

Disney World for Aquarists

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I have family in Florida and so can be a frequent visitor to Orlando and of course, take my love of fishkeeping with me. If you are going to take that holiday of a lifetime, here is some advice that will help you also to enjoy the American aquatic scene.



Millions of Brits visit Florida every year and stay in Orlando's International Drive (or better still for Disney, the 192 Resort Area of Kissimmee) and aquarists among them will have many things to see and enjoy. Marinists especially must visit SeaWorld and marvel at the displays. More of that later, because SeaWorld is not Disney (it is owned by the beer company Anheuser-Busch).

Disney's World

There are four 'Adventure Parks' in Disney World near Kissimmee: The Magic Kingdom, Animal Kingdom, MGM Studios and Epcot. There is nothing aquatic in MGM Studios or the Magic Kingdom (but plenty of other fascinating shows and rides of course). You would think Animal Kingdom would have aquaria and fish but the only ones are a few large Pacu in the Asian Otter display. They can be seen below water level through an acrylic front to the display opposite the Pizzafari restaurant to the left of Discovery Island.

Disney's main claim to aquatic fame is the 'Seas' exhibit in Epcot (Experimental Prototype City of Tomorrow). Readers who have already visited Disney World will recall that since it was built by United Technologies Corp. for Disney, the exhibition was called the 'Living Seas' with total emphasis on 'edutainment' about the Sea and its animals. There were 'Hydrolators' – pretend lifts that took you down to Sea Base Alpha with its aquariums and touch tanks.

This has all changed – the aquarium has been given the Disney treatment and made into a cartoon show. It is now called 'The Seas with Nemo & Friends' (to the West of the main Fountain Display). A ride called a 'clamobile' (shell-shaped people-mover) takes visitors through views of the main aquarium with a narration about losing Nemo (the Clownfish of Disney-Pixar's "Finding Nemo" motion picture).

This includes projected images of the cartoon fish into the aquarium, so they seem to be swimming among the real fish. Even if you disapprove of the concept, you have to marvel at the technology. After the ride, there are still some seawater aquariums to see and views into the main tank with displayed data on the pH and salinity etc. (it is claimed that the pH is maintained at precisely 8.096!).



Disney's famous Living Seas exhibit is now a cartoon ride.

A Six Million Gallon Aquarium

The statistics of 'The Seas' aquarium is amazing. It is the World's 6th largest ocean yet totally artificial. It contains 6 million gallons (that's American gallons which is 5 million Imperial Gallons or nearly 23 million litres) and when they do a complete water change (it happens) 27 lorry-loads of seasalt are needed. Behind the scenes huge biofilters recycle all 6 million gallons every 2 hours and 40 minutes.

The aquarium houses 3,000 fishes (real ones!) of 100 species and are fed over 400 lbs of food daily, prepared by Animal Nutritionists and delivered by qualified divers. Diets range from Romaine Lettuce to ground fishfood in dental plaster (for the Parrot Fish to crunch).

The Land

Next to the Seas is The Land (with the fantastic 'Soarin' ride – don't miss it) that includes a boat trip through the 'Living with the Land' exhibit. This is a biotechnology unit with greenhouses using hydroponics and aeroponics and an aquaculture section. The vegetables, fruit and fish they produce is used in all the restaurants within the Disney parks. They have even combined the culture of fish and plants.

The ride only gives a passing glance at the intensive aquaculture tanks of Tilapia and Channel Catfishes etc. but a closer look is possible with the 'Behind the Seeds Tour' where you take an hour-long walk through the unit and includes hand-feeding the fish. This has to be prebooked at the Customer Relations desk at the entrance to Soarin'.



Disney's combined aquaculture and hydroponics

Disney's Pedigree Koi

From these 'Future World' rides at Epcot, visitors move on to 'World Showcase' where exhibitions from eleven countries reside (United Kingdom includes Harry Ramsden's Fish & Chips). The Japanese exhibit has splendid gardens with crystal-clear water lakes holding magnificent pedigree Koi. These include some incredibly beautiful longfinned Sanke.

If Koi is your thing, visit the Gaylord Palms Exhibition Centre (free but parking is \$10) at Junction 65 off the I4 motorway. The Koi are in the Atrium within the hotel's shopping and restaurant area. There is also a seawater lake with Tarpon, Snook and Red Rum fish; feeding times are advertised as Monday, Wednesday and Fridays at 4pm.

