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SANCTUARY FOR THE SOUL

Spend your Vacation with Best Friends Animal Society

WRITTEN AND PHOTOS BY Kathryn van Rosendaal



Photo by Tairimi Swanson.



Photo by Gary Kalpakoff.

Nestled in the mountains of Southwest Utah, just beyond the eastern border of Zion National Park, lies a haven for all things furry and feathery. It is the sanctuary for Best Friends Animal Society, the heart of the non-profit's movement to create a world of No More Homeless Pets. And here in the aptly named Angel Canyon, the dogs and cats, rabbits and horses, parrots and ducks, pigs and goats and even the occasional bat have found a place to rest and heal.

Best Friends is more than just a place for animals. The society's mission is to find these animals homes, and that means they need to learn to trust and interact with people. And so the sanctuary is also a haven for animal lovers who want to pet rabbits, cuddle with cats, play with puppies, groom horses or simply catch a glimpse of a wild bird before it is re-released. Some come for a day, some for two. Others come for weeks or even months. It is, they admit, the perfect vacation where they can get away from their troubles while giving something back.

"The beauty is [Best Friends] is in the hub. You can volunteer here, then take a day trip to Zion or Lake Powell," says Patty Hegwood, Best Friends' Director of Volunteer and Visitor Engagement. "You can make this your home base for a whole vacation."

"It is particularly a good vacation for families," adds Silva Battista, one of the society's founders and the Director of Celebrity Relationships. "The husband may want to work in cats and the wife wants to work with bunnies. You can also go hiking or do other things, then come together in the evening. There is a lot of diversity here."

An Animal Odyssey

Best Friends Animal Society thrives off of its volunteers and thousands visit the sanctuary every year. Fortunately they have Hegwood and her staff of volunteer coordinators to keep things running smooth.

"Our volunteers come from all over the world and we want to make sure they have the best possible experience," says Hegwood. "To do that you really need to plan in advance."

The first step, she says, is to send an e-mail to the volunteer coordinators to get the process started. They will walk you through the whole process – from getting the paperwork filled out to choosing which areas in the sanctuary you would like to visit. The staff can also help get you signed up for tours, workshops and classes you may want to take part in during your visit.

"There is a whole host of things you can do," says Hegwood. "You can read to animals and spend one-on-one time. You can sit with shy animals and get them used to being with a person. Or you can pick up a dog and go on one of the hiking trails. You have a good time and it increases the animals' quality of life. Their stress goes down and their adoptability and health goes up."

Top: Lorena Staples of LaVerkin, Utah, makes friends with Incitato, a resident of Horse Haven.

Bottom: The cafeteria at Angel Village offers a stunning view of the canyon.



Walker is always on the job as greeter at Old Friends in Dogtown.

DOGTOWN

"The most awesome thing at Best Friends is the dogs," says John Garcia, Dogtown manager. "We have literally everything, from walking dogs to behavior modification and education. We have puppy classes and demos. You can do all the dirty work or just pet the dogs."

Dogtown has anywhere from 450 to 500 dogs at any given time and they all need love so that is a big part of what volunteers do. After watching a short orientation video, you can dive in and help socialize puppies, clean kennels, or go on a long walk with a new furry friend. And once you've volunteered at Dogtown, you can check out a dog for a day outing or a sleepover. It sounds like all fun and games, but the outings are important to getting a dog adopted. After interacting with the dog one-on-one on a hiking trail, on a car ride, sleeping over in a cabin or sitting at a sidewalk table at a café, you fill out a questionnaire on how the dog reacted to its new surroundings. That info is then used to match the dog to the right home.

"Without volunteers we wouldn't be able to do what we do," says Garcia.

CAT WORLD

"We're more relaxed here," says Michelle Warfle, Cat World Manager. "There's not as much noise here and we're more laid back. This is the perfect place to de-stress; petting a cat is great stress relief and the purr is calming. Volunteering in Cat World is the perfect relaxing vacation."

