

Newport Aquarium

By Sarah Mullins

As a little kid I loved going to the aquarium, in the lay-out-my-clothes-and-not-get-a-wink-of-sleep-the-night-before kind of way. An air of adventure always swirled around school field trips or overnights with Girl Scouts. Everyone had to get a signed permission slip, pack a lunch and squeeze onto an overcrowded bus for the hour-long trip from suburban West Chester, Ohio to Newport, Kentucky. I always felt a sense of elation as we made our initial descent into the blue tinted underwater wonderland via the main escalator at the Newport Aquarium. Even as an adult I felt giddy with anticipation for what the aquarium would reveal to me. I discovered that visiting the aquarium in the middle of the afternoon on an uneventful weekday is the ideal way to experience the marine life. With no one around, I was free to embrace my inner child and embark on my own adventure. I felt like I was in a scene of a romantic comedy, with the cheerful music and brightly colored fish swimming through giant tanks above my head.

I can't say that I have ever had a particular fascination with seahorses, but I was certainly drawn to them in their little tank in the wall. Seeing as I had the place to myself, I figured it would be okay if I observed them for a while. I plopped down on the floor with my camera and made some friends. I had no idea the little fin on the back of a seahorse was what propelled them along. They were swimming through clumps of algae, just having a great time. I would have sworn that one of them saw me and was posing for pictures. He wrapped his tail around the slimy green algae and was making sure I got all of his best angles. Seeing as we are now best friends, I named him Norbert.

Aside from my impromptu seahorse fashion photo shoot, a number of interactive elements kept me occupied. After wandering through the tunnels of acrylic, with stingrays idling overhead, past walls painted a bright cobalt blue, I happened upon a bayou inhabited by the whitest alligators I had ever seen. These White American Alligators were affectionately named

Snowball and Snowflake. They were rather uninterested in my presence, but perked up when their handlers brought them a gourmet lunch of field mice. Their ruby red eyes scanned the habitat looking for the best place to snack on their afternoon treat. There is something primal and majestic about the aggressive nature in which the alligators snapped up their prey. I was able to witness this feast due purely to good timing, the employees informed me the alligators are not fed on a set schedule. I just happened to wander into their little swamp at just the right time.

While the alligators were quite enticing, the best part of the aquarium is the mermaid lagoon. On weekends merfolk can be found sitting upon rocks, ready to answer questions from inquisitive children. My luck did not hold here, there were no mermaids holding court, but there were stingrays. Now you may wonder what could be so great about the stingray exhibit if there were no mermaids to be found, but why converse with a water nymph when you can caress a stingray? For some reason I imagined they would feel rough, like a cat's tongue, but instead they felt slimy like freshly cooked pasta. I could have spent all day hunched over the mesmerizing creatures, but it seemed only fair I shared the lagoon with the family who followed me in. As I was appreciating the pirate chic décor of rope nets and anchors, I realized upon looking at the family behind me that the love of exploration I felt was a universal feeling. I saw it in the mother as she watched her three kids clamor over each other to pet the stingrays and in each of their faces when the stingray graced them with its presence.

There was so much to do and explore from the sharks, to the jellyfish, to the penguins. Each exhibit immerses you in a new world full of exotic creatures and dazzling colors, that I hardly wanted to leave. I could see myself in the little girl as she was being dragged out the door by her mom. Her mother protested that she had been there ten times already but the look in the girl's eyes told me she was already plotting ways to come back.