

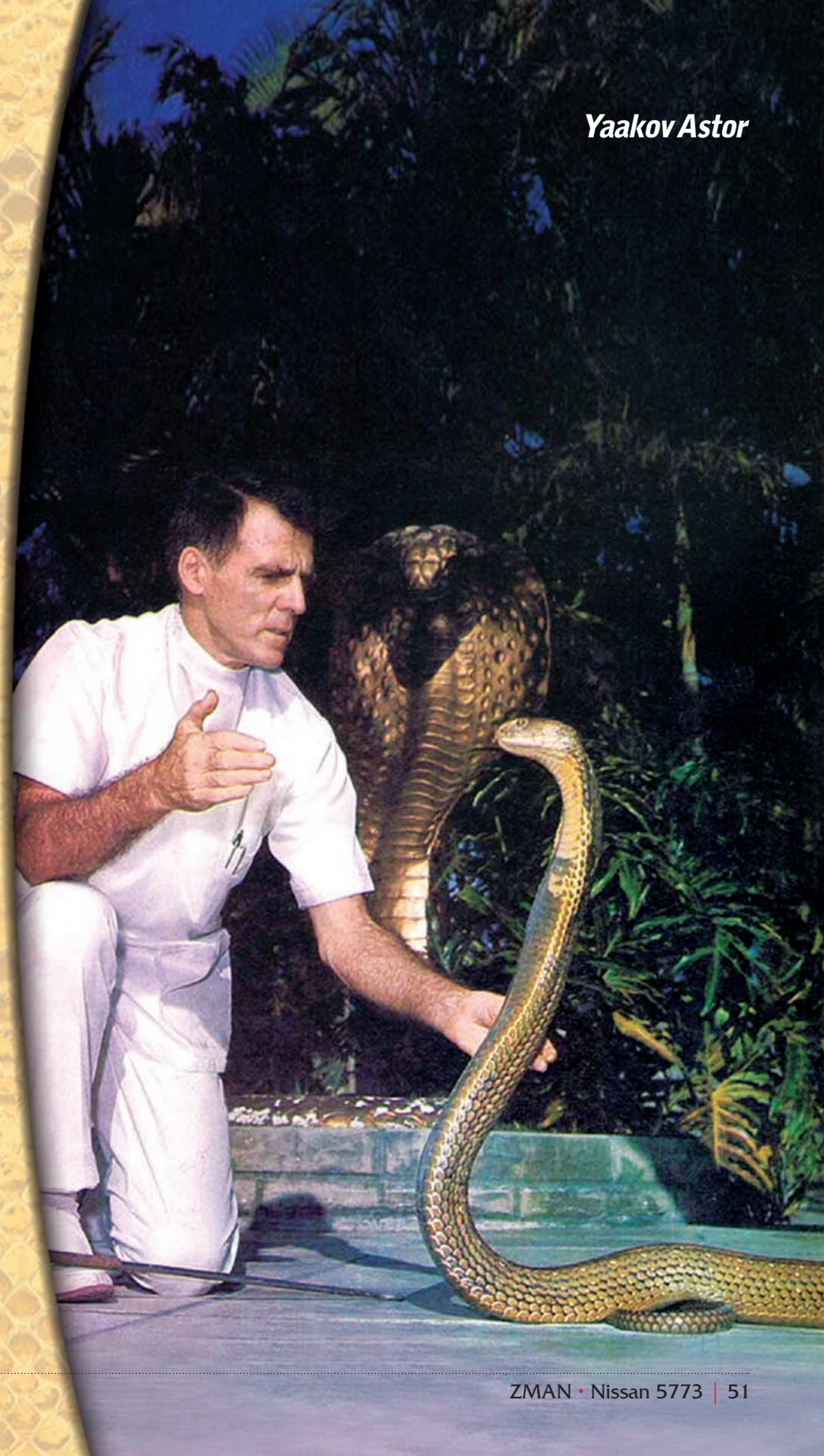


Close Encounters Of The Venomous Kind

Survivor of 172 Venomous Snakebites, Bill Haast Risked His Life Daily to Save Lives

In 2011, Bill Haast died at the age of 100. Today, worldwide, there are an estimated 500,000 centenarians. Although reaching 100 is an accomplishment in itself, what makes Bill Haast exceptional is that in those 100 years he was bitten no less than 172 times by some of the world's most venomous snakes, including more than once by the most deadly of all: the king cobra!

It was all in a day's work for Haast, who founded and for 40 years ran the Miami Serpentarium, where some 100 times a day he "milked" snakes for their venom to be used in medicines to save lives. Indeed, the idea of extracting snake venom for medicinal purposes is very old, but modern science has only been exploring these possibilities relatively recently. As this article discusses, snake venom today is finding uses in the treatment of high blood pressure, heart disease, stroke, Alzheimer's disease, cancer and more. Here, then, is the fascinating story of the man who, more than any other American, put snakes and their venom on the map.



