Swamps, Caves and Outer Space

Explore new worlds at the Louisiana Arts and Science Center.

We've all seen Julia Sims' photos of Manchac Swamp in magazines, newspapers and coffee table books. But you haven't really experienced the power of her images until you've seen them in all their glory — blown up and showcased at the Louisiana Arts and Science Center in Baton Rouge.

The vivid photographs — some as much as three feet tall — pull onlookers into the swamp through brilliant color and sharp focus. The wild beauty of the animals and the majesty of the cypress spring to life in ways that reproduction in books and brochures can't capture. Before you view the last photograph, you'll feel and share Sims' devotion to recording and preserving the ancient, threatened swamp.

The photography exhibit will be open through Nov. 21. On Oct. 29 at 7 p.m., Julia Sims and writer John Kemp will host a gallery talk and autograph copies of their book, Manchac Swamp. At the same time, children ages 5 and up can create watercolor or charcoal likenesses of the ones Sims photographs during "Swampy Sunsets," a workshop that will teach watercolor wash and dry-brush techniques.

While the Sims photographs won't stay long, the Louisiana Arts and Science Center's permanent exhibits will give you plenty of reasons to return at any time.

Start upstairs with "Culture of Ancient Egypt." After exploring the brief introductory area, turn the corner and walk into the cave cut into the rock face of a mountain. The walkway takes you into a burial chamber filled with pots, jars, masks and two genuine mummies. Signs describe mumification and the radiography that allows us to figure out age and cause of death.

I cavedropped as a young girl and her father entered the tomb. She grew fascinated, and a museum worker explained that one mummy was a priestess who died at about 20 years old of a crushing blow to her rib cage. The girl had a million questions, and the worker enthusiastically explained how scientists knew so much about the woman, where they found her and why the mummy still had hair after so many years. When they left, I went back for another peek at the mummy, armed with more knowledge this time.

Down the stairs and down the hall, I discovered Train City. A three-square-mile model train town, Train City represents every aspect of a small community served by the railroad, including inner city, suburbs, farms and industrial areas. Once an hour on Saturdays and Sundays, the city comes to life inside its glass chamber.

If your child is more hands-on than don't-touch, stop by the Science Station and the Discovery Depot. The Science Station provides an informal setting for exploring light and sound, color, electricity and simple machines. X-rays, skeletons, pulleys, hooks and trick mirrors all beg to be handled. Designed for 2- to 8-year-olds, the Discovery Depot welcomes kids with huge bins of egg cartons and foam peanuts, and containers filled with markers and crayons. The toddler area satisfies climbers and crawlers, while older kids can point, click and draw on the depot's computers.

Plan ahead to take advantage of one of the Arts and Science Center's highlights, the Challenger Learning Center. This wannabe astronaut's dream has a mission control room designed after NASA's Johnson Space Center and a Space Lab simulator that gives space travelers the feeling of working in space.

Groups of 14-16 or 24-32 can reserve spaceflight simulations on the weekends. Special "beam-up" flights are available once a month for anyone not part of a group. School groups can lift off Monday through Friday by reservation. Mission tasks expand math, science, technology and critical-thinking skills.

Corporate groups take advantage of the simulations to improve teamwork, problem-solving, communication and decision-making. Or so they say. I think it's really about the thrill of being an astronaut for a day.

Getting There

The Louisiana Arts and Science Center is located at 100 South River Road, on the river in downtown Baton Rouge. Hours are Tuesday-Friday, 10 a.m.-3 p.m.; Saturday, 10 a.m.-4 p.m., and Sunday, 1-4 p.m. For more information, call (225) 344-LASC.