

One final check that all  
2,500 Night Safari animals  
are safe for the evening.

**OPPOSITE** A stealthy  
Sri Lankan leopard.

WHERE  
THE WILD  
THINGS ARE

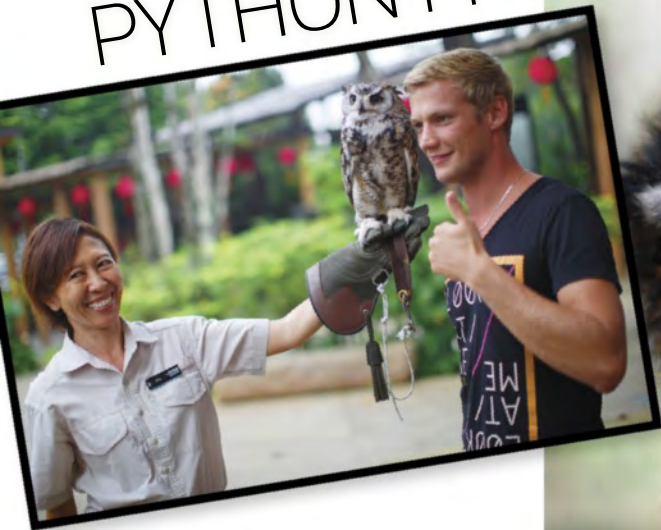




Animal-uneducated MELANIE LEE trains as a  
zookeeper at Singapore's Night Safari, and  
discovers the quirky charm of its nocturnal  
residents. PHOTOGRAPHED BY DARREN SOH



# PHOENIX, A MUSCULAR BALL PYTHON FROM AFRICA,



writhes around in my hands. “Being a keeper is all about mutual respect and trust between animals and humans,” says Natalie Chan, a supervisor at Singapore’s Night Safari. “The animals may not understand what you say, but they feel your energy and, as much as possible, you try to make them feel comfortable.”

My response? Yelping: “Help!” The python senses my unease and attempts to slither out of my hands.

Chan takes Phoenix and he immediately calms down and hangs off her arms in complete stillness. “He senses your nervousness,” she tells me. “Animals are very good in picking up on anxiety.” Translation: I have failed my initiation as a zookeeper.

For the second test, we head over to the owl enclosure. Rainbow, an American great horned owl who, according to Chan, “never acts up,” squawks at my appearance, attempts to fly off when I try to carry her, and knocks over a bottle of disinfectant in the process.

Chan calms Rainbow down by stroking her feathers and whispering soothing apologies. I swear Rainbow then gives me a long, stern stare.

After my dismal performance with the python and the owl, Chan decides

that I am not up to carrying either of these animals for the daily roving session at the Night Safari entrance. “You just help visitors take photos with these animals instead,” assistant communications manager Natt Haniff says.

In the real zookeeper world, I would probably have been fired.

Luckily, I’m only doing a three-day stint behind the scenes at the 20-year-old Night Safari. The world’s first nocturnal zoo and one of Singapore’s most popular tourist destinations with 1.1 million visitors annually, the Night Safari is my go-to spot to bring friends from out of town because it presents an alternative side to the glitzy shopping mall image of this country. Yet, I’d always had the impression that the animals here—like most other living things in Singapore—were a well-disciplined lot. Everything always ran like clockwork: guided trams whizzed by every few minutes; there was an impeccable system of crowd control; and the animals, as if on cue, would be posing strategically in front of their exhibit areas precisely as carriages of trigger-happy visitors passed.

What I learned in my three short but enlightening days working at the Night Safari was that it’s the diligent, big-hearted zookeepers that make the place tick. Under their care, the residents thrive. More than a third of the 2,500 animals here are considered threatened species and, in 2013 alone, 54 endangered animals of 11 species—including the Malayan tapir and the fishing cat from Southeast Asia—were bred and raised in the Night Safari. But it’s not all about stats. The keepers’ passion for animals is apparent as they regale me with tales of flatulent zebras and pampered giraffes who refuse to eat wet leaves.



