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I thought I would give Jim a bit of a break from the article writing this month. Whilst Jim and I do all the same sort of things with your cats and dogs I have a particular interest in some of our more exotic friends

We see all sorts of animals at the vets. I often get asked what is the smallest, largest, weirdest, slimiest, scariest, heaviest or fattest animal I have ever treated?, usually by one of our younger more inquisitive client!

Well here goes. . . . smallest – a spider,



largest – an elephant,



weirdest – a slug,



slimiest – a snake (of course),

most scary – a lion, heaviest – an elephant again, fattest – a cat.



Actually, I lied, snakes aren't slimy, but I think a slug is weirder than a snake.

Most of these animals are called exotic. It used to be that anything other than a cat or dog was exotic, even a rabbit or guinea pig. Nowadays we don't know what to expect through the doors. Not all of the unusual animals I mentioned were people's pets. The elephant and lion belonged to the visiting circus in the years when it was acceptable to have such performing animals. You really wouldn't want a lion as a pet, especially one with diarrhoea!



So what exotic pets do people keep nowadays? By far the most popular are reptiles. I have had to learn how to keep and treat these special creatures. There are many types which all require different care. They really should not be kept as pets. They require specialist care from owners who understand their requirements. They require special housing, heating, lighting and feeding. Get it wrong and the creature will suffer, become ill and die. Therefore, anyone considering owning a reptile should treat them as a hobby, not a pet. They should study them, join groups of other like-minded people and be prepared to spend as much money as is necessary to ensure that their reptile has the best care.

If you think that this is for you then where do you start? Well you need to decide what space you have. Some reptiles such as a Burmese python will grow to sixteen feet!



An iguana will require a very large enclosure. Both of these start life as very small and easy to accommodate pets. However they will soon outgrow the facilities that the average person can provide. Snakes eat meat..., mice, rats, guinea pigs and rabbits, plus pet dogs and cats too....it has been known! What is food to a snake is a pet to some people. Can you feed a guinea pig to a snake? If the answer is no, then a snake is not for you. Many lizards eat crickets and locusts. Doesn't sound so bad, but just wait till you get a locust crawling over your face whilst you are asleep! They are great escape artists. What will the mother in law think of that? If you don't want the mother in law visiting too often, then a cricket-eating bearded dragon may be for you.

Visit your local zoo and speak to the keepers. Visit the garden centres - look but don't buy just yet! You can get mixed messages from some staff who really don't know all the facts and some of the housing sold is woefully inappropriate. Join a group such as The Reptile Trust. Read books and surf the net with care – there is a lot of bad advice out there. Speak to your vet. Whilst they may not know everything about every species, they will have access to trusted information.

What can you afford? Can you afford the proper enclosure? Can you afford the heating bills? Can you afford the food bills? Have you got a vet that will treat your “strange pet”? I have clients that will come from thirty miles away because their local vet won't touch it. Can you afford the vet bill?

If the answer to all the questions is yes, then you need to find a legitimate place to buy your reptile. Choose your reptile, set up their new home, collect your pet and enjoy what will be a very rewarding hobby.

I chose a vegetarian lizard that didn't grow very big. A *Uromastyx* was the ideal reptile for me. However, I didn't count on my electricity bill increasing so much!



Whatever you choose, research it well, talk to your vet, but most of all enjoy the experience of sharing your life with some of nature's' weirder and more exotic pets.