



Baghdad Zoo makes comeback

Updated 11/10/2005 11:32 PM



A couple enjoys the camel exhibit at the Baghdad Zoo.

BAGHDAD — Qusay al-Matouqi needed an escape from the violence and mayhem that have enveloped his battered city. So he went to the Baghdad Zoo. He wasn't alone." (**Related photos:** [Zoo makes comeback](#))

"I didn't expect to see this many families," said al-Matouqi, 25, a Baghdad taxi driver, as he lunched at the zoo recently with his mother, sister and other family members. "The security situation here is excellent, and the atmosphere makes you forget the terror outside."

Baghdad Zoo, once among the largest zoos in the Middle East, continues to draw hundreds of visitors looking for a quick escape from everyday stress.

Located in a leafy three-square-block park in the heart of the city, the zoo once housed more than 600 animals and drew 1.5 million visitors a year, according to WildAid, a San Francisco animal conservation group that assisted the zoo after the U.S.-led invasion.

The war has taken a toll. Many of the tamer animals — birds, pigs, goats and monkeys — were looted in

the invasion's chaotic aftermath. Exotic birds were sold on the black market. Some animals became food.

One of the park's tigers was shot and killed after a U.S. soldier stuck his hand in the cage and had it mauled by the feline, said Mohammed Salman, 57, a zoo employee.

The zoo has been slowly rehabilitated with help from outside agencies, such as WildAid. WildAid officials scoured the city for food for the animals, trained zoo employees and tried to change the perception of zookeepers, considered a demeaning job in Iraq, said WildAid's Stephan Bognar, who was in Iraq for several months after the invasion. "If you're always handling animals you're in sort of a dirty profession," he said.

Nowadays, the zoo houses 86 animals, including some of the lions kept as pets by Uday and Qusay, Saddam Hussein's sons.

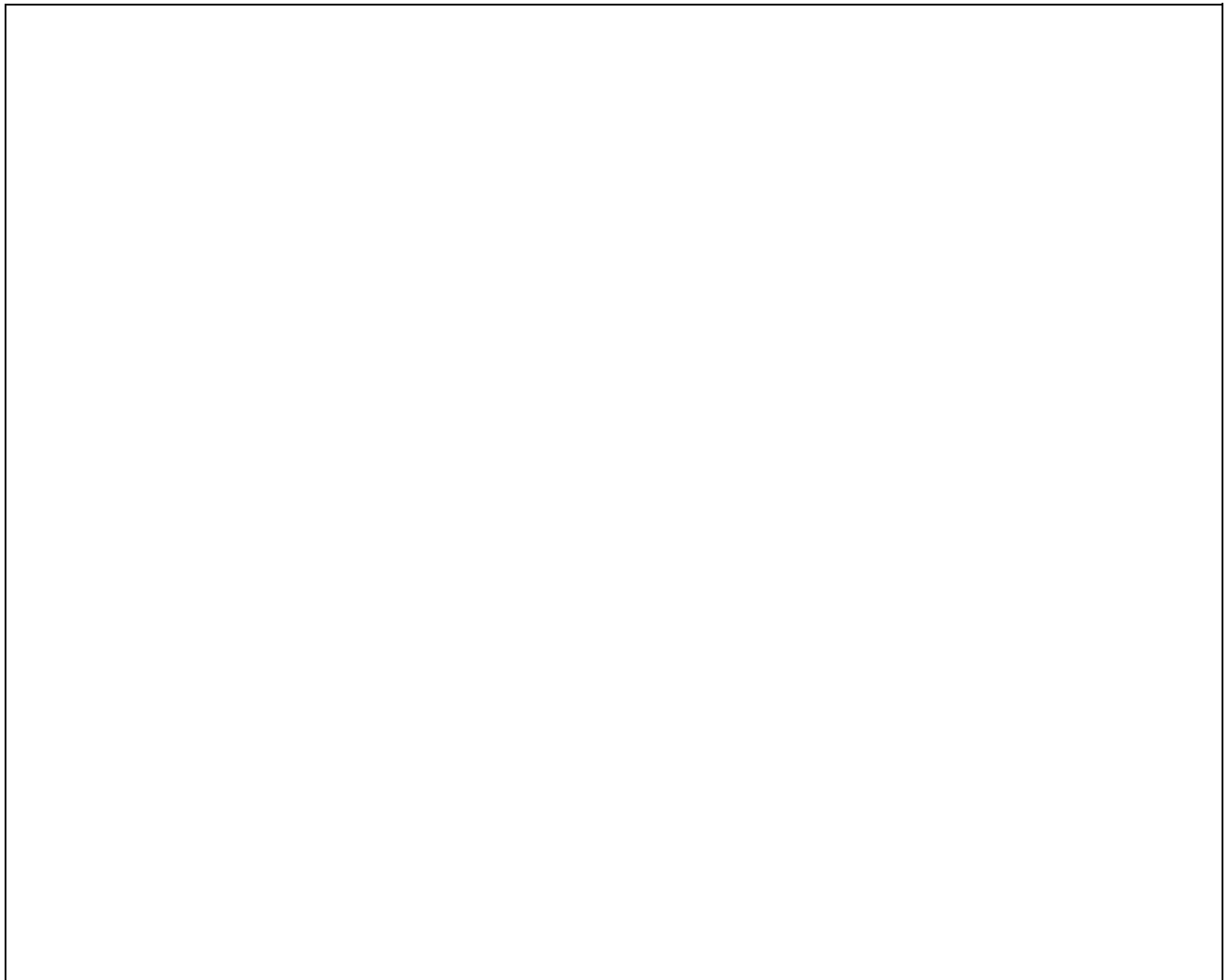
Families come to see the lions, tigers, ostriches, camels, leopards, parrots and swans. The giraffes and elephants are gone. Of the 14 monkeys once housed at the zoo, only four remain. Donkeys are kept separately — as food for the lions and tigers.

Visitors enjoy the quiet sanctuary that has endured despite the violence outside. Mohammed Sagban, 28, visited recently with his wife, Zahra Ali, 26, sister-in-law and his two kids.

"I wish I could see some crocodiles, snakes or a giraffe," Ali said. "But I'm happy I at least got to see Uday's and Qusay's lions."

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