



THE MONTEREY BAY AQUARIUM

FEATURE AND PHOTOGRAPHY **PATRICK VAN HOESERLANDE**

A few months ago, I went on a business trip to Monterey Bay. Whilst travelling, be it for business or leisure, I try to go diving, at least once. I have to admit that I rarely succeed in this personal objective. As a diver who prefers his own equipment for safety and comfort reasons, I bring all the necessary equipment with me when I do travel to dive. On these other trips, my dive computer and my regulator are the bare minimum I always take with me for a chance to dive.

To dive somewhere after flying in for just a short stay is a failure in the making. I have never been successful in combining a short business trip with a good dive. All kinds of problems arise keeping me from my mission. I do not understand why I'm often needed to do a test dive as I'm an instructor and a lot of the time, refused the opportunity to dive without one. One day, I will combine a short trip with an interesting dive, I'm not giving up.

Back to Monterey Bay. This time, it had all the elements of being a success. I had everything well prepared. An email from the dive base – it took 4 emails to get one reply – confirmed the booking. I then just had to make sure my meeting would finish on time to be able to combine the dive with the flight back home as the two had to be separated by at least 24 hours. As the week neared its end, the meeting followed the agenda like clockwork. Hopes increased and to make sure that details would not turn sour, I gave the dive centre a quick call by phone to check my diving arrangements. Everything was ok. Great!

With high hopes, I walked over to the dive

shop from my hotel. The scene of a man cleaning dive equipment triggered an internal alarm. Normally, cleaning is done after a dive, but maybe this was low season. Did I have an appointment? No. As he was the owner of the shop, he would have known of it. There was no more diving for the day. I have no idea who had been on the other end of the phone when I had called to confirm the schedule. It was a total failure, the only thing left to do was go for a wander.

The view from the beach clearly demonstrated all the niceties I had missed. The water was so clear that the visibility could be measured by eye for several meters. Sea lions and sea otters were enjoying the thing I had hoped to do myself. Looking down into the water, I could see all the fish swimming. A bit farther away, two divers were entering the water looking happy in anticipation of what they hoped to discover.

My walk unintentionally took me to the Monterey Bay Aquarium. Why not? I knew that entering would increase my frustration of having missed another dive, but on the other hand I would get to see some of the local fish species. There would be no comparison as good as diving, but it would be a worthy alternative.

The Monterey Bay Aquarium is not the biggest of aquariums, but it has earned its place as one of the world's best. The entrance does not impress me and it looks very normal, but for now, I'm fine with it being small.

Once inside, the old Cannery Row displays its hidden treasures and looks very promising.

As if a huge vacuum, the building sucks me in. From that moment on, I was on a journey of constant amazement. No words can rightfully reflect the wonders and sensations concealed inside. I almost forgot the cause of my being there.

After having entered, I turned left leaving the kelp forest for later. I passed a small aquarium with some amazing sea creatures inside it. I took my time to study them. Every animal deserved more attention than I could give. This could be the only time I would visit the Monterey Bay Aquarium, so I wanted to make sure to see it all.

As a diver, I'm drawn to the big tanks. The 30 meter long Monterey Bay habitat contains more than one million liters of water. It represents the local bay's habitats of sandy sea floors, shale reefs, deep reefs and wharf pilings. Small sharks, salmon and huge sea bass populate this enormous aquarium. I've never seen such a big tank. Trying to look in from all possible angles, I wondered how it would be to dive inside it. To be one with the animals. The visibility was great, so as a diver it would feel as if you were suspended in air. A group of passersby rip me from my daydream and I have to move on and continue with the rest of the exhibits.

Next on my visit is the aviary. At first I was surprised to discover an exhibit of birds in an aquarium, but a sign explains that these birds had been wounded and that this is the only place where they are able to survive. Even though I'm born on the coast, this was the first time I could almost touch a shore bird.