**“IS THAT A LEOPARD?”** I ask Chan as I catch a glimpse of a yellow creature with black spots in the distance.

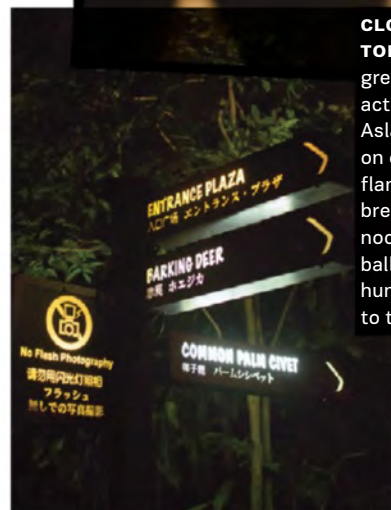
“It’s a spotted hyena,” she replies with a chuckle, and then mutters to her two colleagues, “Boy, are we in for a long afternoon!”

Okay, it’s true. I know precious little about the animal kingdom. I’m charging ahead with this mini-internship partly to better understand Gandhi’s line, “The greatness of a nation and its moral progress can be judged by the way its animals are treated.” Wildlife Reserves Singapore runs extensive conservation efforts via captive breeding, animal research and public education programs at its institutions: the Singapore Zoo, Jurong Bird Park and the River Safari, as well as the Night Safari—which is composed of spacious, natural habitats open after dark to give visitors a chance to see the mostly nocturnal tropical mammals at their most active.

And sometimes at their most sassy. My favorite “night owl” is actually a binturong, a dark brown, furry bearcat from Indonesia named Aslan who loves posing on top of my head. He craves attention so much, Chan says, that he tends to linger during his high-wire performance in the Creatures of the Night show. The longer he can bask in the spotlight, the better.

Then there’s Jamilah, a female Asian elephant from Malaysia who nudges me playfully with her trunk every time her trainer, senior keeper Lechu Lachmana, looks away during one of the elephants’ twice-daily walks. I’m startled each time she pokes me and, I’m not sure if I’m imagining it, but she seems to enjoy intimidating me.

“*Mei daha*,” Lachmana says, as he tries to steer Jamilah away from some bushes that she is pulverizing with her trunk. It means “come this side” in Sinhalese, the language—peppered with bits of English and Tamil—in which all the zookeepers communicate with the elephants. Lachmana has been with these elephants for eight years