Volunteer time at Cat World is very flexible. Different tasks and areas are highlighted during orientation, then you get to pick where you will go and what you'll do. If the weather is crappy, you can stay inside and if it's nice you can go outside in one of the catteries or take one of the harness-trained cats for a walk. You can clean cat boxes, groom cats or simply sit in one of the chairs – each room has one – and wait for someone to jump into your lap for cuddles. Cats also can be checked out for stayovers, so you can pick a favorite and snuggle all night long. Like with a dog sleepover, you fill out a questionnaire afterward that can help that cat get into a new home. Of the approximately 500 cats currently at Cat World, 100 of them can take part in a slumber party.



Augusta DeLisi of Chicago takes Bob for a walk.

WILD FRIENDS

"What makes Wild Friends fun is that we have so many different species," says Wildlife Rehabilitator Barbara Weider. "You can work directly with ducks, pigeons, peafowl and geese. People don't realize how much personality ducks and geese have and you can tell how happy they are when they get a fresh pond."

Wild Friends has much more than waterfowl. There are minks escaped from backyard fur farms; owls, falcons and ravens that have been injured and can't be re-released; and rabbits that have been hit by cars. Regulations don't let volunteers get hands-on with the wilder residents, but you can still see them and help with feeding and cleaning. And because Wild Friends is such a small department, you get to work one-on-one with a caregiver and ask all the questions you want. If you have construction or DIY experience, you can also help build or expand animal enclosures, which is a constant job with so many different animals to take care of.



A wild turkey visits the residents of Wild Friends.



Wendy Hatchel shows off one of the residents of Parrot Garden.

PARROT GARDEN

"We play here," says Jacque Johnson, Parrot Garden Manager. "Parrots are more intelligent than dogs – they're scary intelligent sometimes – and the birds love it when you laugh, sing or talk to them. We encourage silliness ... and we always have really good snacks in the kitchen."

Their intelligence can make parrots hard to handle at times. They make instant decisions on who they like and some are male or female specific so a tour is the first order of business. And they can be loud, messy and destructive, especially if they're bored, so cleaning is a big part of volunteering at Parrot Garden. Each of the cages and bowls are cleaned out every single day, but it is far from menial labor. The birds are colorful and loud and singing and talking to them really is encouraged. They get bored easily and the interaction keeps the parrots entertained and healthy.

After the cleaning is done, you can help make toys for the birds, usually food wrapped in different materials to simulate foraging. And the more complicated you make it, the better; these loud, colorful birds can figure out a combination lock.



A custom gate leads visitors to Angels Rest. Photo by Tammi Swanson.

There are seven areas in the sanctuary where you can volunteer – Dogtown, Cat World, Parrot Garden, Piggy Paradise, Horse Haven, Bunny House and Wild Friends – so there really are plenty of activities to choose from. And you can plan your whole visit in one or two areas – who doesn't want to spend three days playing with puppies? – or you can experience the whole sanctuary.

"You can make it an odyssey through all the animals and make a lot of new friends," says Hegwood.

Home Away From Home

Once you've planned your volunteer time at Best Friends, you need to figure out the rest of your vacation, including where to stay. And there's quite a bit to choose from. There are cabins and cottages available in the sanctuary, as well as a few RV spots. Those can be booked by e-mailing cottages@bestfriends.org. Or you can stay in one of the many hotels or Bed & Breakfasts in nearby Kanab. Many of them offer a discount for vacationers who are visiting Best Friends.

You can also wander a little farther afield and get lodging at the Zion Ponderosa Ranch Resort on the eastern edge of Zion National Park (www.zionponderosa.com) or choose a camping spot in Zion or nearby Coral Pink Sand Dunes State Park.

"If your accommodations are pet-friendly you can book a sleepover," says Hegwood. "You can take a dog, a cat or even a pig. It gives the animal something cool and new and you get to meet a different animal."

