

# Schonbrunner Zoo: The Oldest Zoo in the World

A 260th anniversary is momentous for any establishment but it is particularly impressive for a zoo and this is exactly what the Schonbrunner Zoo at Schonbrunn Palace, Vienna, was celebrating in 2012. This historic zoo has gone on a long journey from old-fashioned menagerie to modern conservation park via some highs as a Victorian fashion spot and some lows where its future was uncertain. Today the zoo is highly commended and makes many must-see lists.



## History

Schonbrunner Zoo is probably most famous for being the oldest zoo in the world, having been officially founded in 1752, but some visitors are unaware of how long a history this wildlife park really has. Forms of animal husbandry have been practiced in one form or another since the 1500s and the 1750s was just the turning point from menagerie to fully fledged zoo and visitor attraction. One of the most iconic structures in the zoo is the Kaiser Pavilion café in center, which was built in 1759 and can now be rented for private functions, but there are reminders of the zoo's past everywhere, from the farmhouse dating back to 1722 to the stylish, 19th century monkey house. From its official birthday to the start of the 20th century, the zoo has built up an impressive collection of species – 717 by 1914 – and has had some key moments, such as the fashion trend sparked by the arrival of the giraffes in 1828 and the first birth of a captive elephant in 1906.

When modern visitors learn a zoo's age there is often some concern about how well the establishment has adapted to modern conservation ideas, changing visitor expectations and new techniques in habitat management; conservation and old Victorian cages do not go together so what should visitors expect from a zoo founded in the 18th century? The answer is a surprising amount because even though there was a crisis in 1987, when visitor numbers declined due to the zoo's standards and the park faced closure, major renovations and rescue efforts in the 1990s brought it to a new level and the Schonbrunner Zoo transformed into the well-loved, award-winning conservation park it is today. These modern changes included new, enriched habitats for its animals – such as a suitable outdoor area for orangutans – increased use of renewable energy with a solar roof on the elephant house and greater conservation efforts for rare species. Giant pandas were introduced to the zoo in 2003 and are one of the few groups to be breeding successfully.



## The Highlights

Today the zoo is very proud of its many specialized areas and habitats, such as the refurbished aquarium, but two areas that are sure to impress and excite visitors are the rainforest exhibit and the polarium. This air-conditioned polarium was constructed in 2004 as a way of providing better habitats for sea lions, king penguins and rockhopper penguins and showcasing more natural behavior. These tailor-made areas include rocks and vegetation at the optimal temperature and a large pool for catching the fish being thrown to them. Over at the 1000 square meter rainforest, which was built for the 250th anniversary, there is a rich ecology to observe with mammals like otters and gliders, beautiful birds, pythons and iguanas and a range of amphibians, fish and insects. What makes this center even more incredible is the computer controlled weather system for extra realism.



With so much to see and so many different areas and houses it is important that visitors give themselves enough time to explore, especially when the houses close earlier than the park itself, and that they take advantage of all the opportunities on offer. As well as the cafés, gift shops and other traditional facilities, guests can enjoy special days and packages that present the animals and environments in a new light. A great example of this is the Dive package in the polarium where people can watch the seals in a specially lit viewing area with added commentary.

## Historical Zoo with Modern Edge

When you take into account all the changes that have been made in this environmental park over the last 260 years, it is not hard to see why it makes peoples' must see lists and wins numerous awards. It has certainly come a long way since the days when the zoo was only open one day a week to the "decently dressed" and the combination of the successful breeding programmes, change of image, rare species and beautiful historic grounds are a hard act to follow.

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