Children's Zoo and the African exhibits. The boys would have been content to ride the train, eat lunch, ride the train again, and get dessert.

Still, they had said they wanted to see some animals. So we set off through the zoo.



We did, in fact, see a turtle—a statue Leo got to sit on.

And Daniel saw not just a duck, but a duck who even snapped at a snake who swam up to him. “That snake makes me shiver,” said Leo. Me too.



Leo climbed into the pretend nests and turtle shells and stepped across the lily pads. As I expected, Daniel was cautious and didn’t want to pretend to be an animal. He was curious, though, about many of the creatures we encountered.

There was the elephant who was munching on grass while taking a bath.



There was the female giraffe who stood aloofly looking down at us.



There were colorful birds galore for our bird-loving Daniel.



And there were goats just waiting to be petted and brushed in the zoo farmyard. “Oh, they’re so cute,” said Leo. Daniel, who likes his animals from a distance, wasn’t sure about the goats.



But he found the courage to take a plastic brush and touch the goat gently with it. I was astounded.



If you asked the boys what they remembered from our zoo trip, Leo would certainly talk about the train—and he might tell you about a tiny spider he watched crawling up a tree. Daniel—if he knew a little more English—would probably talk about his first taste of cotton candy, or perhaps the robin redbreast he saw, or maybe even the backhoe he watched digging a hole.

As for me, I'd describe the wonder of experiencing the zoo through my sons' eyes. They make every experience—no matter how ordinary—novel and special. Whether we're taking a walk, riding in the car, checking the mail, even answering the phone—it's all wonderful and new. And as we watch them growing up, I feel sure of one thing. We're in for a wild ride.