

Fun Reptile Vacations

Check out these fun family reptile vacation destinations!

By Clay Jackson

Every year during the dog days of summer, my family would embark on a rolling adventure across this great land - a trip known as the family vacation.

Gatorland's popular "Jungle Crocs" show features trainers hand feeding some truly massive crocodilians.
Photo courtesy of Gatorland

I'd be crammed in the back seat with my brother, sister and our 75-pound prodigiously salivating boxer. All the while our sweaty thighs adhered to the solar-heated vinyl as the inevitable chorus rang out, "Are we there yet?" Oh, how I wanted to stop and see every attraction advertised on the garish roadside billboards that whizzed by every few minutes.

Back then it would have been great to have had a guide to herp attractions, so when Dad said no to the beckoning Gatorland billboard, I could have fired back with, "Well, what about...?"

This article is that guide. Here, you'll find 40 U.S. herp-related attractions - everything from animal collections to amusing roadside curiosities, such as a giant turtle made entirely of wheel rims. There's enough to keep you and your family occupied all summer long. And just think: This listing doesn't include all the great reptile retail stores and zoo reptile houses you're likely going to pass along the way. If you stop at some of those, too, you've probably got enough info here to plan a six-month reptile road trip!

A secure glass enclosure allows these Reptiland visitors to go nose-to-nose with a huge reticulated python.
Photo courtesy of Clyde Peeling's Reptiland

West Coast Ramblings

The small foothill community of Monroe, Washington, has more than just million-dollar views of the Cascades. Passerbys should stop by the Washington Serpentarium, which has one of the most complete collections of reptiles on the West Coast, including an alligator snapping turtle, an albino rattler, an Egyptian cobra, a frilled lizard, green tree pythons, Brazilian rainbow boas, green mambas, rhinoceros vipers, puff adders, Gaboon vipers, an albino alligator and dwarf caimans, just to mention a few. Kids and adults can hold 10 different snake species.

Lodi, California, is home to the Great Valley Serpentarium. Pay a visit to the free Snake Museum, which has about 150 natural-habitat exhibits housing numerous snakes, lizards, tortoises, frogs and arachnids. Many rear-fanged species, such as hognoses, false water cobras and mangrove snakes are also on display (they have the only known specimen of Kupang mangrove snake in the United States).

For fun, visit the Calaveras County Fair's Jumping Frog Jubilee at Angels Camp, California. The Frog Jubilee commemorates the famed jumping frog in Mark Twain's *The Celebrated Jumping Frog of Calaveras County* with, of course, frog jumping contests and other events (including a kids' jumping contest). You don't even need your own frog; you can rent a bullfrog to compete. The 2005 Calaveras County Fair and Jumping Frog Jubilee (theme: "Famous Authors and Awesome Hoppers") will be held May 19 to 22.

The annual Jumping Frog Jubilee, at Angels Camp, California, uses bullfrogs in various jumping competitions. The current world record jump is 21 feet 5¾ inches.

Photo courtesy of Jeff White/Frogtown

Spring is also the optimal time to visit the Desert Tortoise Natural Area near California City, California. As the Mojave Desert begins to warm up in late April and early May, desert tortoises emerge from their burrows to forage. Current population density estimates around the interpretive area are between 20 to 25 tortoises per square mile (in 1979 the same area had well over 100 tortoises per square mile). The natural area is home to many other reptiles, including leopard lizards, zebra-tails, western whiptails, side-blotched lizards, desert horned lizards, Mojave rattlers, sidewinders, coachwhips and gopher snakes.

A staff volunteer explained that if you visit when the tortoises are exiting their burrows, walk off the trails and spend an hour or two looking, then you definitely should see a few. Remember, however, that it is unlawful to harass, injure or

collect desert tortoises!

This smooth softshell turtle (*Apalone mutica*) is just one of the many herps the STAR Eco Station rescues every year.
Photo courtesy of Eco Station

There is a dual mission to STAR Eco Station's lost-Mayan-city-and-jungle motif: to rescue exotic animals and provide a fun and educational experience for kids and adults alike. The Culver City, California, facility has 15 interactive learning areas and numerous rescued herps. Eco Station is an official wildlife rescue facility for several U.S. agencies, including the United States Fish and Wildlife Service.

The Coachella Valley Preserve lies just off Interstate 10, near the town of Thousand Palms. This was the first preserve set aside for an endangered lizard: the Coachella Valley fringe-toed lizard. The preserve offers a small visitor center/museum, nature trails, and tours can be arranged into the main dune area, habitat for fringe-toed lizards, sidewinders, flat-tailed horned lizards, collared lizards, chuckwallas and other species.