

## Discovery Cove: A Tropical Paradise in Orlando

by Barry Hom, PassPorter Guest Contributor

I'd visited all the theme parks in Orlando except one: Discovery Cove. From Discovery Cove's web site, the park looked like a beautiful tropical paradise and an enjoyable time, but the high cost of admission kept me away. Currently, the price with the dolphin package is \$259 to \$279, depending on the time of year. I checked the price for an early March visit and found a Florida Resident discount of \$199 with the dolphin encounter. The regular price was \$229. Each admission includes a seven consecutive day's pass for Sea World Orlando and Busch Gardens Africa, or pay \$30 more to have admission to both parks for 14 consecutive days. Continental breakfast and lunch for the day at Discovery Cove are also included. Even with the discount and the admission special, it took me days to decide to book. My deciding factor was reading numerous trip reports on different Internet discussion boards about Discovery Cove. Almost unanimously, the trip reports stated the experience was well worth the investment.

Discovery Cove is divided into two parts, separated by a blue bridge. One part is home to the Resort Pool, Tropical River, and the Coral Reef. The other part is the restaurant, the Dolphin Lagoon, the bathhouse, and the cabanas for the dolphin experience. Lush vegetation is all around the park. You can sign up for a free horticulture tour (which I didn't experience) at the Guest Services desk.

At check-in, you're given an ID badge (which you can assign a credit card to for charging privileges) and assigned a dolphin encounter time. My time was 11:00 am at the Starfish Cabana. After posing for your complimentary photo at the blue bridge, you can enjoy the continental breakfast. The restaurant had all the pastries, coffee, juices, and milk that you can consume. You can go back through the line and have seconds if you want.

After breakfast, it was time to choose a vest or wet suit (I chose a vest because it was a warm day). I also picked up a bag with a mask, snorkel, and a package of dolphin-safe sunscreen. At the end of the day, you could keep the bag, snorkel, and the sunscreen. Please note that if you wear sunscreen that is not dolphin-safe, you'll be told to wash it off and use the dolphin-safe sunscreen. You can buy more of this sunscreen in the gift shop. After changing in the bathhouse and storing my gear in the free lockers, it was time to have fun!

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The Resort Pool has a small cave with a large waterfall running in front of it. The water in the pool was four feet at its deepest point, according to Discovery Cove's web site. The Tropical River winds in a circle. It starts at one end of the Resort Pool and ends at the other. One part of the river is about eight feet deep, and warning signs are posted. The river has more beautiful vegetation to admire and lovely waterfalls to swim through. You can also see vases and other "artifacts" below the surface. Underwater rocks create a bright path. The river took me an hour to walk - quite a workout! Later in the day, I took a leisurely swim along the river.

The Coral Reef is like going to Bermuda and snorkeling in their waters. The salt water is fairly cold; it felt like it was around 60 degrees! You become acclimated to it after a few minutes of immersion. The Coral Reef had dozens of colorful fish and giant stingrays that were so close that you could touch them! Protective glass separates you from the sharks and barracudas. You could swim the reef, but if you're tall like I am at 6'3", you can walk it and keep your head above water.

In the Aviary, you can see all sorts of birds and you can even feed them out of your hand. Keep an eye out for the resident deer, which hid in the bushes when I visited.

Like breakfast, lunch is included in the admission cost. They were serving jambalaya, macaroni and cheese, lobster salad, cheeseburgers and fries, and other delicious dishes. The restaurant also served side salads and a variety of deserts. The food at Anheuser-Busch parks tend to be of very good quality and lunch was no exception. I tried the jambalaya and it was sumptuous! Of course, I had to try dessert. The chocolate cake was delicious! Like breakfast, you could have second helpings if you wanted.

At 11:00 am, it was time to experience the piece de resistance of Discovery Cove; the dolphin encounter. A group of 32 guests met at the Starfish Cabana and was divided into groups of eight. The experience started with a short video about dolphins. The groups then headed into the Dolphin Lagoon to meet their assigned dolphins. You are not allowed to bring anything into the lagoon except for your mask and snorkel. Photographers with digital cameras and camcorders were in the water to capture the experience.

Our dolphin was a three-year old named Marena, who made a grand entrance by jumping out of the water and doing a flip! The Discovery Cove trainer told the group many facts about the dolphins. One interesting thing is the trainers always ask, never force, the dolphins to do tricks when they give hand signals. The entire group touched the

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dolphin's skin, flippers, dorsal fin, and tail fluke.

During the dolphin swim, each guest in the group was able to interact with Marena. The first opportunity was a pose with the dolphin for a Kodak moment-worthy photograph. During the second opportunity, each guest gave Marena a kiss on her dolphin "lips." The last interaction was a ride with the dolphin. Each guest swam out to the 12-foot deep end of the lagoon, about 20 feet away. Marena approached that person, and the guest put one hand of the dorsal fin and the other hand where the dolphin's flipper meets its body. Hang on tight because this ride is more thrilling than a ride on Sea World Orlando's Kraken roller coaster! At the end of the dolphin encounter time, all four dolphins grouped together and did a few jumps out of the water. The entire experience lasted about 45 minutes.

After the dolphin swim, the group was led to a small building where we could view our pictures. I could pick out the photos I wanted on a touch screen monitor. You could choose package deals, but due to the high costs, I decided to go a la carte. I chose the souvenir DVD and two 6x8 photos. The DVD cost \$60 and the two photos were \$16 each. (All prices are subject to change.)

Yes, Discovery Cove is expensive. Is it worth the money? I'd say it is. The experience is quite memorable and pleasurable. Four months after my visit, I still often think of the good times I've had at the park. Discovery Cove is different than the other parks, as there's no need to make a plan or decide in what order to experience the attractions. As a maximum of 1,000 guests are allowed entrance every day, you don't have to wait for anything or deal with huge crowds. If you can overcome the sticker shock of Discovery Cove, you can have an amazing experience. I'm already considering a return visit!

My video of Discovery Cove:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4eTeQp7DT5c>

Discovery Cove's web site: <http://www.discoverycove.com>

*About The Author: Barry is a roller coaster and theme/amusement park enthusiast. So far, he has ridden 382 roller coasters and visited over 80 theme and amusement parks in many U.S. states, France, United Kingdom, Norway, and Sweden. He is also a columnist and a moderator for the web site IOA Central. He is looking forward to a group trip with the web site Theme Park Review to Japan in September and a side trip to SoCal shortly afterwards.*

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