

SAFARI PARK ST.VRAIN, FRANCE

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In January 1997 a good friend of mine asked if I would like to spend a weekend visiting St. Vrain Safari Park, situated south of Paris. The trip was proposed and organised with the intent of offering advice to a French Baroness, on matters concerning the animals held in her safari park. Little did I realise what I was letting myself in for.

I had at the time never heard of this park, which was located just south of Orly airport on the E15. As is not unusual in France, the train services were disrupted due to strike action so the very quick service connecting Cologne to Paris was not an option. Instead we had to fly to Orly with a break in Brussels, which meant that flying was no quicker than taking the train would have been. We arrived on what was a wet and cold February day.

Awaiting us was a taxi that took us directly away from what appeared to be a very oriental, drab looking, part of the City on to the motorway, where we quickly arrived in a quiet, rural, area. Outside a large farmhouse we were met by a tall, slim, lady who was very business-like and formal.

We were escorted into her office at the back of her house and our conversation started immediately. The first shock for me was that she was actually looking for a manager to run the park for her; this I had not been told in advance. Whilst listening, I scanned her bookshelves, as I believe it gives you an indication of their intensity of interest. I did not see one zoo book in English, be it an identification guide or general literature. Neither did I recognise any French zoo literature, but many antiquarian philosophical books. There were a few photos of a tall well-dressed man playing with young lions, that I realised was her recently deceased husband, who had run the park, which was now the Baronesses responsibility. Our conversation ran on for about two hours and I came to the conclusion that Baroness de Mortemart knew, and had visited, a few zoological gardens. I asked why she had not approached the two Paris zoos to help but she indicated that they looked down with arrogant disapproval on her husband's venture. She was also somewhat vague about approaching some of France's

other privately run zoos. Later on, in further conversations, the Baroness told me her family was involved in banking (my friend told me later that she had recently sold her stake in the Hennessy Cognac business to Guinness for many hundreds of millions). One of the few times that a definite smile appeared on her face was when in conversation Margaret Thatcher's name was mentioned!

The Chipperfield Organisation established the safari park in 1975 in collaboration with the Baron's family. In his book *My Wildlife* Jimmy Chipperfield described St. Vrain as follows, "*we found an establishment very like those at Longleat or Woburn, a chateau owned by a noble family, set in a lovely park graced by an exceptional amount of water*" covering an area of 130 hectares. The Baroness was of the opinion that the Chipperfield management was very heavy-handed and had now excluded them from any real decision making. At this time John Chipperfield ran the park management side of the business, including many other ventures around the world with the Hardwick Company, such as Safari World Bangkok, Thailand, where Peter Lichfield worked. In St. Vrain, Peter Larkin was responsible (he still lives in Germany, not far from Hodenhagen), having come over from Hodenhagen, Germany, with some of the animals. Hodenhagen was opened in 1974.

Roy Smith of INTERZOO (the respected animal transport firm which does most of the animal transport for the major zoos in Europe and around the world) and former Chipperfield employee told me that he remembers twenty-one White rhino leaving Hodenhagen for, amongst others, St. Vrain, Japan and Great Adventure, USA, which is another of the Chipperfield/Hardwick ventures. Hodenhagen was used as a staging post for various other enterprises with the American partner Hardwick. The late Paolo Sepe, owner of Hodenhagen, was deeply involved with the Hardwick's business venture (the company was an enterprise of the first national bank of America).

There was already a young British couple Helen and Richard Veal working at St. Vrain Safari Park. Richard had previously worked at both London and Jersey zoos, where, in 1992, he published an article in DODO 28 on the Malagasy giant jumping rat. I won't go into all of the background details but staying with them overnight and discussing all of the extreme problems prevailing within the park's management, it became evident that a union indoctrinated head keeper was a major hindrance, but by all means not the only issue.

Richard showed us around the park and a rather depressing picture of the place started to appear. Although to be fair the weather did not help in bringing the described picture from "*My Wildlife*" into view. The park was heavily wooded, which I am sure was a great asset in the summer heat, but with many trees down from recent storms a forester had been contracted to clear them. There were the usual drive-through areas with big cats: lions; wolves etc., but as the park was closed for winter there was an obvious mistrust of visitors and it took time to motivate somebody (a Portuguese keeper) to open the electric gates for us. The same happened again the next day when the Baroness drove us around the park in her small Renault – the same keeper wanted to know who she was driving around – and why!

Back with Richard and Helen, we were shown one adult hippo outside in his mud wallow; the temperature was 5 degrees centigrade. Helen was feeding various other hoof stock as they had no hay in their racks. In the food preparation area there was an elderly pair of Pileated gibbons being over-wintered, but missing digits, a textbook example of frost-bitten fingers.

