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"A Different Light"

A Different Light – 12th July 2025 – “Auckland Zoo’s unexpected charm on rainy school holiday visit”

We tried to get there early before the rain got too bad. But who were we kidding? The Met Service App had black clouds and rain symbols for the morning, afternoon and evening. Last week being the school holidays, we took our granddaughter, Isla, down to Auckland to go to the zoo. We knew the weather forecast was bad, but plans were already in place. We intended to forge ahead. We arrived at opening time and there was barely a car in the vast carpark, a sign that the forecasted precipitation had put off the usual throngs of zoo goers who converge there in the school holidays. Every cloud has a silver lining, I optimistically quipped, as we wrangled my mobility scooter out of the boot.

It was my travel scooter, which is so compact, it is on the verge of being microscopic. It has three wheels. Every time I get on it, I feel like a chimpanzee on a tricycle in a circus. I should be in good company, I thought. The rain at that time was the consistency of a strong drizzle, but it didn't curb Isla's enthusiasm. She led the expedition, and we dutifully followed. She weaved in and out the zoo's exotic tracks; the African Safari Track, the Australia Bush Track, the Southeast Jungle Track and other tracks blurred into a never ending pilgrimage in the rain. The crowd was scarce, and so were the animals. The giraffes were well away having a snack out of hanging baskets, high in the air. The meerkats were hunkered down but one or two were visible; the otter on the other hand was gregarious, frolicking in the water. The rain came down harder. My wife offered me a pink rainproof poncho, which historically I have refused to wear, thinking it was way below my fashion grade, but I gladly accepted it this time. The pink flamingos were out in force - we stared at each other both in pink, blinking in the rain. We went up paths and down paths and along bridges, the terrain rough in places with interesting cambers and angles. My microlite scooter tottered and lurched precariously. While some animals were out of site in the rain, some were very close up. The cheetahs were reclining with their backs on the glass surround, impervious to the small crowd tapping on the glass behind them, their tiny ears giving the occasional twitch. The tigers strode past,

feet away behind the glass balustrade, with massive chunks of meat hanging menacingly from their jaws during their feeding time.

My scooter was also behaving menacingly by now, its orange light indicating that it was running out of power. The thought of being stranded in the Southeast Jungle Track in the rain wasn't appealing. Luckily, the Auckland Zoo hires out mobility scooters for which I swapped my Microlite. These were far more robust steeds that handled the terrain with far greater confidence.

The highlight of the zoo foray was the orangutans. There was a mother and her baby who were hanging out in their trapeze nest beside the glass barricade. Isla put her hand on the glass and the baby orangutan put its hands on the other side next to hers. It was a moment of red headed unity.

Zoos in the rain feel more honest. No crowds, no rush—just you and the animals weathering the world together.

Jonny Wilkinson is the CEO of Tiaho Trust - Disability A Matter of Perception, a Whangarei based disability advocacy organisation.