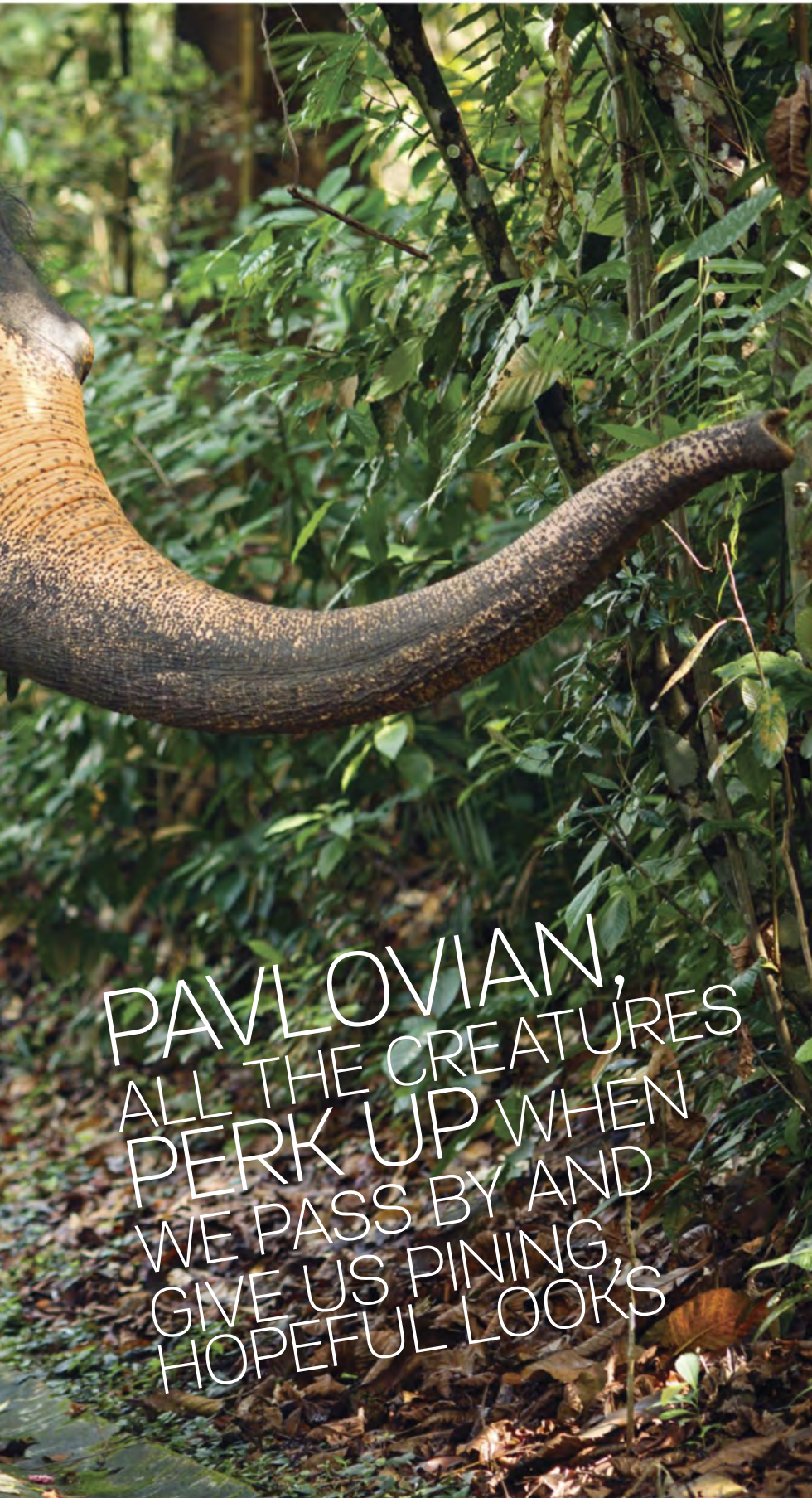
**CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT** Rainbow the great horned owl “never acts up;” binturong Aslan loves posing on our author’s head; flamingos who aren’t breeding tend to feed nocturnally; Phoenix the ball python picks up on human anxiety; this way to the egress?





The zookeepers speak to their elephants in Sinhalese peppered with English and Tamil.





PAVLOVIAN,  
ALL THE CREATURES  
PERK UP WHEN  
WE PASS BY AND  
GIVE US PINING,  
HOPEFUL LOOKS

and, like a doting parent, gives me the lowdown on their personalities.

“Jamilah is gentle, but very greedy, always snacking. Sri Nandong can be very stubborn, and Tun always wants to play with people,” the soft-spoken zookeeper says with a smile.

Another elephant trainer, deputy head keeper Novendran S., has such a tight bond with his charge, Chawang, a feisty Asian male also from Malaysia, that they even pull pranks together. As we pass the male elephants in a buggy one night, I hear “Blow!” and Chawang lifts his trunk to spray us with water from a moat.

Novendran laughs at us, damp and stunned. “This boy hates buggies because someone in a buggy once made fun of him,” he offers as explanation. “So I just help him, yah?”

It’s easy to understand this sense of solicitude as I watch the Creatures of the Night show. My beloved binturong, Aslan, and his sister, Narnia, start off the show by scurrying across a high wire from opposite ends to the beat of techno music, and end their act impressively by hanging upside down at the center of the wire with their prehensile tails. I continue to swell with pride when, despite our bad blood, Rainbow the owl resplendently spreads her broad, striped wings, much to the audience’s appreciation.

**INSIDER ZOO JOKE:** humans are the most difficult animals to deal with. Much of a zookeeper’s time is spent educating visitors through such activities as feeding sessions with local animals like the small-toothed civets, the sunda pangolins and the sambar deer along the walking trails. Though, in Singapore, the job doesn’t require a zoology degree, the work is very much a calling. Most of the zookeepers I meet have been here 10 to 20 years despite the repetitive chores of cleaning, feeding and training, along with checking up on the animals and logging their behavior patterns for research purposes. Not surprisingly, given the nine-hour, cardio-intensive shifts, all the keepers look incredibly fit and youthful.

