

## Close Encounters of the Animal Kind

### Dr. Ruth MacPete, DVM

Ruth has more than 15 years of experience in the veterinary industry as a companion animal veterinarian in private practice. Along with being a writer and media personality, she is also a founding member of IDEXX's Pet Health Network team.

[Dr. Ruth MacPete](#) discusses where to take kids for great animal experiences. For more from Dr. MacPete, find her on [Facebook](#) or at [www.drruthpetvet.com](http://www.drruthpetvet.com)!

As a veterinarian and mother of two young children, I often get asked where animal-loving kids can go to experience unique animal encounters. Here are a few amazing animal experiences for adults and kids.

#### Manatee Encounters

Manatee encounters allow you to swim alongside these gentle giants in their natural environment. Tours take you by boat to manatee hotspots and then let you snorkel and swim around them. Although you are allowed to touch them with one hand, you are not allowed to hold them or ride them. Of course, being curious creatures, don't be surprised if a manatee decides to touch you! I did the manatee encounter as a vet student years ago and it remains one of my all-time favorite memories. If you are in Florida and want to find out more, go to: [www.crystalriverdivers.com](http://www.crystalriverdivers.com)

#### Dolphin Encounters

Who doesn't love dolphins? They are sleek, playful, and intelligent. Dolphin Quest gives visitors the unique opportunity to not only learn about these amazing animals up close, but to also feed them and touch them. They offer different dolphin experiences geared towards different levels of interest and age groups. They even have a parent and toddler encounter for children ages 2 to 4. If you're planning a vacation for your family in Bermuda, Oahu, or the Big Island and you're interested in giving your kids a unique animal experience, check out their website: [www.dolphinquest.com](http://www.dolphinquest.com)

### Feed a Giraffe

Have you ever seen a giraffe tongue? Giraffes use their long prehensile tongues to pull-off leaves from the highest branches of acacia trees. Now imagine one of these 20-inch long tongues reaching out towards you to pick-up a biscuit from your hand? Many zoos and wildlife parks offer the opportunity to feed the giraffes. My kids screamed with delight when the giraffe's giant tongue wrapped around their tiny hand. It was quite the sight to see the tallest land animal reach down and stretch out their giant tongue to deftly pick up a biscuit. Besides a little giraffe spit, my kids went home with an amazing memory. Check with your local zoo to find out about when you and your kids can feed a giraffe.

### Turtle Hatching

Have you ever seen a baby sea turtle hatch and make its way to the ocean? Imagine seeing a thousand little turtle hatchlings crawling towards the water's edge and then swimming away. Public hatchling releases are a great way for kids to witness this incredible natural spectacle. Padre Island National Seashore incubation facility on Padre Island protects and cares for all the turtle eggs found on the island and all along the Texas coast. Several times a year they invite the public to witness the release of their hatchlings. These events are free of charge and attract thousands of visitors each year. To find out about seeing a turtle hatching, go to: [www.nps.gov/pais/naturescience/releases.htm](http://www.nps.gov/pais/naturescience/releases.htm).

*If you have any questions or concerns, you should always visit or call your veterinarian - they are your best resource to ensure the health and well-being of your pets.*