

Family Travel

Exploring Monterey

Under the Sea



Ocean sunfish swim with the sharks in the Monterey Bay Aquarium's new Outer Bay exhibit.

► We never heard, “Are we there yet?” from our 6 and 8 year olds throughout the five-hour drive. That’s the good news. The bad (for us parents, anyway) is the reason: We left L.A. after 9 p.m., arriving at the elegant Monterey Plaza Hotel at approximately 2:30 a.m. The desk clerk though, like a well-schooled butler, never let on that this was an unusual hour to check-in—a professional aplomb that marked our two-day stay.

While the rhythmic crashing of the waves had soothed us into our too-short slumber, we were eased awake by the calls of the seagulls and the barking sea lions (*Awur! Awur!*) beneath our window. Stepping out on our balcony in the morning light, I realized that the Monterey Plaza is partially perched on pylons, offering a front-row seat to the sights and smells of the sea. (As close as you can get without Dramamine; bring your binoculars!)

But we still wanted to get beneath the surface—that was the purpose of our visit, after all—so we walked a couple blocks down Cannery Row to the Monterey Bay Aquarium. On our last visit, a couple years ago, we had admired the aquarium’s three-story-high kelp forest stocked with sealife, enjoyed the thoughtfully

designed sea otter exhibit where you can watch the furry mammals from above and below the water, and had fun petting the velvety soft stingrays. Revisiting those alone would be a treat, but the new Outer Bay wing makes a return trip (or first ever visit) mandatory.

The centerpiece is the Outer Bay, a million-gallon indoor ocean that showcases fast-swimming fishes like sharks, barracuda, schools of tuna and huge ocean sunfish weighing in at 3,000 pounds. As we stared through the 35-by-54-foot window (the largest in the world) we were absolutely captivated by the constant motion. Nearby, the Outer Bay Drifters is a mesmerizing collection of jellyfish—from the tiny translucent lobed comb that looks like an alien spaceship to the golden brown sea nettle that hypnotically undulates along, trailing its ruffled tentacles. At the Flippers, Flukes & Fun exhibit we tried out interactive learning displays that actually *are* fun. In fact, there were as many adults as children vying to catch plastic fish with a mini orca, try on foam whale flippers, or push a button to hear an elephant seal’s fartlike bel-low (a big hit with the preschool set).

The aquarium houses more than 100 permanent exhibits as well as temporary galleries like *Deadly Beauties* featuring more than two dozen of the most poisonous marine species on earth. Tickets: \$13.75 adults, \$6 children 3 to 12. Call (800) 756-3737. Visit the aquarium online at <http://www.mbayaq.org/>. Tip: It gets quite crowded, so buy your tickets in advance and visit on a weekday if you can.

Back at the Monterey Plaza, we dined on tender grilled sea scallops with mushrooms, wood roasted salmon and a perfectly caramelized crème brûlée at the Duck Club Restaurant. (We didn’t try the Duck Club duck, but if the rest of the food is any indication, it must be good.) While, at first glance, the polished, traditional decor doesn’t shriek “kid-friendly,” the children’s menu was surprisingly extensive (don’t

miss the cookie plate!) and families are made to feel welcome. The restaurant is also open daily for breakfast and lunch.

The hotel is offering a special aquarium package available until Dec. 7: \$169 per night Sunday through Thursday for an inland view room (ocean view, \$209) including two aquarium tickets. Call (800) 334-3999. Take a virtual tour of the Monterey Plaza and Western Lodgings’ five other Northern California hotels at <http://www.wlodging.com>.

We broke up the ride home with an overnight stay in Pismo Beach at the Sandcastle Inn (about 2 1/2 hours south of Monterey). Our comfortable ocean view motel room had a refrigerator, VCR and was steps from the sand. And a long soak in their outdoor Jacuzzi helped relax our muscles for the drive home, which crept up all too soon. Summer rates, including continental breakfast, range from \$79 to \$134 weekdays; \$105 to \$155 weekends; suites up to \$225. Call (800) 822-6606 or visit <http://webmill.com/pismo>.

—Vivien Santana Hughes



“Interactive” aptly describes the Flippers, Flukes & Fun area of the new Outer Bay exhibit at the Monterey Bay Aquarium.

