

Sept. 3: OdySea Aquarium Opens

Written by Editorial

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The opening of the highly anticipated OdySea Aquarium is planned for Saturday, Sept. 3. Located at the Salt River Pima-Maricopa Indian Community, it is the largest aquarium in the Southwest, spanning 200,000 square feet. The two-level, state-of-the-art facility holds more than two million gallons of water and accommodates over 10,000 visitors daily.

The OdySea Aquarium offers an educational, interactive and entertaining experience for guests of all ages by combining theme-park-style amusement with highly engaging presentations of aquatic life like no other in the industry. The facility includes a 3D theater, SeaTREK™ underwater ocean walking and a one-of-a-kind voyage through the “Living Sea”—a “surprise” that will be revealed upon opening.

Unparalleled features include massive aquatic orbs suspended from the lobby ceiling and filled with colorful schools of fish, and a giant submerged escalator allowing guests to descend deep into the ocean while surrounded by thousands of seas creatures. Even the restrooms have viewing windows into the shark habitat so guests won’t miss a thing when they need to take a break.

Throughout the OdySea Aquarium experience, interactive activities are plentiful from the *walk-about animals* referred to as “Animal Ambassadors” such as a sloth, penguins and otters, to “touch” areas designed for visitors to *feel* sea lion whiskers, turtle eggs, invertebrates and more. Visitors may also participate in scheduled daily events throughout the day such as feedings, enrichment sessions for the animals and Question & Answer sessions with aquarists.

“The futuristic entertainment component of the OdySea Aquarium goes far beyond delivering a standard aquarium experience,” says Amram Knishinsky, PhD, principal founder. “It will offer experiential engagement like no other in the country.”

With more than 50 exhibits, over 30,000 animals and 500 species, the visitor’s journey begins with a *drop of water falling from the sky into the lakes and rivers. The rivers wind their way to the shores and down into the vast ocean.* At each stage of the drop’s journey, visitors experience a distinctive environment teeming with animal and plant life.

From fresh water to salt water, bayous to swamps and coral reefs to the ocean’s deep abyss, some of the diversified exhibits include:

Aqua Lobby: Upon entering, guests view nine massive globe aquariums suspended from the ceiling, each weighing 1,000 lbs. and filled with colorful schools of fish.

American Rivers: The journey begins with the diverse “Rivers of the World” and a variety of exhibits featuring fresh water turtles, paddlefish, sturgeon, the endangered Apache trout, gar, 60-lb. catfish, baby Siamese crocodiles and more.

Rainforest Rivers: Moving to the Amazon, these exhibits include bigtooth river rays, true piranha, pacu, arapaima, archerfish and more.

Otter Banks: At this exhibit the charismatic Asian small-clawed otters wrestle, play and demonstrate lively underwater acrobatics with a special vocabulary of their own. These small marine life animals are on the top predator list and they are critical for the eco-system.

Tide Touch Pool: Larger than most touch pools, this 37-foot long touch pool holds more than 2,000 gallons of water. Interactive, hands-on discoveries include sea cucumbers, sea stars, hermit crabs, sea snails and more.

Penguin Point: One of the most popular exhibits, this experience begins with animatronic characters (“Pip & Polly”) who answer important questions about penguins’ natural behaviors. Guests can observe the playful South African penguins and their agile and graceful swimming patterns through underwater portholes. In addition, a special “PIP” (Penguin Interaction Program) allows visitors to get up-close-and personal with these happy penguins where photo opportunities are abundant.

Stingray Bay: Atop the platform overlooking SeaTREK™ guests can watch the underwater ocean walking adventures and touch marine life such as cownose rays, angelfish and bamboo shark.

Escalator to the Deep Ocean: The first of its kind, visitors begin their descent via an escalator, fully encased by an acrylic tunnel, that moves slowly down into the “depths of the ocean.” During this descent, guests are serenaded by the soothing sounds of water and completely surrounded by eagle ray flying overhead, whitetip reef sharks emerging from the shadows, rescued seas turtles and other mesmerizing ocean creatures.

Sharks of the Deep: This exhibit, presented by Cox, includes over 200,000 gallons of water and multiple viewing areas to allow guests to see more than 8 different species of mysterious deep ocean sharks including California leopard sharks, scalloped hammerhead, blacknose sharks, bonnethead sharks and more.

Bizarre & Beautiful: Nature’s most unusual sea creatures are found at this exhibit including the giant Pacific octopus, moray eel, California spiny lobster, lionfish, king crab, nautilus and chain dogfish.

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Reef Jewels: *The “Jewels of the Caribbean” is an opportunity to get a closer look at some of the ocean’s most precious gems such as the clown fish, scissortail chromis, banded butterflyfish, sea horses, the giant jawfish and many more.*

Great Barrier Reef: *Guests cross the Red Sea through an acrylic tunnel leading to the inside the Earth’s largest living structure-Australia’s famous Great Barrier Reef. Here visitors can observe the most diverse Great Barrier Reef exhibit in the world with species including angel fish, morrish idol, harlequin tuskfish, foxface and a variety of red breasted Maori wrasse fish.*

Living Sea: *Considered to be an engineering marvel and the very first of its kind, visitors are whisked away on a one-of-a-kind voyage through the Living Sea for a 20-minute thrilling experience.*

Ocean Art: *A martini glass-shaped aquarium is part of a living “art gallery” that features the peaceful painted anthias, vibrant tangs, and thousands of sparkling tropical schooling fish in a sea of color.*

3D Theater *With stadium seating for 200 people, this theater is the setting for the spectacular 10-minute 3D feature film “Underwater Giants” featuring the humpback whales, whale sharks and more. This exclusive film was produced for the OdySea Aquarium by award-winning MacGillivray Freeman Films, renowned as the world’s foremost independent producer and distributor of giant-screen 70mm films.*

SeaTREK™: *This first-time indoor SeaTREK™ experience is an underwater interactive adventure that takes participants into a truly immersive experience where they are surrounded by thousands of colorful and curious sea creatures from the Indo-Pacific region of the world. Participants wear an OdySea wetsuit, a special SeaTREK™ helmet and walk into the water. It is not necessary to be scuba certified. This experience is for ages 9 yrs. and older and reservations are required. There is an additional fee for this adventure.*

During the three-hour OdySea Aquarium experience, guests may crave nourishment and refreshments. To satiate their needs, guests enter the **Lighthouse Cafe**, presented by Coca-Cola, through an authentic 28 ft. lighthouse. The nautical-themed restaurant features wall art with more than 40 water-themed movie posters—from *Jaws* to *Finding Dory*—and large television monitors showcasing famous lighthouses throughout the world. The menu offers a selection of beer and wine, artisan brick oven pizzas, gourmet burgers and other items that appeal to the palates of all ages.

The OdySea Treasures Gift Shop will carry keepsakes ranging from books and videos to an assortment of tee shirts, jewelry, art and other aquarium-related merchandise.

The 501(c)(3), non-profit OdySea Aquarium Foundation is an active participant in the aquarium community that contributes to education and ocean conservation in a variety of ways.

Over the next few months, OdySea in the Desert will open approximately 30 restaurants and retail establishments surrounding a one-acre courtyard with multiple water features and a lively center stage.