

## National Aquarium: Baltimore

by Erik Johnson, PassPorter Guest Contributor

Isn't the National Aquarium in Washington, D.C.? Well, there is a National Aquarium in Washington, D.C.; it is in the Department of Commerce Building near the Federal Triangle Metro stop. However, the "official" National Aquarium is in Baltimore, Maryland.

Prior to our visit, we purchased our admission and dolphin show tickets on the Aquarium web site, with a scheduled entry time of 10:30 am, and would be seeing the 11:30 am dolphin show. Admission prices vary based on the package you choose.

The National Aquarium in Baltimore is located downtown, at the Inner Harbor, convenient to other Baltimore attractions. We parked in a garage located across the street. There was no line when we got to the aquarium and we were directed to the kiosk where the online will-call tickets are picked up. The process was both fast and automated. We got inside quickly -- good thing too, as it was chilly! It was nice that we do not need a stroller for our sons anymore, as they do not allow them. However, the aquarium will loan you a backpack carrier, if you need one.

There is a reception area that is staffed with nice cast members - whoops, I mean greeters - that get you oriented so you can enjoy your visit. The aquarium was built on two piers in the inner harbor. It is in sections and each section has its own theme (and cafe and gift shop - of course). The sections are Glass Pavilion, the Pier 3 (main) Pavilion, and the Pier 4 (dolphin show) Pavilion. You take an escalator up to the main level and approach the main stingray tank, where you may get to see the keepers feed the animals! They have the rest of the main building set up for one-way traffic, which is a good idea, considering the number of student groups that go through here (this worked to our disadvantage later in the day). You take an escalator to the second level and see the Maryland display, Mountains to the Sea, which takes you through the waterways of Maryland with special emphasis on the Chesapeake, as pretty much every drop winds up there! You then loop around and over the main tank and get to the next level via a moving walkway. On this third level, there is the exhibit, Surviving Through Adaptation. You go up again to level four to see Sea Cliffs, Kelp Forest, Pacific Coral Reef, and Amazon River Forest. We especially like the puffins! The top level (Level 5) is the very warm and moist, glassed-in Upland Tropical Rainforest exhibit. Here, the neatest thing is the poison dart frogs! Then, you come back down and over one level to the top of the four-story Atlantic Coral Reef tank. A winding ramp lets you see all

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the different kinds of sea life from the top down to the bottom of the reef, ending at the Open Ocean section, which is very dark and mysterious looking. This is where the sharks are! They have such big teeth, and are so mesmerizing! At the lowest level you can sit, catch your breath, and watch the rays swimming - very relaxing - it's like they are flying!

From here you go up another escalator, and cross the bridge to Pier 4 to reach the dolphin pavilion. We timed it just right! We walked into the amphitheater, found seats, and sat down without much wait for the show to begin. The dolphins performed some nice tricks together and splashed the audience pretty well. At least we had been warned! The presentation includes some nice educational bits using the large video displays that are set on both sides of the pool. When I find myself in a room like that with water, usually the chlorine is overpowering, but not here. Because of the Atlantic Bottlenose Dolphins, I am sure they have something much better than good old chlorine and paper filters - it just smells a little damp, but not musty.

The dolphin show is certainly not comparable to what you would see at SeaWorld, but it was fun, and the admission charge helps to support the programs of the aquarium. When you leave the amphitheater, you can go down to a little area and watch the dolphins underwater, or you can go to the neighboring food court. Can you guess which one we chose? (Did I mention we have two growing sons?) We had cheeseburgers and chicken sandwiches, which filled up the boys for a while.

Once we were done with the best the aquarium had to offer, we got a couple of souvenirs and some pressed pennies, as there were a couple of machines in that area. My dear wife decided that she had to go back and enjoy the coral reef exhibit. So, in order to do that, we had to go back through the rest of the main room and back up and around to the top floor -- whew! At least they have escalators. After we had our fill of the reef, we went over to the Glass Pavilion and enjoyed the Animal Planet - Australia exhibit. Next door to this is the 4D Theater that is currently showing Planet Earth - Shallow Seas, which we opted not to see on this particular visit.

Some nearby attractions are: The B&O Railroad Museum, the Baltimore Maritime Museum, Harborplace Mall, Fort McHenry (of Star Spangled Banner fame), the Maryland Science Center, the Maryland Museum of African American History and Culture, and the Top of The World observation deck on top of Baltimore's World Trade Center. The restored USS Constellation is berthed here, too, as is the Pride of Baltimore. Port Discovery Children's Museum is here as well, that many with kids may find fun. You might want to take advantage of the water

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taxi to travel between some of the sites. In the summer, there are paddleboats you can rent. There are many hotels nearby as is the convention center and Camden Yard (the home of the Orioles).

The National Aquarium is a good way to spend a day with the kids, especially if you can combine it with a nearby attraction or two.

*About The Author: Erik Johnson grew up in the Washington, D.C. area and works in the city, but still loves to explore the area's many interesting sites. He lives in the country with his wife Kendra and their sons and dogs and cats.*

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