



WAKE UP WITH THE WILDLIFE ON A WEST MIDLAND SAFARI

To paraphrase Dr Dolittle, if we could talk to the animals at West Midlands Safari Park, they would have some very interesting tales to tell about recent exciting developments there.



Chris Kelly, Head of Midland Safari Park

Imagine opening your curtains on a morning and being greeted by a cheetah or an elephant, rhino or giraffe? For those of us who've never been on safari, this is the next best thing. Experience for guests at the Park's new lodges. By April 2022, there will be eighteen luxury lodges with bespoke animal paddocks at the Bewdley site, all based on authentic African design. Demand has been exceptional, with the cheetah and elephant lodges sold out for two years, and ambitious ride high thanks to the multi-million investment programme. MD Chris Kelly joined the team in January 2020, having previously been a director at Port Lympne Island and Reserve, in Kent. "I had nearly three months to get the project off the ground before Covid hit," he explained, "so we had time to sort out issues around planning and procurement, design and operations, before work came to a halt in April 2020."

"The contractors had to get everything up again when they returned. But credit to design that the lodges wouldn't go ahead unless the animal enclosures were completed too."

The new Elephant House, for example, was built at a cost of over £2m, before attention turned to the accompanying lodge. "Cheetahs had very specific requirements for each enclosure. The elephants even have their own jungle swimming pool, although they are a bit reluctant to dip their trunks in yet, for reasons unknown."

Cottages with an enriched habitat for these cheetah little mammals. "It's all been great fun," Chris adds, "and the plan now is to build four lodges each for giraffes, rhinos and hippos, all with purpose-built animal housing on the grounds."

"We're also hoping to build four lion lodges this time next year, plus eight private lodges dotted along the lake, complete with an island for exclusive monkey use."

"Our animals and their environments are paramount to us," he continues. "If we've had to remove trees, we've planted the same number plus an extra 20%. Bat and swift boxes are incorporated in lodge roofs, and there's nesting boxes in the trees."

"Specific needs are catered for, so for example, red pandas love cool weather for most, even when it's freezing. As soon as it gets warm, they come down into



her house where she's got nice cool air conditioning."

Despite ongoing work, the animals take happiness of us all, and adapted to their new surroundings overnight. Even during lockdown, nothing changed for them, other than they got a bit frustrated that there were no safari feeding sessions.

"Our wildlife team have been brilliant throughout. As key workers, it was business as usual for them, but in other areas, the furlough scheme was fantastic and helped us avoid redundancies."

Thanks to unwavering support from the Licensing Group (which also owns Dungeness Park, the Somerset hills

and several European leisure parks), Midland Safari Park has come through the worst of the pandemic. Chris also acknowledges the Charitable Foundation's support in moving animals across the country and reworking "which is brilliant". As for the future, the Park hopes to return to pre-pandemic visitor levels very soon, Chris says. "Day numbers and business events aren't quite the same but I'm confident they'll bounce back with confidence given."

In fact, Chris's only concern is the lack of shortage, as experienced in many sectors.

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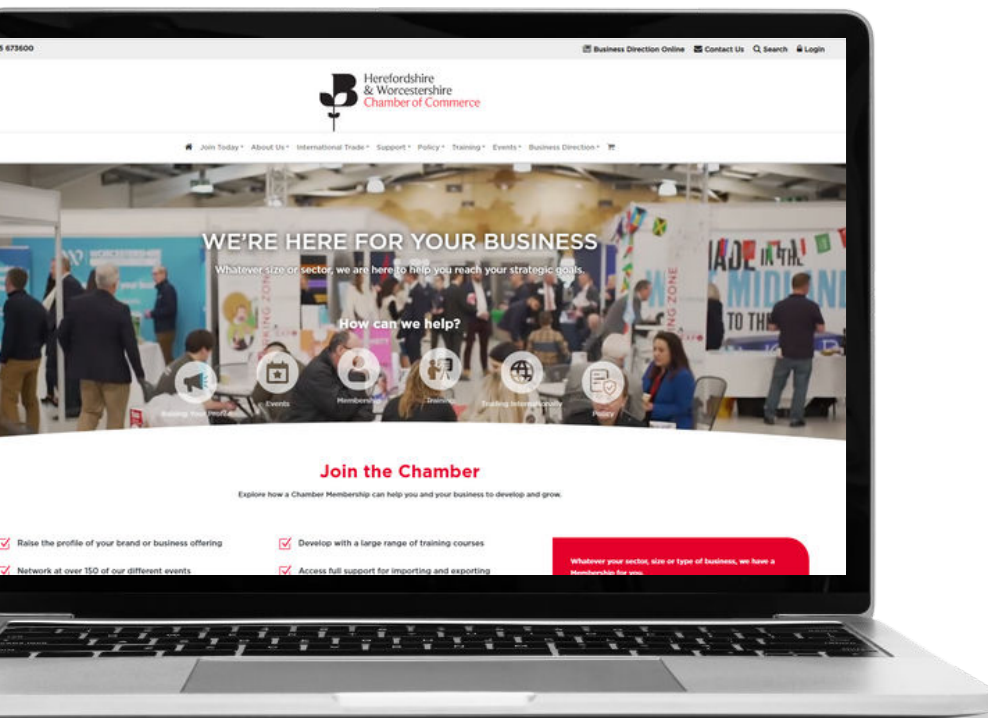
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