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Crowds roar about Giants of the Savanna exhibit at Dallas Zoo

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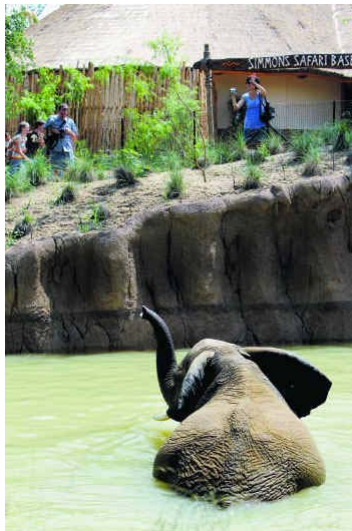
By **DAVID FLICK** / The Dallas Morning News
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The new Giants of the Savanna habitat got rave reviews Friday from its most important critics – the paying customers of the Dallas Zoo.

"It's marvelous. I'm very surprised," said Cynthia Palmer of North Dallas. "We just got back from Disney's wildlife exhibit, and this is on a par with that."

Friday marked the official public opening of the \$30 million, 11-acre habitat. Zoo officials on Thursday had given visitors an unpublicized sneak preview following a private ribbon-cutting.

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Photos by **COURTNEY PERRY/DMN**

Gypsy cooled off Friday in the Elephant Water Hole at the Dallas Zoo's new Giants of the Savanna habitat. "This is so natural-looking; it's such a good change," one zoogoer said.

Officials have been counting on the new habitat to brighten the zoo's image. Judging by Friday's first impressions, their wish may be fulfilled.

Among those who praised it was Reginald Terry of Oak Cliff, who was chaperoning students from Tyler Street Christian Academy.

He snapped pictures of the ostriches, watched kids feed lettuce leaves to the giraffes and laughed at the reaction when he patted a latex reproduction of an elephant's behind along one wall of the base camp.

When visitors do that, the reproduction is designed to – this is a family newspaper, so work with me – emit a long and loud noise.

"This is the first time I've been to the Dallas Zoo in 20 years. I'm very impressed," Terry said. "When I wanted to go to a zoo, I used to drive over to Fort Worth, but this is really, really nice."

Friday's opening began at 9 a.m. with a trickle of visitors that swelled as the day went on. Gregg Hudson, executive director of the Dallas Zoo, estimated at midafternoon that 3,500 visitors would come through the turnstiles by the end of Friday – about 50 percent more than the day before Memorial Day weekend last year, when the temperature was 10 degrees cooler. A bigger

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COURTNEY PERRY/DMN
Norma Mouritsen air-kisses a giraffe as she visits the Dallas Zoo's new Giants of the Savanna habitat with her great-grandchildren. Friday marked the official public opening of the \$30 million, 11-acre Giants of the Savanna.

wave is expected on Saturday.

One of the few people reserving judgment on opening day was Gary Lee, who, as principal partner of the Philadelphia-based CLR firm, was the habitat's chief designer.

Asked if he thought the habitat was a success, Lee replied: "I'll wait a year. Then I'll know."

As time goes on, he said, the landscaping will grow in and a wider diversity of animals will mingle on the two open stretches of the savanna.

"It's going to create a vista where you have layers of roaming animals," he said.

More important, the animals will display new behaviors as they learn more about their home. The elephants, for example, have yet to learn how to use a special shower rigged to squirt them – and visitors – when the pachyderms pull a chain.

"You come back in a few weeks and they'll be doing completely new things," Lee said.

The six giraffes, meanwhile, were delighting crowds by clustering near the visitors' overlook, where they were offered lettuce leaves and were petted by children. But the giraffes mostly ignored the large grassland designed at great expense to showcase them mingling with ostriches and impalas.

Lee said the giraffes may eventually have to be coaxed out to the grassland by employees using behavior modification. Giraffes, he explained, are herd animals – and not particularly bright.

"I don't want to bad-mouth giraffes, but they're not even as smart as pigs," he said.

Friday's crowds sometimes created traffic jams of strollers at the lion exhibit, where by late morning visitors occasionally lined up four deep in front to the glass walls.

One of the few areas that seemed to disappoint visitors was the warthog exhibit, where people seemed to peek over a rail at the slumbering hogs and then move on.

"I didn't think it was that impressive," said one woman who asked not to be identified. "I've seen it elsewhere."

There were few other criticisms, however, especially among visitors who remembered the Dallas Zoo from even a few years ago.

"We used to come here, back when they had all the animals lined up in cages, and it was depressing, really," Palmer said. "But this is so natural looking; it's such a good change."