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SEA-ING SAN DIEGO

"America's Finest City" Has a Multitude of Marine Life to Share with Locals and Visitors Alike

By Jeannine Clark

It's tough to think of San Diego, California without envisioning the amazing, abundant sea life living in its cool, blue waters; but did you know that San Diego also hosts countless marine mammals, fishes, sharks, jellyfish and seahorses (just to name a few) in several informative and entertaining aquariums and attractions on land? Here are five of the best ways to see (and interact with) San Diego's incredible sea life:



LEGOLAND California probably isn't the first place you think of when searching for sea life, but the park offers a view of many eye-catching underwater creatures in its Sea Life Aquarium. Although mainly geared towards young children, on a recent visit I found something of interest for all ages.

During your journey through what's ostensibly a giant fishbowl, you'll discover unusual facts about tropical sharks and learn about the remarkable lives of seahorses. You'll see glow-in-the-dark jellyfish floating in midnight blue tanks. And you'll see flying stingrays and the underbellies of great white sharks swimming overhead. You'll even be able to touch starfish, abalone and other shellfish in the two, shallow touch pools.

The aquarium is set-up in different zones reflecting everything from the San Francisco Harbor to a shipwreck made of LEGOs, to the lost city of Atlantis. There are fun nooks and crannies for little ones (and not-so-little ones) to crawl under and into to become part of the aquarium. One sweet little girl, in a yellow-and-white dress, stared through the large glass peek-a-boo window and pointed to a school of fish swimming directly toward her. She excitedly said, "Oh look! It's a whole new world." Yes, it is a whole new world for everyone to explore at the Sea Life Aquarium.



The Scripps Institute of Oceanography, Birch Aquarium is a terrific place to spend a few hours marveling at more than 5,000 specimens representing more than



380 species of fishes and invertebrates in multiple fresh and saltwater tanks. You will also learn about coral reefs, global climate changes and conservation efforts worldwide. Some standouts during my recent excursion were the fascinating “fried egg” jellyfish, the potbellied seahorses and the alien-like weedy sea dragons that drift through the water, carried by currents and their own, undulating bodies.

In the “Hall of Fishes,” more than 60 tanks of Pacific fishes and invertebrates from the cold waters of the Pacific Northwest to the tropical waters of Mexico and the Caribbean are on display. The most impressive exhibit is the huge two-story, 70,000-gallon natural seawater and kelp forest tank. During your visit, you might even be treated to a live show as divers feed the fish and clean the tank. They also have a live-web streaming ‘kelp cam’ if you want to take a virtual visit - so while you’re there gazing through the massive glass wall, turn around and smile, because you are live on the web!

Be sure to venture outside to peek inside “The Shark Reef,” a 13,000-gallon tank devoted to shark species that inhabit tropical reef habitats, including white-tip and black-tip reef sharks, nurse sharks, and epaulette sharks. There are three living tide pools as well that overlook the gorgeous Pacific, where visitors can touch and learn about inhabitants from informative docents. Windows in the habitats provide up-close views of starfish, hermit crabs, sea cucumbers, lobsters and other animals local to San Diego's tide pools.



If exploring sea life in the wild is more your thing, why not take a tour along La Jolla's rocky points and reefs? Start from **La Jolla Cove** then proceed down to the Children's Pool. You won't find any children swimming there; instead, you'll be treated to sunbathing seals and sea lions basking in the sun. This prime area is now protected since its been taken over by real estate- savvy seals. Who says animals aren't smart?

Next, head southward to Windansea Beach and Bird Rock, fantastic spots to catch dolphins swimming and seals playing. In the space of a few short miles, you'll encounter peaceful bays and pounding surf, offshore kelp and near-shore tide pools, sea caves, underwater reefs and seal rookeries.

(If something bigger and wilder is more what you're looking for, San Diego also offers plenty of **whale watching tours** where you're almost guaranteed to spot the leviathans on their way to warmer waters in Mexico. Outfits like Hornblower Cruises and Adventure R.I.B. Rides run whale watching tours during the season, which runs from December through March, though you can see blue whales from June through mid-September as well.)

If you're dying to catch a glimpse of a killer whale, you'll want to head over to



SeaWorld, where Shamu is the big star. At *Shamu Rocks* and the Shamu show *Believe*, you'll hear the crowd chant: “Shamu, Shamu, Shamu,” revealing



Shamu's universal appeal and rock-star status. The shows have been adapted since the deadly attack on a trainer by one of their captive orcas; so you won't see killer whales and humans swimming or doing tricks together in the water. But in spite of the recent changes, both shows feature fun and entertaining orca antics and behaviors that are quintessential crowd-pleasers.

Now, no story on marine life in captivity would be complete without mentioning the heated controversy that's arisen lately over its merits. Movies like *The Cove* have painstakingly illustrated the destructive side of human greed and the harmful interaction we're capable of when it comes to other species who inhabit our planet.

While I certainly don't want to see any animal harmed (especially for mere entertainment), it would be difficult to imagine a world without animal parks or aquariums. My hope, therefore, is that the good these places do - in terms of rescue, rehabilitation and education - ultimately outweighs the negative aspects of their existence. (*Read SeaWorld's response.*)

One of my favorite SeaWorld moments was at Pacific Point where I fed seals and sea lions, and talked to Chris, a "Sea Life Expert" at the park. Chris told me that SeaWorld rescues, on average, 200 beached seals every year. As of July of this year, they've rescued 150 - a big year already. As Chris told me, "Beached seals and sea lions are found malnourished and dehydrated. Once they are brought back to health, most are re-released into the wild." In some cases, release isn't possible as was the case with one endangered Guadalupe fur seal that suffers from seizures and needs medication. Without it, he would not survive on his own.

I asked Chris about one seal, with what appeared to be only the whites of his eyes showing. He assured me, "That seal is just suffering from cataracts from old age." It was refreshing to see real evidence of their rescue efforts at work.

If you've ever dreamed of being in the water with gentle beluga whales or swimming with playful dolphins, you're in luck since SeaWorld offers three opportunities to get up-close and personal with two of the cutest marine mammals around. Dolphin and beluga whale interactions allow you to personally interact with them, and you'll learn how trainers use hand signals to communicate with these unique creatures. If you prefer to stay dry, head to the dolphin encounter where you can touch and feed curious bottlenose dolphins without ever leaving solid ground.



You'll also watch perky penguins, powerful polar bears, silly sea otters, flamboyant flamingos, and everything in between as they swim, feed and play. So for many of us city dwellers, parks such as SeaWorld not only offer fun-filled days of entertainment and education, but an opportunity to see the abundant and diverse marine life our planet offers.

FAST FACTS

Adventure R.I.B. Rides (San Diego, CA)

(619) 808-2822

www.adventureribrides.com

www.aquarium.ucsd.edu

www.hornblower.com/hce/port/overview/sd+whalewatching

www.lajollafriendsoftheseals.org

www.california.legoland.com

www.seaworld.com/sandiego

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