

Epcot DiveQuest: Diving Into The Seas With Nemo & Friends

by Shayne Newell, PassPorter Guest Contributor

Imagine swimming just inches from a sand tiger shark or having a 300-pound green sea turtle brush by your head while you swim in the world's "6th largest ocean." With pleasant water temperatures, unlimited visibility, calm seas, and no current, the six million gallon saltwater aquarium at The Seas with Nemo and Friends provides ideal conditions for scuba diving.

Epcot DiveQuest provides a rare opportunity for scuba-certified guests to become honorary cast members while experiencing a diversity of marine wildlife that would require multiple ocean dives to replicate. My husband and I participated in DiveQuest on our recent trip to Walt Disney World in June 2009.

As instructed, we reported to Guest Relations area outside of Epcot 15 minutes prior to our scheduled dive time. Our group leader, Jim, took everyone's certification cards and asked for our t-shirt and shoe sizes. Then he led us on a backstage tour of The Seas with Nemo and Friends.

First, we saw some of the water filtration infrastructure and Disney's marine research labs, learned how they feed the various animals and learned about the efforts of the Disney Worldwide Conservation Fund. Next, we went behind-the-scenes at the manatee exhibit and learned that manatees' only natural enemy is man -- most manatees are injured by boats or other man-made objects. Jim led us through the "onstage" portion of the manatee exhibit and the dolphin exhibit.

We returned backstage and went into a lounge area where we signed the requisite waivers and watched a short video about the experience we were about to have. Everyone was excited, and we then headed for the locker rooms. Each diver was assigned a locker with a dry towel and Scubapro wet suit and booties ready and waiting inside. Once everyone had gotten on their swimsuits, wet suits and booties, Jim led us to a door with a sign that read, "Door leads onstage/Do not leave open." He reminded us that we were honorary cast members for the day and that we should smile and be friendly to the other guests. It's hard to miss a large group of people in wet suits, and as soon as we walked out the door, the cameras started flashing. My husband commented that he felt like we should be walking in slow motion like the scene in "Armageddon" where the astronauts leave mission control to board their rocket!

After the photo opportunity, we were led up a spiraling staircase to the

spot where we would dive. All of our diving gear was assembled and ready to go. The Scubapro buoyancy control devices are weight-integrated and, just as Jim had correctly guessed everyone's wet suit size, the dive masters had correctly weighted everyone's gear. I guess that's part of the magic of Disney!

We stepped on to a ledge just above the observation deck in the same order as our gear was set up. We donned our fins and gear, made a short surface swim to a buoy, and then descended. There were three dive masters in the water with us, plus the videographer. Our primary dive master led us on a short guided tour of the aquarium, which gave the videographer some good shots of everyone in the group. Before the dive, they had told us that if we had family on the observation deck, we should go find them at the conclusion of the guided tour and wait for the videographer to come film us. My husband easily spotted our two children and my parents, and the dive master flagged down the videographer, who got a shot of all of us together, then zoomed in on our family through the aquarium glass.

After that, we were free to explore all the aquarium had to offer. Two sand tiger sharks patrol the waters, but didn't seem to notice us. The two huge green sea turtles were happy to swim right above, underneath, or next to us. There is a no-touch policy on the dive, otherwise it would have been tempting to grab on to their shells and take a ride like Marlin and Dory did with Crush in "Finding Nemo"! Hundreds of fish were swimming about, some in large schools and others in smaller groups, along with two gigantic grouper. Spotted eagle rays and cow-nosed rays glided gracefully around us. Because there is no sunlight in the aquarium, the coral is not real. But in true Disney form, it looks so real that the fish have been known to lay their eggs in it.

Through the various aquarium windows, we could see guests on the observation deck, many of whom were waving and taking photos of us. Through other windows we could "visit" the diners at The Coral Reef restaurant. It was fun to be part of the show and to entertain the guests.

After about 40 minutes, which passed by in a flash, our dive master banged two rocks together -- our signal that it was time to surface. I swam to the observation deck to wave and blow one last kiss to my kids before surfacing. We got back on the ledge and took off our fins and gear. Jim handed us a dry towel as we stepped from the water.

Following the dive, Jim showed us backstage in the dolphin exhibit and told us a little bit about the dolphins living there. Then we returned to the locker rooms to clean up. The showers are private stalls, each

.....

supplied with shampoo, conditioner, and body wash. The locker room also had several hair dryers.

Everyone re-convened in lounge area, where we were supposed to watch the video that they had shot for us, but they were having technical problems, so that part of our experience got cut short. We picked up our certification cards and Epcot DiveQuest t-shirts, and had a chance to log our dive and get something to drink. Later that evening, we returned to the gift shop area at The Seas with Nemo and Friends to purchase our DVD for \$35 plus tax.

Epcot DiveQuest is a 3-hour experience, open to certified scuba divers ages 10 and up (guests ages 10-14 must be accompanied by a scuba-certified adult). The cost is \$175 per person, with discounts available for divers certified by PADI or NAUI. Dives take place each day at 4:30 and 5:30 p.m. Advance reservations are required and can be made by calling (407) WDW-PLAY. Park admission is not required to participate in Epcot DiveQuest, but you are released into the park at the conclusion of the dive. So, if you participate in the early dive, you will have a few hours to spend at Epcot before it closes. To avoid cross-contamination, Epcot DiveQuest provides all the diving gear other than a swimsuit, but you are permitted to wear your own mask, if desired.

As with all things Disney, Epcot DiveQuest was first-class all the way. It was such a unique and fun experience -- not to mention a great way to get out of the Florida heat -- that we definitely plan to do it again.

About The Author: Shayne Newell is a lawyer in Houston, Texas who, along with her husband and two sons, is a Walt Disney World fanatic. She received her open water certification in 2007, and Epcot DiveQuest was her 15th open water dive.

Article last updated: 7/23/2009

View the latest version online at: <http://www.passporter.com/articles/epcot-divequest.html>

Copyright by Shayne Newell. All rights reserved under International and Pan-American Copyright Conventions. No part of this publication may be stored in a retrieval system or transmitted in any form by any means electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, scanning, or otherwise, except as permitted under sections 107 or 108 of the 1976 United States Copyright Act. Resale of this guide is strictly prohibited without the copyright holder's permission. If you purchased this publication from someone other than PassPorter Travel Press, please call 877-929-3273.

.....

View more PassPorter Articles online at <http://www.passporter.com/articles/>

PassPorter Deluxe: Cut, punch holes, and insert in binder.
PassPorter Spiral: Cut, print at dotted line, and insert in PassPorter.

.....