“What’s a Serpentarium?” I asked my mother. I was old enough to know that a zoo was a place to see land animals; an aquarium was for seeing sea animals, but a Serpentarium...

“It’s for seeing snakes.”

“Snakes?”

“And lizards. And crocodiles. And other reptiles.”

Ok, I thought. This could be different....

And I really knew it was going to be different when we drove into the parking lot of the Serpentarium and protruding through the flat-roof at the entrance, I saw an amazing 35-foot concrete replica of a cobra, forked tongue flicking menacingly!

After paying for tickets, we walked through the entrance. There was a large, well-groomed square lawn to the right, the place where there would be an incredible show, the ticket clerk told us, in about an hour: a live, king cobra capture.

Meanwhile, we joined a small tour group with a guide describing the different exhibits. There was a large round crocodile pit. Leaning over the wall, looking down, I could see a couple of crocodiles, including, we were told, a very aggressive one that had bitten off its own tail after thinking it was another croc coming to steal its food.

Next we moved to a building which housed all types of poisonous snakes: king cobras, spitting cobras, green mambas, black mambas, palm vipers, pit vipers, puff adders, asps, rattlesnakes, copperheads, cottonmouths, coral snakes—there seemed to be no end to them. The guide interspersed the tour with interesting facts, such as that the most venomous snake, ounce for ounce, was the black mamba, and then he pointed to it in its cage.

After exiting the snake building, we stopped at a holding pen for two giant Galápagos tortoises, which we were told were each over 100 years old. Then we moved to a pit filled with dozens and dozens of pygmy rattlesnakes. “Small, but very deadly,” the guide said. Finally, we were told it was

time to see the main attraction, the Serpentarium’s founder, Dr. Bill Haast, capturing a live king cobra.

As we arrived at the square lawn, I wondered where the capture was going to take place. After all, he surely wasn’t going to let the cobra free on the ground and then try to capture it. There was no fence.

Before I could think further, the guide introduced us to Dr. Haast’s assistant, who it turned out was his wife. She helped someone roll into place a tall cart on wheels with a metal box at the top. That “someone,” a man dressed in a white shirt, pants and shoes, was none other than Dr. Haast.

As Mrs. Haast took a portable microphone, she told the spectators to please stay where they were at the edge of the grass. There was a king cobra in the box, and when they would release it on the ground it was essential that no one move onto the lawn.

They’re going to release it on the ground.... I thought to myself. But there’s no fence!

I instinctively scanned the area for the nearest exit. I also wondered if I could outrun a king cobra.

About a hundred people had gathered around the perimeter of the lawn to watch. Mrs. Haast, who seemed a little uneasy,



The natural setting of the Serpentarium garden included other animals for visitor interest. Shown here is one of two enormous Galápagos turtles. Other pits contained crocodiles, alligators and snakes.

volunteered that no matter how many times her husband did this successfully she was always a little nervous. That didn’t make me feel any better. Again, out of the corner of my eye I looked at the exit and envisioned running full speed to get there....

“A king cobra,” she explained, “is the deadliest snake in the world. Although other snakes have stronger venom,” she continued, “the bite of a king cobra contains more venom than any other. A single bite is enough to kill at least five grown men. It can even kill an elephant.”

I wondered how large king cobras could get. “King cobras can grow to 18 feet,” she said, as if reading my mind. “The one we are about to take out of this box is 16 feet.”

I tried to envision how long 16 feet was. The height to a basketball hoop was 10 feet, which seemed very high to me. (This was before the days I could dunk... just kidding.) Add to that another basket about half the height plus...

Suddenly, a hush came over the crowd. Dr. Haast, manipulating a long metal pole with a hook on the end, slid open the door to the cage.

We heard a loud hiss. Actually, it was more than a hiss. It sounded like a growl. “That sound,” Mrs. Haast explained, “is unique to the king cobra and only a couple of other snakes. Thanks to special resonating chambers, it’s more like a growl than a hiss.” She was reading my mind again.

Dr. Haast manipulated the pole inside the cage.

“Bill,” Mrs. Haast said, referring to her husband, “likes to point out that taking the cobra out and putting it back in is as dangerous as capturing it, because it is at its most unpredictable. In fact, that is how he got his first bite when he was 12 years old.” As she said it, Dr. Haast successfully hooked the cobra, lifted it out of the box and gingerly dropped it to the ground.

Jaws dropped. Children shrieked in horrified glee. I squeezed my mother’s hand.

The second it touched the ground the great snake’s head rose several feet above the grass, spread its hood, weaved back



Every Sunday at the Serpentarium, Haast would release a king cobra on the lawn, as spectators stood just a few feet away without any fence between them....



Haast distracts the snake with the right hand....



A moment before capture. Notice his left hand in position to make the grab.