



# Beneath the Sea

BY LINDA BARRETT

SEE THE WONDERS OF THE  
AQUATIC WORLD AT THE  
NATIONAL AQUARIUM



Photo credit: Linda Barrett



See the world from below the surface at Baltimore's National Aquarium and experience an amazing and informative journey through the wonders of the aquatic world. Home to more than 20,000 fish, birds, amphibians, reptiles and marine mammals living in award-winning habitats, the aquarium is also a nonprofit organization with a mission to inspire conservation of the world's aquatic treasures.

"The experience at the National Aquarium is not like anything you will see in your day-to-day life," explained Kate Rowe, director of media relations. "You would have to travel around the world and dive to experience areas like the Coral Reef or the Black Tip Reef. Here, it's much closer to home."

## Living Seashore

The newest feature at the National Aquarium, opened May 12, 2015, is the highly-interactive Living Seashore designed to explore the mid-Atlantic shoreline. Several shallow touchpools (the only touchpools in the Mid-Atlantic) allowed us to stroke the wing of an Atlantic stingray, and feel the bell of a pulsing moon jellyfish. They are firmer than you think! Aquarium staff told us exactly where and how to safely touch these creatures. Digital touch-screen table games and an interactive touch wall are featured for those who might not want to put their hands in the water.

You'll discover a myriad of hidden treasures. "You may have seen these items on the beach, but haven't seen it living, like a horseshoe crab. The next time you go to the beach, you'll see things differently," Rowe said.

## Blacktip Reef

Opened Summer 2013, Blacktip Reef replicates an Indo-Pacific reef and features more than 700 animals including a school of blacktip reef sharks. Several vantage points allow visitors to get up close with the animals including an amazing below-the-water, floor-to-ceiling pop-out viewing window that makes you feel as if you are in the water itself.

From above, see if you can spot Calypso, the 500-pound giant green sea turtle who had to have one flipper amputated when found. "Calypso was a rescue turtle and has been with us about 16 years now. She is maybe 20 years old, and they can live 80-100 years," Rowe explained.

## Dolphin Discovery

Wanting to rest our feet for a moment, we wandered into the Dolphin Discovery exhibit in time to catch a training session with the dolphins. From our tiered seating, we were treated to a show of agility and intelligence as the dolphins jumped, waved and circled. A variety of sessions and chats with marine mammal experts are scheduled throughout the day. Check the digital screens for times or download the free mobile app, and don't forget to go down the steps to the underwater viewing area to see the world from a dolphin's point of view.

## Shark Alley

One of the most memorable features of the National Aquarium is the three-story-tall 225,000-gallon, ring-shaped exhibit of Shark

Alley where you traverse a spiral walkway with Roughtail Stingrays and Nurse, Sand Tiger and Sandbar sharks slowly circling slowly around you. Arrive at feeding time to watch Aquarium divers hand-feed resident fish and wave at you from inside the tank.

## Australia: Wild Extremes

A wonderful surprise was found in the first of the two land-based habitats: Australia Wild Extremes. Winner of the 2008 AZA Exhibit of the Year, the Australia exhibit depicts an Australian river gorge filled with close to 1,800 native animals including freshwater crocodiles, laughing kookaburras, colorful finches, lorikeets, the venomous death adder, bats and even flying foxes. You will have to look for them; the free-roaming creatures are not always easy to spot, as in nature, but that's half the adventure. Cross over the waterfall to reach this exhibit.

## Tropical Rain Forest

Lose yourself in the lush greenery of the second habitat, Tropical Rain Forest, featuring a diverse collection of plants and animals including the two-toed sloths, Golden Lion tamarin, monkeys, poison-dart frogs, and frightening tarantulas. Look up to catch brightly-hued Amazon parrots, Turquoise Tangers and White-Tailed Trogons in flight.

Kate Rowe gave an excellent suggestion: "I find that guests only see what's at their eye level. I recommend moving your head up and down to see what's above and below—there are things everywhere to see." See who can spot the most species, even with their camouflage.

## Get Personal with Immersion Tours

With the Aquarium's Immersion Tours (extra fee) you can go behind the scenes for an insider's perspective. Sleep over with the sharks, traverse the shark catwalk, enjoy a before-we-open guided tour, get personal with the dolphins, discover the world of the icky, creepy, slimy, or be a guest diver in one of the Aquarium's most popular exhibits. Immersion tours vary in length from daily one-to-two hour tours to overnight stays.

## History of National Aquarium

Established in 1873 in Wood's Hole, Massachusetts, the aquarium relocated to Washington, D.C. in 1878. In August 1981, the Baltimore location opened and there were two locations until the D.C. branch closed in September 2013. Now, there is just one National Aquarium, located in a stunning multi-level building on the docks of the Baltimore Inner Harbor.

Tickets are not inexpensive, so plan on spending the day. You'll need that much time to see it all anyway. You can always step out to enjoy lunch (get your hand stamped) at one of the Inner Harbor restaurants and return in the afternoon, if you'd like. Visit on Fridays after 5:00 p.m. for half-price admission.

National Aquarium is one of the wonderful gems of Baltimore and should be at the top of your list. Where else can you experience all this without a passport? ♦

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