Swim with the Fishes

Disney World has two Water Parks in the complex – Blizzard Beach and Typhoon Lagoon. There are no fish at Blizzard Beach but Typhoon Lagoon has tropical fishes, and you can snorkel among them.

Typhoon Lagoon has a sea with 6 foot waves for surfing and coral sand beaches for sunbathing – but the sea is actually fresh water, filtered clean, clear and sterile. Around this 'sea' are water slides and rides galore with one special display of interest to aquarists. This is 'Shark Reef' advertised as 'a saltwater adventure around a sunken tanker with real sharks and schools of tropical fish'.

The sea is of course, artificial seawater, with a huge gravel-based biofilter and kept at 68-70 degrees F (20-21C) to maximise Oxygen content. Actually this makes the water feel cold to swimmers (since the summer air temperatures will be in the upper 80s F (32C)).

The sunken tanker is upside down and you can climb down into the hull to view the fish and sharks through the portholes.

Visitors in groups (you must be able to swim) are taken through showers (to remove suncreams because they clog those biofilters) and everyone is given snorkelling equipment and lessons on how to use it. This does not include flippers because they frighten the fish. Once the short lesson is over the group is turned loose to swim in the 'sea' with Coral Fishes such as French Grunt, Scrawled File Fish, Sargassum Triggerfish, Yellowtail Damselfish, Rainbow Parrotfish, Blue Tang, Spanish Hogfish, Rock Beauty and more.

Far from appearing stressed, the fish are all active, colourful and huge. They seem to accept the humans thrashing about among them. As advertised, there are Rays and Sharks in the same waters, but separated by an acrylic sheet from the fish and the swimmers.



Visitors receive lessons on snorkelling before swimming with the Coral Fish

Alligators Galore

Florida is famous for its freshwater alligators (or infamous – some are people eaters) and so Gatorland is a popular venue for visitors after the Disney tours. It is on Orange Blossom Trail just north of Kissimmee town centre. The entrance and gift shop burnt down in 2006, but a new entrance has now been built.

From the entrance take a right to the observation tower and climb to the top. Look down on the alligator-infested waters and you will see shoals of Tilapia swimming unscathed among the reptiles.

Restaurants with Aquaria

The resorts area has hundreds and hundreds of restaurants with fierce competition making each one have some claim to fame. Often this will be a well-stocked and maintained aquarium. Aquarium rental firms do good business in Florida.

The Red Lobster chain has acrylic aquaria with African Cichlids (chosen for attraction with hardiness) and even McDonalds has a giant seawater aquarium at their largest fastfood outlet in the World (on Sand Lake Road just by Junction 75a of the I4).



Two giant seawater aquariums in the McDonalds restaurant in Orlando

The Rainforest restaurant chain have display marine aquaria – world-wide too. The one at Downtown Disney is spectacular and has been copied by the new (for 2009) T-Rex restaurant by Disney, also in Downtown.



Entrance to Rainforest Diner – through marine tanks!

SeaWorld - the one for Marinists

As stated, the world-famous SeaWorld Adventure Park in Orlando (there are two more at San Diego and San Antonio – all with Shamu, the killer whale) is in competition with Disney. So too is Universal Studios with two Adventure Parks in Orlando, but they have no fish displays.

SeaWorld is a must for marinists. At one of their many entertainments is a water-splash rollercoaster ride called Journey to Atlantis. This includes a shop called the Golden Seahorse and inside is the Jewels of the Sea Aquarium display. The tanks have unusual wave shaped fronts with live, dense coral reefs and every kind of coralfish that can be kept in captivity.

One spectacular aquarium is a walk-over glass tank under another tank over your head – both filled with sharks and seafishes!

At the Shark Encounter are seven different species of Shark and seafish such as Redfish, Golden Trevally, Tarpons and many Rays. The unit has a restaurant where you can have a meal in front of the giant viewing aquarium. The entrance to this restaurant includes the only freshwater fish in SeaWorld, a cylindrical tank filled with hundreds of Tinfoil Barbs swimming round and round....

Discovery Cove

Discovery Cove is a separate unit at SeaWorld where you can famously 'swim with the Dolphins'. This includes a chance to swim among coral fishes with supplied snorkelling equipment. Waterproof cards identifying the fish are available and you will find Atlantic Blue Tangs, Cinnamon Clownfish, Blue Ringed Angels, French Angels, Redlined Butterfly and many more within touching distance.