Bathing an elephant, for example, is exhausting. After just 15 minutes of



scrubbing Jamilah's mud-crusted belly, I am panting. But Lachmana tells me it takes at least an hour to clean a whole elephant, and that's only if she is in a good mood and agrees to lie on her side.

Who would have thought that scooping zebra poop could be so strenuous? While the Grant's zebras Anand and Zimbabwe (yes, the farters) graciously make way for me to clear the excrement they have considerately tucked under a layer of hay, I take five minutes to collect a few pieces into my giant dustpan. There's a technique to retrieving these sticky ping-pong ball-sized pellets—think of scraping old paint.

Even mealtime can be a frenzied affair. One night, I'm put on the feeding buggy, the Night Safari's version of a food truck, with Anand



Indian rhino Gomati is quite the foodie. **ABOVE RIGHT** Three South African giraffes have been born at the Night Safari.

Kumar, another deputy head keeper, who has to go six rounds throughout the night giving animals “snacks” along the tram route so that visitors will catch the animals “in a good mood.”

It is an entirely different experience going around the Night Safari on this feeding buggy. Pavlovian, all the creatures perk up when we pass by and give us pining, hopeful looks. I can't help but giggle as the usually sorrowful-looking striped hyenas bound towards us in unbridled joy as Kumar flings them meat chunks. He hurls the food like an Olympic field star—far enough to pass over the moats between the exhibit area and the road, and also precisely enough to land at key lighting spots, to tactically draw the animals out for visitors to view them in all their glory.

Another mealtime that takes some getting used to is that of Gomati, the female Indian rhinoceros, whom Haniff describes as a “crotchety old lady.” I am tasked with feeding Gomati pellets and chopped carrots while she is getting a medicated foot soak (for a cracked hind hoof) and antiseptic cream applied on her sores (which seems to make her even more cranky). Gomati grunts every time there is even a second-long break between mouthfuls. This impatience and her cavernous mouth filled with huge brown teeth combine to make me jittery, and I spill bits of food on the floor while she slobbers up my entire hand. The fifth time this happens, she lets out a long, Chewbacca-like bellow, and her keepers laugh. She is annoyed with me for wasting food, they say. Aww, she's a foodie like me! Crotchety old lady and I: finally bonded. +

## T+L Guide

### Getting there

The Night Safari is in the northern part of Singapore. The quickest way to get there is by cab, but **Singapore Attractions Express** (65/6753-0506; [saex.com.sg](http://saex.com.sg)) offers an affordable bus shuttle service to and from selected hotels around the city for just S\$5 a trip.



