Aquarium of the Americas has it all

By Druann Domangue
Entertainment Editor

Do you have a small aquarium in your home? Perhaps it’s filled with little goldfish or a sunfish or two. Well, you ain’t seen nothing until you’ve visited the Aquarium of the Americas in New Orleans.

This large exhibition hall houses thousands of fish ranging from small goldfish to Tiger sharks weighing hundreds of pounds. The Aquarium is divided into sections which focus on aquatic environments of North and South America. Each section includes exhibits, videos, graphics and hands-on displays.

The Advertiser took a tour of the Aquarium, and came back loaded with information and helpful hints.

First, never go to the Aquarium without ticket in hand. Tickets may be purchased in advance, through any Ticketmaster outlet, or by calling 1-800-683-1996. Tickets are $8 for adults and $4.25 for children, not including the service charge. This advanced purchase will prevent you from having to stand in a VERY long line while people fumble for credit cards or cash. With your ticket ready, you can walk straight to the door and enter.

While you’re in New Orleans, you might also want to visit Audubon Zoo. The city has made the trip easier than ever, with a riverboat docked right outside the Aquarium waiting to take you to the zoo. The St. Charles Avenue streetcar also makes periodic runs to the zoo, and it stops next to the Aquarium. A combination ticket is available, and it makes that day outing for the children. For information on the zoo, call 504-861-2537.

Another important must is the warning — arrive early! The Aquarium opens at 9:30 a.m. seven days a week. It closes at 5 p.m. Sundays through Thursdays and 7 p.m. on Fridays and Saturdays. We arrived at 9:30 a.m., entered immediately, and were able to tour the Aquarium without the stress of being among the crowds (a common complaint of many visitors). In fact, there were just enough people there to make the trip interesting, as we listened to children exclaim in delight and a woman shriek in surprise as a large macaw unexpectedly surprised her with a loud call.

Here’s a short description of what you’ll see at the Aquarium:

The first section of the Aquarium is the “Caribbean Reef,” which features a walk-through tunnel. One fish, which closely resembled E.T. with its wide-set eyes and large mouth, came up to the glass, stayed motionless for several minutes, and stared at eye level with a small girl. The child stuck her face up next to the glass, and to everyone’s amusement, the fish did the same.

This tank is ideal for picture-taking. There are many guides working the various exhibits, and they are quick to suggest that when taking pictures of the fish, the results are much better if photographers aim their flash units up instead of directly at the glass. There is much less distortion and glare as a result.

TV monitors show how fish reproduce, and information about the various types of fish can be found posted alongside the individual tanks. This section included spotted moray eels which resembled black and white slugs, and its relative, the green moray eel.

Louisiana natives were quick to spot the lobsters in the tank. Several of the viewers were overheard discussing the best way to cook the delicacies. Piranhas, which are unlawful to possess in Louisiana, are on display at the Aquarium under the authority of the Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries.

The “Living In Water” section includes a penguin tank. The popular penguins spend their time swimming around and climbing on rock formations. They like to perform. One particular ham bobbed up and down in front of the viewers until he was nudged away by another penguin anxious to get some attention.

Aquarium visitors can take an escalator up into a virtual forest which is appropriately entitled “Amazon Rainforest.” By far the most colorful and creative of the Aquarium sections, this area contains exotic birds which are free to roam around in a tree-filled landscape complete with waterfalls and a Swiss-family Robinson type construction of units up instead of directly at the glass.

Have you ever seen an octopus up close? Well, just imagine the circular rows of the Aquarium, and set your eyes on the gallery of the penguins. These galactic residents perform. One particular ham bobbed up and down in front of the viewers until he was nudged away by another penguin anxious to get some attention.

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The “Living In Water” exhibit features visitors entering a large tank and touching the various creatures. This section features many different species of fresh water creatures, while an Aquarium employee provides information on their habitat and habits.

The exhibits are very educational. Information is provided on fishes’ eyes, taste and touch. For instance, the barbels on a catfish’s chin are more like a tongue than whiskers. They drag them along the bottom tasting for food. Some catfish have taste buds all over their bodies.

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The steps lead up over a waterfall and ponds filled with exotic fish. The overhanging branches hold birds in their natural environment, and you can walk through and touch everything.

Tanks which are positioned in one area of the exhibit contain large fish between two and three feet long, catfish, and an unusual fish called a Pacu which looks like a horse aquarium fish on steroids. Piranhas, which are unlawful to possess in Louisiana, are on display at the Aquarium under the authority of the Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries.

The Aquarium tanks allow viewers a complete look at the fish’s environment. “I especially like that you can see both above and below the water line.”

Forest Nelson

Leaving the “Living In Water” exhibits, visitors enter “Mississippi River.” This section feels like home to local residents. It’s filled with alligators, cypress trees, and other sights and sounds of Louisiana.

The final section, the “Gulf of Mexico” is where the Aquarium brings out its big guns. Large tanks contain enormous fish. One huge tank, 14 feet in height with a 13-inch thick ground glass, holds 400,000 gallons of water and Tiger sharks. Other Gulf of Mexico fish, including Stingrays, are on display at the Aquarium under the authority of the Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries.

In fact, it is a very impressive. Allow yourself approximately one and one-half hours to view the entire exhibit, and wear walking shoes as you relax. As one visitor said, “This is exactly what I came to see. It’s impressive.”

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For further information, call the Aquarium of the Americas at 504-861-2537.