Identity Cards showing the fish surrounding you in Discovery Cove

The Florida Aquarium

Florida is home to many exotic fishes, but Floridians do not keep them in aquaria, the freshwater ones are just viewed as bait to catch the seafish. Minnows and Crappie are caught and used on sea-fishing boats to land Red Snappers or Gag Groupers. All these fishes can be seen in the only public aquarium in the Disney World area....the Florida Aquarium in Tampa.

However, this does mean an 80 mile trip and is not for the nervous driver. It is a straight run down the I4 (West), a kind of M1 with a slow as well as a top speed limit. 18-wheelers thunder past you on all lanes at 80mph.

Tampa is a typical American city – being torn down and rebuilt continuously – but the Aquarium is well signposted and can be found at Tampa's Port Authority's Cruise Terminal 2 (a few miles beyond Exit 45A off the I4).

Opened in 1995 at a cost of \$84 million, the huge building has a shell-shaped glass dome enclosing two stories of display aquaria and paludaria. There is a walk-through scheme showing a drop of water from an underground spring as it moves into various Florida habitats all the way to the sea. The flora and fauna are shown in real-life displays, not only fish but Spoonbills, Herons, Ducks, even Snakes and Alligators, with Mangrove Plants that tower over the visitors.

The fish are all Floridian and so will be unknown to most British aquarists. They have names like Red Rum, Sheepshead Minnow, Spotted Pinfish, Atlantic Guitarfish, Tomtate and Fascinating Filefish. There are some familiar ones - many Killifishes and shoals of huge but colourless Sailfin Mollies in the marine aquaria.

With the American desire to guild every Lilly, the displays range from the superb to the garish. The Aquarium's Mission Statement is 'to entertain, educate and inspire stewardship about our natural environment'. An army of Curators, Instructors, Divers and volunteers give talks and tours using high tech equipment. For example a diver will swim in the 500,000 gallon Coral Tank and take questions from an audience the other side of the 12" thick acrylic aquarium front. A 600 gallon Touch Tank has Sea Stars, Urchins, Crabs and many more invertebrates with staff always on duty to describe – and protect – the animals. This display is called the 'No Bone Zone' stated in brilliant fluorescent lights.

On the sea side of the building is a veritable Theme Park for children with water slides, play fountains and promotional stands for radio and educational programmes – the main sponsor is Disney World.

You can swim with the fishes, dive with the Sharks; even take a 90 minute tour of Tampa Bay in a 64-foot Catamaran. Everything is beautifully laid out and scrupulously clean of course, and apart from occasional hurricanes, basks under the famous Florida sunshine.

Well worth the trip – if you can get away from the delights of Disney World.



The Florida Aquarium is closely associated with Disney World



A diver in the giant seawater talks to visitors via wireless link

Go aqua-shopping.....

The small, privately-owned aquashops have closed down because of competition from the nation-wide, large petshop stores. Visitors to Florida may remember the giant 'Aquarium' sign on the Orange Blossom Trail, but that shop closed last year. Heading south on the Trail will meet Osceola Parkway crossroads. Turn left onto East Ocala Parkway and on the right the first shopping area has the last small aquashop called 'Aquarium Aqualife'. Open Monday afternoons and Tuesday to Saturday 10am to 8pm, Sunday 11am to 4pm.

The large stores are Petco and PetsMart in Orlando. Both are open 9am to 9pm (10am to 6pm Sunday). Go to Orlando Square at the crossroads of Sand Lake Road and Orange Blossom Trail for Petco. They have a large fishkeeping section with fresh and saltwater fish. The aquarium units and accessories are interesting, but marvel at antibiotics such as Tetracycline for treating petfish, on unregulated sale.

What does it all cost?

A lot – that is why it is the holiday of lifetime. With the £ between \$1 and \$2 everything looks reasonably cheap but the price is never what you see. At checkout 7% Florida sale tax is added. Disney Parks are value for money but you get a lot, so it costs a lot. Each Park is about \$70 per person but a Park Hopper is best for an extra \$45 (less for Seniors and Juniors). Parking is \$12 per day.

SeaWorld is about \$65 plus \$12 parking but they usually have some scheme for second day visits. Gatorland is around \$20 and \$13 for children with free parking.

If you want to swim with the fishes Discovery Cove will set you back \$170 and \$270 if you want to swim with a Dolphin. A cheaper option for swimming with fishes is to visit Disney's Typhoon Lagoon at \$36 (\$30 children) plus that tax but parking is free. All this is at the time of writing; the prices seem to change too frequently and always upwards....

It pays to pre-book with your travel agency or via the Internet rather than pay at the door. Stay away from the 'Cheap Tickets for Disney' places on the 192 and International Drive!