"We have 100 cats right now who can go on sleepovers," says Michelle Warfle, Cat World Manager. "It is a wonderful way to get a cat out of the shelter and into a home environment. It is wonderful for the cat and wonderful for you."

And if you need a break from the animals for just a bit, the sanctuary is located in the middle of the Southwest's most beautiful landscapes. Bryce Canyon, Cedar Breaks, Lake Powell and the North Rim of the Grand Canyon are all day-trip distance.

"The natural landscape is the best. I mean, oh my gosh, the incredible scenery!" says Dogtown Manager John Garcia. "Some people don't take enough time here; they only stay two days. Try two weeks. Some come for months at a time and still don't see all there is to see."

Beyond Angel Canyon

The sanctuary at Angel Canyon is the showpiece of Best Friends Animal Society, but it is only the headquarters for the group's work.

"Early on we learned we couldn't do it by ourselves," says Gregory Castle, Best Friends CEO and one of the co-founders. "We could have done sanctuaries all over the country. But we decided to support others, other organizations, to save more animals."

In addition to volunteering in the different areas at the sanctuary, visitors can also take part in classes

"You definitely want to volunteer with bunnies," says Debby Widolf, Rabbit Department Manager. "They're softer and they're not as loud. You always need to have a camera because there's all kinds of cuteness here. But that doesn't mean it's just for girls. We have four guys working here (at the Bunny House) and they'll call you over to see something cute. You can still be a manly man and work in bunnies."

There are a lot of jobs to do in the Bunny House, not the least of which is cleaning litter boxes, scooping the runs, sweeping, mopping and doing laundry. But your biggest job as a volunteer is to get the rabbits used to being around different people. Most rabbits don't like to be picked up and they don't go for walks, but they still have a lot of love to give and they need to be well socialized to get adopted. A good part of that is simply sitting in one of the rabbit runs talking, reading out loud or handing out greens and treats. It takes time to earn a rabbit's trust, but it's worth the effort when one finally comes up to you and takes that tidbit from your hand.



Wilson waits for a treat in Bunny House.



Mia Swanson of St. George, Utah, says hello to Jack. Photo by Tammi Swanson.

PIGGY PARADISE

"Pigs are smart," says Patty Platia, Caregiver and Office Manager for Piggy Paradise. "They're smarter than most dogs and most people don't realize that they're also very clean. You can take them for walks or sit and pet them. They're just as friendly as other pets."

Most of the pigs in Piggy Paradise are potbellied pigs and they wound up homeless not because they were bad tempered or ill mannered, but because they grew to be too big or their owners didn't realize their city didn't allow pigs as pets. As a volunteer at Piggy Paradise, you will do some cleaning and feeding, but you will also get to spend time giving love to these intelligent, sensitive animals. They need to go for walks to keep in shape and they need baths to keep them clean and healthy. And, of course, you will learn about these often misunderstood animals. Some of the pigs can even go on stayovers and by taking one out overnight you can help that piggy get adopted into the perfect home.

HORSE HAVEN

"Who wouldn't want to spend time with horses?" says Jackie Mawhinney, Caregiver at Horse Haven. "They are the most beautiful animals. They're majestic and strong and just wonderful."

Volunteering at Horse Haven is a lot of hard work, but it's worth it to work with these noble animals. You will help with the daily chores – feeding and watering the animals, mucking stalls and pastures and grooming – but you will also get to spend time just sharing some together time. Just like with any other animal, these horses need to learn that people are OK and the more people they learn to trust, the more likely it is that they can be adopted into a home.

And Horse Haven isn't just horses. There are burros and mules as well as sheep and goats. Each animal needs individual attention to help them recover from a medical condition or simply learn to trust people. You can't ride a goat, but you can take one for a walk – how's that for a vacation story?

Photo by Tammi Swanson.

