Aquarium of the Americas

Louisiana’s biggest new attraction showcases the wonders of the waters

By CYNTHIA V. CAMPBELL
Travel editor

In the fictional world under the sea, mermaids are often depicted as beautiful, mythical creatures. However, in reality, as in American New Orleans, these mythical creatures are not just stories, but a reality for the people who live there and those who visit.

Defining Louisiana's unique relationship to the world's water systems, the massive glass-and-concrete aquarium rises on the banks of the Mississippi River. The building's design is shaped like a fish with a tail, and it houses various exhibits that focus on the environment and the numerous species that call the region home.

This page is an excerpt from a larger article discussing the Aquarium of the Americas, its features, and the unusual experience it offers visitors. The article highlights the aquarium's role in teaching and preserving knowledge about marine life.

Clockwise, from bottom left: A Lantern fish takes all the attention in this circle. This particular fish is highly poisonous through spines in its dorsal fin, which give the fish a ragged look. Lines were long on opening day, but those who waited had a chance to study the architectural niches on the exterior of the building. Heads filled back and mouths snapped, visitors walk through a tunnel under one of the aquarium tanks where the specimens can swim by, up and over viewers, as this turbot apolytly demonstrates. A pair of fearless adventurers find out what it is like to pet a Horsehead Crab. The touch-and-feel exhibit also features the sharks, sea urchins and crabs. A young girl checks out the hand claws of an Atmospheric Dining Bell, one of the ocean-related static displays. The suite is worn by divers going down 2,000 feet and is capable of 72 hours of the support.
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ture poison dart frogs and black-and-green poison arrow frog. Here one can see a 15-foot anaconda snake and a rainbow boa.

Louisianians will be familiar with the creatures in the Mississippi River and Delta Exhibition, where a canopy of moss-draped trees covers a bayou whose population includes alligator gar, sturgeon, paddlefish, catfish, bass, carp, alligator and snapping turtles. Also on view are Audubon Zoo’s famous white alligators.

There’s a Cajun trapper’s bayou cabin with a wooden deck, which visitors can walk beneath to see what life is like for the fish that live under the wharf. Looking up, one sees a crawfish pond. Perched in the middle of this semi-tropical habitat are a glossy black vulture and a red-headed woodpecker.

The largest exhibit, the 500,000-gallon Gulf of Mexico, focuses on Louisiana’s relationship to that massive body of water. One of the world’s largest windows — 14 feet high, 50 feet long and 12 inches thick — provides a 180-degree view of sand tiger sharks, tarpon, amberjack and other fish as they glide past. Included in the tank are Atlantic sting rays, giant tarpon, barracuda and grouper. There’s also a 12-foot-long sawfish, which aquarium authorities say is about 35 years old.

Throughout the day, visitors can watch as fish are hand-fed by divers. Some 70 volunteer divers are participating in the project, and they were selected from 800 who applied to be in the program. The biggest problems they face are not the sharks (who, by the way, are well fed and quite content) but the confinement of the tank and the close proximity to coral, which can be damaged by swim fins. The divers have not yet announced a routine feeding schedule.

More than 700 volunteers play a vital role in the aquarium’s operation. Stationed throughout the exhibit areas, they answer questions and explain details about individuals in each exhibit. Patti Jones, a native of New Orleans, said, “I really knew nothing about sea life. I love the city and I wanted to be a part of the aquarium. We all went to eight weeks of classes, and we’re still learning where everything is located.”

Chris Parsons of Monterey, Calif., and formerly associated with the aquarium there, served as a consultant on the education and volunteer programs at the Aquarium of the Americas. “This is one of the new aquariums in the world that are designed as an immersion experience,” she said. “The best examples of that experience here are the Amazon and Mississippi and Delta exhibitions. The hope is that visitors experience those environments.”

Just as exciting as the emersion habitats are the smaller exhibits. Black-footed penguins from South Africa huddle together in cozy comfort or dive for pleasure in an eye-level pool. Annableps, small fish appearing to have four eyes, stare back at visitors who look through a special “lens” in the exhibit. Colorful clownfish and feathery anemones live together in a happy symbiotic relationship, and the Pacific Giant Octopus winds its many tentacles protectively about itself, curling up to stare back at curious visitors.

The aquarium is a memorable experience, but it is not a static series of displays. Exhibits and individuals will continually evolve. Fish will grow and get fat, have babies, grow old and, yes, die. There will continue to be new exhibits and new creatures.

The facilities include a cafe on the second floor, which serves seafood and snacks, and a gift shop on the first floor featuring quality items ranging from T-shirts to crystal and pewter fish. The building has a classroom area, and special educational programs are being planned for school children. Arrangements can be made for private viewings, conventions and night functions, and weekend festivals, such as the Louisiana Swamp Festival on Oct. 6-7 and 13-14.

The $40 million aquarium is a treasure for the City of New Orleans and for the people of Louisiana. It invites everyone to share in the new wave of thinking about our environment and how we share it with all creatures.