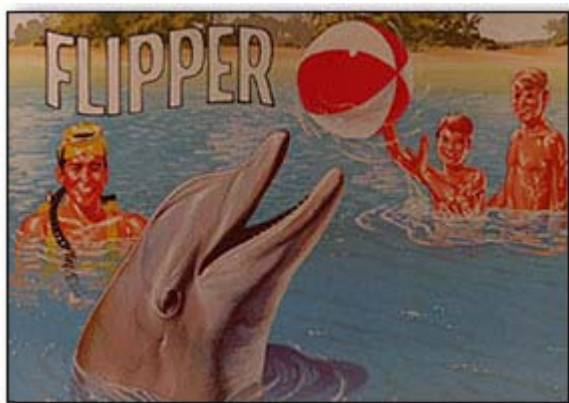


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LaVidaLocal

Something fishy

We Durangoans tend to eschew tourist activities, opting instead for free nature experiences (well, minus the cost of our gear). But I have to admit that when I travel, sometimes I love the touristy stuff. Don't get me wrong, I like to find gritty music venues and underground art, and have my fair share of stories involving sketchy bus rides in developing countries, but I'm also tickled by tourist traps like the Leaning Tower of Pisa or cheesy revolving restaurants on top of skyscrapers. These spectacles draw crowds for a reason.



So on a recent business trip to Atlanta, I snuck away one afternoon to visit one of the city's biggest attractions: the Georgia Aquarium. When it opened in 2005, it was the largest aquarium in the world, and more than 1 million people visited it in the first 100 days. Singapore knocked them down to the second largest in 2012, but the Georgia Aquarium still has tens of thousands of marine animals in 10 million gallons of water, including a 6.3-million gallon tank with four whale sharks. I couldn't wrap my brain around it and needed to see it for myself.

The whale shark enclosure was my first stop. I walked into a huge room playing crescendoing classical music and a wall of glass. On the other side, tropical fish and manta rays swooped near gaping children – a gigantic grouper menaced a kid who hollered, "That grouper's gonna eat me!" Then a whale shark glided into view. It was like one of those

"THX – The Audience is Listening" surround sound moments as the room swelled with voices shouting and "oohing" and "aahing." It was cool to share a moment like that with a room full of strangers.

Then I wandered into a hallway that tunneled under the tank and stood on a moving walkway while craning my neck to watch the various sharks, rays and fish cruise overhead. I didn't notice that there were TV screens sharing information about the tank's inhabitants until an excited tween boy exclaimed, "No wait – that was a zebra shark!"

Hooray for kids applying knowledge! I loved people's reactions to the marine life almost as much as seeing the animals themselves. I spent a long time watching the otters flit around, torpedoing through the water and then floating belly up, mussing their whiskers with their little paws. One young woman declared, "They're like water ferrets," while another asked her boyfriend, "What are those? They're creepy!" He ignored her, instead chuckling at the otter scratching its nose in the cutest way – I bet they broke up that night over otters.

I cooed with school kids over the turtle eating lettuce, got hypnotized by jellyfish, laughed at the penguins waddling around in their little tuxedos. Staring at the display of "mermaid's purses," a gaggle of 11-year-old boys crowded in and started hollering, "What's that?" One of them said, "They're shark eggs. There are six babies inside but only one hatches because the dominant shark eats the other ones." The rowdiness subsided as they pondered this news, but I couldn't help blurting, "Eww! Is that true?" Instead of screaming, "Stranger danger!" the kid nodded his head authoritatively, and I very maturely added another, "Eww!" (No doubt the 40-something Colorado hippie was one of the strangest sights the Atlanta kids saw at the aquarium that day.)

Close to a thousand of us headed to the "Dolphin Tales" auditorium for the afternoon show. Every employee and volunteer seemed to think it was extremely important to arrive 30 minutes early, so I got there in time for the warm-up act. A young guy with a microphone was telling aquatic jokes like, "What did one ocean say to the other ocean? ... Nothing: they just waved." (To his credit, he also encouraged the audience to boo him.) Then we watched a video about the conservation and research efforts made with proceeds from aquarium admission fees, and we pledged to resolve to make conservation efforts in our own lives, like recycling and using less water. We were repeatedly reminded that the "splash zone" was in the first 10 rows if we wanted to get wet (I was safely in row 14).

The show started with singing and dramatic backstory about a ship that needed to be saved by dolphins. This is going to be so lame, I thought – until three dolphins shot straight into the air in perfect synchronization, and I burst into tears.

The dolphins proceeded to save the “ship” by splashing the audience, leading to screeches of delight from schoolkids and abrupt exits from non-English speaking tourists who hadn’t understood the meaning of “splash zone.” The show concluded with an actor booming that we can look to the stars to see the dolphin constellation and know that a friend is always nearby, prompting more tears from a certain sappy Durango tourist.

We pressed out in a claustrophobic throng while volunteers thanked us for coming. “That was amazing – I cried!” I told an unimpressed teen. I didn’t know what to do with all of my unbridled joy at the incredible experience I was having. I assumed everyone must be as overcome as I was. Then I heard the guy next to me ask his buddy, “Is there a good seafood restaurant around here? I’m starving.”

I realized with a jolt that it was time to head off the beaten path and find a more authentic cultural experience. But I only made it about a block away from the Georgia Aquarium before I spotted a Ferris wheel.

– Jen Reeder

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