Giulia Staples of LaVerkin, Utah, spends quality time with Chewie.



IN THE AREA

You don't have to spend your entire vacation in the sanctuary. Here are just a few of the wonderful places you can visit as a day trip from Best Friends.

Kanab – The closest town to the Best Friends' sanctuary is called "Little Hollywood" because so many films have been made in the area. And with a population of only 4,300, it still has an Old West feel. Visit www.visitkanab.info.

Zion National Park – The east entrance to Zion National Park is only about 35 miles from the entrance to the sanctuary. Here you will experience towering sandstone cliffs cut by the Virgin River. Visit www.nps.gov/zion.

Bryce Canyon National Park – About 75 miles from the sanctuary is Bryce Canyon and its iconic spires of colored rock. Visit www.nps.gov/brca.

Coral Pink Sand Dunes State Park – The pink, red and white off-road paradise of Coral Pink Sand Dunes is less than 20 miles from the sanctuary. Visit stateparks.utah.gov/parks/coral-pink.

Cedar Breaks National Monument – The "Circle of Painted Cliffs" is popular among sightseers, hikers and photographers for its scenery and diversity of wildlife. And it's only about 40 miles from Best Friends. Visit www.nps.gov/cebr.

North Rim of the Grand Canyon – The largest natural tourist attraction in the U.S. is just 80 road miles south of Best Friends. From the North Rim it is a straight shot down to the bottom of the canyon, offering breathtaking views. Visit www.nps.gov/grca.

Lake Powell/Glen Canyon Recreation Area – If water sports are your thing, you can drive 70 miles south and east to Lake Powell and enjoy boating, jet skiing and swimming. Visit www.nps.gov/glca.

and workshops, then take that knowledge home with them. There are short 1-hour classes such as Horse Grooming 101, FeLV (feline leukemia virus) Cat Chat and An Introduction to the Wonderful Elusive Rabbit. And there are multi-day workshops on How To Start an Animal Sanctuary and Art for the Animals.

"It's a kind of pollination," says Hegwood. "You spread that information everywhere you go."

Best Friends has "pollinated" well beyond Angel Canyon. The society now has outreach programs in Los Angeles, New York and Salt Lake City and is starting programs in Chicago and Las Vegas. And through its outreach and networking programs, Best Friends has the potential to help animals in every community in the United States.

"We can't do it all," says Castle. "But we can try to put people in touch with their local resources."

THE MORE WE CAN GENERATE INVOLVEMENT IN PEOPLE, IN LOCAL COMMUNITIES, THE MORE WE CAN DO."

It's wonderful to have people come volunteer at the sanctuary, says Hegwood, "but we really want to get people involved in their own community."

To help with that involvement, Best Friends has developed programs such as Network Charities to help small, all-volunteer rescue groups that don't have all the resources they need. They also offer grants and help match groups with volunteers in their area. And they sponsor Pup My Ride, which transports dogs from puppy mills to rescue groups, and Strut Your Mutt, a hug dog walk that showcases dogs looking for homes.

"Strut Your Mutt is a veritable parade," says Hegwood. "It also raises funds for rescues. We have had groups raise their entire annual budget."

"When people come here, they tend to like it very much," says Castle. "We are blessed to have the sanctuary where we are. But the sanctuary isn't all there is. We want our friends – our extended family – to continue their experience in their own communities."

Interested in More Information?

For more info on visiting Best Friends Animal Sanctuary for your vacation, go to www.bestfriends.org/atthesanctuary on the Internet. The site offers tips on where to stay (click on "Planning Your Visit") and gives all the info you need on signing up for volunteer time (click on "Volunteering"). The site also spotlights the different areas at the sanctuary, complete with photos and video. Basically, if you need to know it, it's here.

The main Web site for Best Friends – www.bestfriends.org – also offers links to all of the society's programs, including the Best Friends Network and Outreach. And don't forget to check out the Adorable Adoptables!