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PHOTO BY SANDY THOMPSON, COURTESY OF THE OREGON ZOO

Lily and her mom, Rose-Tu, enjoy a swim in the Oregon Zoo's new 160,000-gallon pool for pachyderms, part of the zoo's expansive new Elephant Lands habitat.

'Elephant Lands' Ushers in New Era at the Oregon Zoo

Testing the Waters

The New Year ushers in a new era at the Oregon Zoo as the most ambitious project in zoo history is now complete. Elephant Lands, a world-class home for a world-famous elephant family, opened to the public on Dec. 16.

Two and a half years in the making, and four times the size of the zoo's former elephant habitat, Elephant Lands accounts for nearly one-tenth of the zoo's total 64-acre footprint. A bridge leading visitors to the new Forest Hall offers a sweeping,

panoramic view of the entire project: six acres, extending around much of the zoo's eastern side from the central lawn to the veterinary medical center.

"The puzzle is finally complete," said Bob Lee, the zoo's elephant curator. "All the separate pieces are connected, and the elephant family has the run of the place. This feels like a historical moment. It's not just a new space they're stepping into — it's a whole new era of elephant welfare."

To keep the herd comfortable during the

building of Elephant Lands, animal-care staff and construction managers devised a phasing plan to gradually expand the elephants' accessible space. The Encounter Habitat opened two years ago, followed by the North Habitat in April. New indoor facilities — among the largest in the world — opened to elephants in May, and the recently opened South Habitat completes the project and brings all the areas together.

"This is a home for some of the largest and most intelligent land mammals on the

planet," Lee said. "We wanted to make sure we did it right. This new habitat lets elephants be elephants, making their own decisions about how they spend their days and nights."

"Our community has created something truly special here," added Heidi Rahn, bond program director. "Ever since the birth of Packy, we've had a strong connection with elephants, and now this world-famous ele-

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