Next to the aviary are the touch pools. Seeing and touching are normal behaviors during the exploration of new things, so you can find these kinds of pools in every aquarium. The volunteers take care of their designated animals and invite visitors to touch the creatures while explaining how they live. It is funny to observe how kids react with such surprise when they touch a ray. Following the noise of breaking waves, I left the left wing and crossed the bridge over to discover the rest of the 550 species left to see in nearly 200 exhibits.

Once on the other side, I stepped into the interior of a very big fish bowl. I stood there with thousands of sardines eternally circling around me. It was a big school of fish in that one tank. I had never seen that before and it was wonderful. It was then that I believed this building was home to more than 35,000 creatures as I had skeptically first thought when reading it in the brochure. Before leaving, I noticed one estranged individual swimming counter clockwise, against all the rest.

Next up into the darkness, was "The Jellies Experience". They are such strange, but fascinating animals. Here I learned a lot more about them, but their simple beauty is what struck me the most. They just do whatever they have to do, moving through water like 3D ballerinas. You may not like them, but you have to admit that when you see them dancing in open water, they look beautiful. The setup of that exhibition showed these delicate drifters in their full grace, light and all.

As I turned the corner, I heard music that I automatically connected one of my favorite movies to, 'Le Grande Bleu'. I stopped, eyes wide. In front of me was the front of a huge plexiglas window of a 4 million liter tank. This was the Open Sea exhibit. In the Open Sea, you find a lot of fish, small and big. The kind

of fish you do not expect in great numbers in an aquarium. In the Open Sea exhibit you'll discover hammerhead sharks, sea turtles, ocean sunfish, huge tunas, a school of mackerel, and if you're lucky, a great white shark. I picked the left corner to sit down and relax and almost instantly, felt like I was on the inside with all those magnificent creatures.

A flashlight brings me back to the realization that they are the ones swimming and I'm just sitting there watching them. I have to move on. I could have stayed, but I continued on with my discovery, and headed slowly downstairs.

There I began my journey into a world of undersea magicians, masters of disguise and quick-changing artists. The special exhibition 'Tentacles: The Astounding Lives of Octopuses, Squid and Cuttlefish' increased my amazement and understanding of these creatures. This exhibit showcased two dozen species, from the giant Pacific octopus to the chambered nautilus. On dives, I find it challenging to find them and to then observe their behavior. Their creativity in solving problems attracts me. The kids are even more fascinated than me. If they knew more about these animals, they may start to appreciate them and maybe some day, these young visitors will protect them.

Leaving the dark towards the light, I observed sea otters in their playful mood. The two-story tank allows visitors to watch the otters enjoying their stay at the surface and underwater. When will we be able to move that gracefully and effortlessly underwater?

Before visiting the exhibit I had kept for last, a volunteer called me in to the movie theater. The screen announced a documentary on the great white shark. This shark does not inflict me with the kind of fear that 'Jaws' had so well created. This big fish fascinates me and has my

respect as I have for all animals. I left the theater with a very good feeling after a very interesting exposé illustrated with photographs and short films. The rest of the audience left the room smarter with this gained knowledge and with a respectful 'awe'.

With the intention to end my visit with the reasons for my being there, I walked towards the Kelp Forest. This is a towering tank of almost 10 meters high showcasing a living kelp forest community. With one glance, the full meaning of 'forest' hits me. Looking at all the other people standing around and observing it, I was clearly not the only one trying to absorb the picturesque setting. I moved over to a quieter spot on the stairs to allow myself to get in the diver mood. I almost had it when I sensed some disturbance. Instinctively, I looked towards the surface and I discovered the reason.

A pair of fins announced the arrival of a diver in the aquarium. A guide had taken place in front of the tank and began talking to the public. A short instance later, a second person introduced herself. The diver! Through a two-way communication mask she interacted with the guide and the visitors. She named each of the fish swimming in the tank and explained some of the kelp forest's features. Then she started feeding the fish. The commotion drew everyone's attention. This was a very good show!

My visit had come to an end and I needed to head back to my hotel. I have made myself the promise to one day return for a full day. While walking out through the door, I wondered what kind of work divers do in a public aquarium. Are they only there to feed the fish during an interactive show? Or do they get more involvement? Something for another article maybe?