TOCA Wednesday 2016 Tour
Omaha

Tour participants will pick up their box lunches at noon at the Magnolia Hotel and then board Ollie the Trolley for the afternoon’s tour. Actually, Ollie the Trolley is the name of the business that has grown to now supplying transportation in eight vehicles reminiscent of the early 1900s. It has been a staple in Omaha since 1985. The size of the tour group will determine whether we are travel on Ollie, Polly, Guacamollie, Pumpkin, Porkchop, Buttercup, Trolley Brown or Lulu. They range in size from 22 to 47 passenger trolleys.

While we enjoy our lunch, we’ll take in some of the sights of Omaha. The exact route is still being determined but it promises to be interesting and informative.

Our first stop will be Omaha’s Henry Doorly Zoo and Aquarium, the largest zoo in the world. Because of the size, we will concentrate our visit to three areas with zoo-supplied guides for each. We will split into groups and take turns in the Lied Jungle and the Desert Dome/Kingdoms of the Night. We will then take a stroll through the new African Grasslands, set to officially open Memorial Day weekend, as we head to the Garden of the Senses.

When the Lied Jungle opened in 1992 it was the largest indoor rainforest in the world. It has 123,000 square feet of floor space with 61,000 square feet of planted exhibit space, 35,000 square feet of display management area and 11,000 square feet of education space. It is 80 feet tall, about the same as an eight-story building. Asian, African and South American rainforests are highlighted with specific areas. Over 90 animal species and countless plant species can be seen throughout the jungle. The birth of a pygmy hippopotamus added to the numbers on December 22.

The world’s largest indoor desert opened in 2002. The Desert Dome is housed in the upper level of the world’s largest glazed geodesic dome and stands 13 stories tall. Although the building is 230 feet in diameter spanning over one acre, there are no support columns except for the outer wall. A gutter system, on the outside of the Dome, is connected to two 20,000 gallon underground storage tanks for the collection of rainwater. This water is used for watering the plants inside. There are three separate deserts in the Dome; the Namib Desert of southern Africa, the Red Center of Australia and the Sonoran Desert. There are many plants and animals in each section native to the respective parts of the world.

The lower level of the Dome houses the Kingdoms of the Night which opened in 2003. It is the world’s largest nocturnal exhibit. The day-night cycles are reversed, so guests can experience creatures in their natural nocturnal activity patterns. Exhibits include an African diorama, a wet cave, a dry bat cave, a Eucalyptus forest and the world’s largest indoor swamp. Among the many animal species you’ll find is a rare Japanese giant salamander, one of only six in the U. S. Many rare and unusual plants can also be seen.

The African Grasslands covers 28 acres and, at $78 million, is the zoo’s largest project to-date. The extensive uses of grasses, acacia-like trees, rock kopjes (granite boulders set in the
open savanna) and minimal barriers will provide unobstructed views of the animals. While still under construction, there is plenty to see. The Giraffe Herd Rooms are completed and you can watch the giraffes indoors and out. Outdoors the giraffes roam with impala, white rhino, ostrich, spur-winged geese and other species. The Elephant Family Quarters are also completed and the elephants should arrive any day and should be feeling right at home by the time TOCA gets its turn to traipse around the area.

The Garden of the Senses opened in 1998. It is filled with over 250 different species of herbs, perennials and trees along with many roses and other flowers. Bronze statues of animals, fountains and other water features also adorn the area. South American parrots, Australian cockatoos and other fauna are in the garden. The Garden of the Senses was built based on the concept of having an area where people with limitations can interact and appreciate the Zoo through sensory experiences. It is designed so all five senses can be ignited. The Zoo plans to have a horticulturist on hand to provide further information on the garden.

You will quickly see that the tour will barely scratch the surface as far as Omaha’s Henry Doorly Zoo and Aquarium is concerned. If at all possible, schedule your return home late Friday or Saturday morning so you can take advantage of the free passes we have arranged for so you can spend a whole day at the zoo on Friday. Just note your request for your pass on the registration form. Go to www.omahazoo.com to help you plan out your Friday visit. You can obtain full details on the dozens of exhibits and areas that you won’t get to see on Wednesday.

We will then depart the zoo, cross back over I-80 and head about a mile north and east to Lauritzen Gardens, Omaha’s Botanical Center. After two years of preliminary planning, Helena Street, the Omaha World-Herald garden columnist at the time hosted a meeting in 1982 to set the stage for what is now Lauritzen Gardens. Construction started in 1995. The Gardens now encompass over 100 acres of grounds, gardens and buildings. The newest building and the Crown Jewel to this point is the 20,000 square foot, Marjorie K. Daugherty Conservatory. It opened in 2013 and is named after Marge Daugherty, the wife of the founder of Valmont Industries, the late Robert B. Daugherty. The conservatory includes a 10,000 square foot tropical house, a 5,300 square foot temperate house and a 2,000 square foot gallery designed for unique floral displays and special events. The design inspiration comes from the heliconia flower and the Lauritzen Gardens logo.

Our tour will start in the Conservatory. After a welcome and presentation by the executive director and/or a horticulturist, and possibly others, depending on what else is scheduled on-site that day, we will be free to explore as much of the entire grounds as we can squeeze in. For those that don’t care to walk all around, there is a tram service that provides a 55 minute tour for $3. Some of the areas and gardens you might want to take in include; Arboretum and Bird Sanctuary, Children’s Garden, Conservation Discovery Garden, English Perennial Border, Festival Garden, Founder’s Garden, Garden in the Glen, Garden of Memories,
Herb Garden, Japanese Garden, Model Railroad Garden, Rose Garden, Song of the Lake Meadow, Spring Flower Walk, Tree Peony Garden, Victorian Garden, or the Woodland Trail.

We will be free to continue our stroll through the gardens until the evening reception and dinner back in the Marjorie K. Daugherty Conservatory. If you feel you must go back to the hotel before the reception there will be a trolley run back to the hotel. Those folks, golfers and other TOCA members can catch the trolley back to Lauritzen Gardens for the reception and dinner.