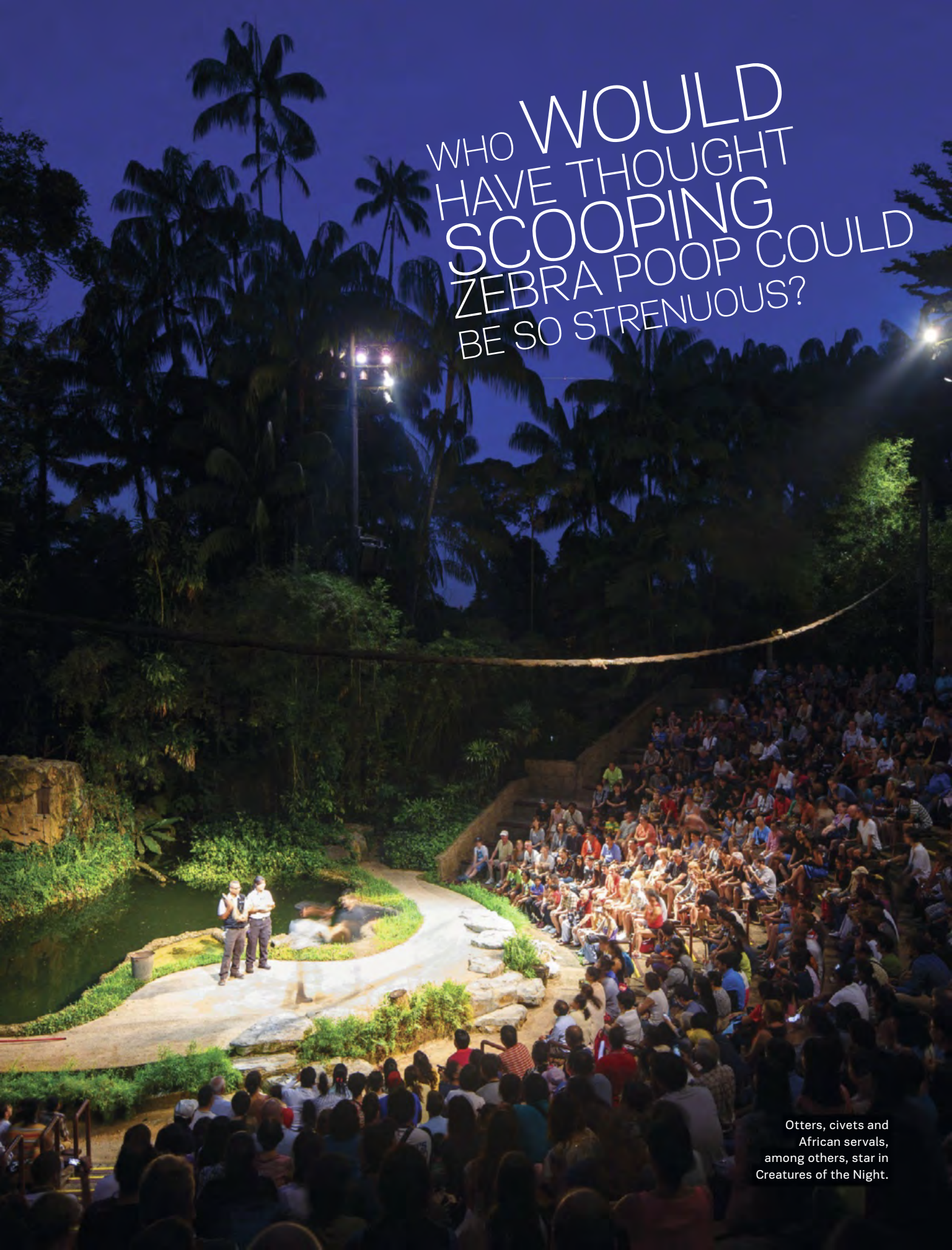
**The Night Safari.** 80 Mandai Lake Rd.; 65/6269-3411; [nightsafari.com.sg](http://nightsafari.com.sg); tickets S\$39 per adult and S\$25 per child (including one tram ride, admission to walking trails and *Creatures of the Night Show*); open 7:30 p.m. to 12:30 a.m. daily.

**Recommended itinerary:** Reach the Night Safari an hour before opening at 6:30 p.m. There is an animal roving session at the entrance where you can get up close and personal with a few exotic animals, and also the **Thumbuakar** fire-eating performance. Grab dinner at the rustic **Ulu Ulu Safari Restaurant** (dinner for two S\$40; open 5:30 p.m. to 11 p.m.) with its decent offerings of popular local dishes such as chili crab and chicken rice. Be sure to head over to the **Creatures of the Night Show** stage by 7:15 p.m. in order to secure a seat for the 7:30 p.m. start. After the show, instead of joining the queues for a tram, try one of the four walking trails (we recommend the **Leopard Trail**) to view a selection of nocturnal creatures at your own pace before resting it out on the 40-minute guided tram route to see the rest of the animals.

**T+L TIP** The intimate **Safari Adventurer Tour** (S\$132 per adult, S\$90 per child) is worth it for inquisitive animal-lovers, with a private buggy and personal guide to answer all your questions about nocturnal wildlife.



WHO WOULD  
HAVE THOUGHT  
SCOOPING  
ZEBRA POOP COULD  
BE SO STRENUOUS?



Otters, civets and  
African servals,  
among others, star in  
Creatures of the Night.