Richard was cautious when taking us into the main building in the park, not wanting to be seen by his colleagues. It would not have been out of place in a rural farm setting and looked from the outside just like a large barn. Inside, in the darkness, on one side were two giraffes: 1.1. In the past a pure group of Rothschild's giraffe was kept here, then in 1987 the French park Le Boissiere received a pair of Rothschild's from St. Vrain 'Desire' and 'Essonce', to be followed by two females 'Noelle' and 'Charlotte', arriving at La Boissiere from St. Vrain in 1992 (born 1990,1991). Hybrid animals had also been kept with this group as other giraffes left St. Vrain in 1991 for Hermival with parentage from Kordofan/Rothschild. On the other side of the building, shackled and very nervous were three female Asian elephants, 'Momo' (born 1985), 'La Grande' (1982) and 'LaPetite' (1985; this female later killed a keeper at Port Lympne). They had not been outside for weeks as they could escape from their small enclosure. Only one keeper was accepted by them. These three arrived in a large import from the dealer Frans van den Brink between 1988-1990; in all he imported 40 elephants from Burma, selling them for 50,000DM to many zoos in Europe.

The next day we again viewed the park with the Baroness and were told that an animal dealer was catching up the baboons (over a hundred) for a medical research company, as the baboons had been a "problem" escaping etc. I did see a small Renault van and one man with a net, I would have liked to have seen how he managed to catch these baboons but we were kept well away from him, so I am not sure which species they kept. Viewing them from a distance they may have been Guinea baboons *Papio papio*. We then made our way to her office at the zoo entrance, a small, round African style wooden building. En route we passed by the first exhibit I liked, the lemur islands for ruffed and kattas (ring-tailed) situated in front of a nice simple restaurant that was beautifully and tastefully decorated. The Baroness told us that she had a very experienced chef running the gastronomic side of the business. By now I was worried and shocked by what I had seen and expressed my opinion. The second bombshell was about to be dropped when I said that not being the expert for elephants but knowing colleagues who were, under no circumstances could the management continue the way it had. A decision would have to be made to invest in another exhibit or to sell the animals, as being of good potential breeding age and of great interest to many zoos, she would certainly recoup her purchase price. After listening she told me that the three did not belong to her; her husband had a written contract with van den Brink to lease the animals, but he had all rights of sale. I left under the impression that she was not overly enthusiastic about keeping the park open.

After flying back to Germany, I approached my good friend of many years, Jurgen Schilfarth, one of the founders of the European Elephant Group, who was as surprised as we were about the elephant situation at St. Vrain and he promised to help find a solution for the three. A few nights later he rang and told me that both Aspinall's and Belfast Zoo would be interested and that I should phone John Strong, then animal manager at Belfast Zoo. John Strong had been in contact with the EEG since acquiring the elephant bull "Sahib" from Leipzig back in 1988. During his trips to Leipzig John had shown Irish courtesy by bringing gifts of Black and Decker drills for staff members, then in the GDR, a much sought after tool as the staff did not at that time have access to foreign currency. On the phone, John told me Twycross Zoo would be interested and was probably the only zoo in the UK that was in a position to pay cash for these animals, but he would talk with all parties interested and let me know. This he did, but told me that the actual price being asked was now very high and out of the question for all concerned, and Twycross was already in the process of

importing an elephant from India. In the meantime van den Brink had, among many interested parties, a circus in South America willing to pay his asking price of 300,000DM. After a year of intense negotiations a final agreement was reached with van den Brink and a new home was found, first in Ganserdork, Austria, being transferred in March 1998 (again a former safari park from the Chipperfield Organisation); on payment of the 300,000 DM by the 'Jumbo' Society 'Home of the Gray' in August 1998, ownership was formally sealed.

In the autumn of 1999 all three were transported to Port Lympne, after a short stopover, 'Momo' and 'La grande' returned to Ganserdorf; 'Momo' returning pregnant from 'Luka' unfortunately aborted. On the 7th of February 2000 'La petite' killed keeper Darren Cockrill "the exact circumstances of his death will never be known" quote from *Help* 22. After this for obvious reasons 'La petite' was eventually sent to Ramat Gan and in 2002 she gave birth to a calf sired by 'Bindu' (now a sire of many calves in Cologne Zoo) which she killed.

Her second calf, a female born 2006, she successfully reared. Unfortunately 'Momo' and 'La grande' had to be sold on to Terra Natura, Spain in 2005 after Ganserdorf had to call in the receiver. Laslo Torok the very respected elephant expert at the safari park (at present director in Veszprem Zoo, Hungary) was always very wary with 'La petite' as she had attacked him during her stay in Austria and it came as no great surprise to him that she later went on to kill somebody.

I am not sure if St. Vrain did re-open for visitors in 1998 but during the season the animals were dispersed to various zoos, the remaining White rhino bull 'Charlie' (supposedly arrived via Hagenbecks 25th December 1973 from South Africa, I assume this is a misleading quote, very probably meaning Hodenhagen?) went to Madrid Safari on the 20th December 1998.

I had asked John Strong to help the Baroness with suggesting new homes for the lions etc., he did mention that at the time, safari parks in Spain were looking for animals, so maybe that was the case? The French zoo historian Jonas Livet confirmed that all of the road signs, parking lot and (after looking over the perimeter fence) some of the buildings were still to be seen in 2010.