

DISCOVERY COVE



There's an overall feeling of relaxation and pampering at Discovery Cove, which is a nice surprise after navigating the bustling crowds usually found in Orlando's other theme parks. Stretching out over 30 lush, beautifully landscaped acres, Discovery Cove only allows in about 1,000 people a day. This, along with the slower pace and its all-inclusive design, gives it the feeling of an upscale resort – one that's ready to cater to your every need.

It's true that dolphins, and the chance to interact with them, are the main draw at this pricey park. But guests soon find there's more to discover here. "Discovery Cove is probably one of the most unique places in the world, where you get an opportunity to swim with thousands of tropical fish, hand feed exotic birds, swim with dolphins, feed

stingrays, all in one unique and beautiful setting," said Scott DeJesus, assistant supervisor of animal training at the park. "When guests get here it's such a surprise for them to be able to swim and snorkel and get up close and personal with so many different types of animals. We even have sloths and anteaters."

As guests first check in,

they're greeted with a sculpture of frolicking dolphins dangling from the ceiling, a concierge to tell them what to expect, and a photographer. Your photo is put onto badges to wear throughout the stay and act as exclusive tickets to all that the park has to offer. Well, almost all.

You'll still have to pay for your own souvenirs, but all

food (including snacks), drinks, towels, dolphin-friendly sunscreen, lounge chairs and umbrellas, floaties, and a photo of your group upon entry are included in your admission. Plus, you'll receive your choice of two types of wetsuits to wear while on site and a snorkel and mask. (You will not be allowed to bring your own equipment, as it may be harmful to the animals.)

"It's nice to not have to worry about money while there," said Terry Mulligan, from Clearwater, Fla. "When you're walking around in your [wetsuit], it would have been kind of hard to whip out your credit card or money. This way contributes to a much less stress day than it is when you're in the bigger parks. It wasn't cheap but I thought it was worth it."

As one of the parks under the SeaWorld Parks and



The main draw: interaction with the park's friendly dolphins

OFFERS A PERFECT BLEND OF DOLPHINS, RAYS AND RELAXATION

By Deborah Brauser



Entertainment umbrella, the price also includes free admission for 14 consecutive days at either SeaWorld Orlando, Aquatica or Busch Gardens Tampa Bay.

"But the very best part about Discovery Cove is the dolphins, of course," said Lucia Mancini, the 14-year-old niece of Mulligan, from Riverside, Ill. "I had never seen one that close before."

The Dolphin Experience

There are two main types of admission categories. Both offer the same all-inclusiveness, but the pricier ticket includes a 30-minute interaction with a friendly and very vocal dolphin while the other does not.

Up to eight people (and one dolphin) are assigned to each group. After a short orientation, the group members assemble in one of

the shallow pools in the Dolphin Lagoon, which is much cooler than the other pools at the park. During the half-hour session, a trainer gives demonstrations and leads the guests in feeding, interacting with, posing for photos, and sometimes even kissing the dolphin. (These photos do cost extra.)

"Every interaction is truly unique. If guests have certain requests, and if we can accommodate it for them and it's safe for our animals and other guests, then we can certainly provide it," noted DeJesus.

The allotted time ends with each guest getting a chance to actually "swim" with the interaction's star by holding its dorsal fin as it tows you into shore. This part is exhilarating but also a little scary (like all good rides). The swim gives you a chance to see how strong they are. What does it feel like?



Various groups participating in the dolphin experience.

Like holding on to a very smooth and slick rubber tire that's being pulled behind a boat.

"Every guest at Discovery Cove has their own idea of what it's like to actually swim with a dolphin," said Steward Clark, the park's vice president. "When they find themselves face-to-face with one of the beautiful Atlantic bottlenose dolphins at the park, few events can rival the thrilling mix of emotions and excitement."

There are currently more

than 40 dolphins at Discovery Cove. "All are allowed to participate in our interactions but none are ever forced to participate," said Trainer DeJesus. "We use positive reinforcements and we have plenty who seem to really want to do these interactions and are trained to do so. However, if one decides it doesn't want to participate anymore, it's no big deal. We'll just call over another one and the guests will get to interact with multiple dolphins for a unique experience."



This interaction is open only to those older than six.

Swimming with Rays, Fish, and Sharks?!

The Tropical Reef area of the park is actually made up of two pools. The larger Coral Reef features a partially submerged ship and 10,000 colorful tropical fish for snorkelers to swim among. For the more adventurous,

there's also an area behind acrylic partitions that houses sharks. When underwater, the partitions seem to fade away, giving the feeling that you're actually swimming close enough to reach over and touch the sharks.

"Discovery Cove is a great place for families because it is such a controlled environment here," said DeJesus. "Safety is our number one concern, not only for our animals but also for our guests who interact with them. When it comes to snorkeling in the reef, there aren't any currents you have to worry about, yet you get the chance to see so many beautiful fish. Plus there are lifeguards and safety personnel always on duty."

For an even calmer atmosphere, the smaller Ray Lagoon is a shallow pool where guests can wade or snorkel while schools of southern and cownose rays swim close by. At certain times, guests can also help feed these gentle gliding giants that can grow up to four feet in diameter. Be sure to ask the aquarist on duty about the feeding times. Another important tip: The beautiful water creatures in both pools are abundant. So bring along an underwater camera.

"I liked that you could stay in there as long as you wanted and it was fun to see the stingrays that close, to see them float right next to you and you could touch them," said Mancini. "They were kind of slimy but soft."

Close to the reef areas is the Wind-Away River, a sort of lazy river that meanders through the park, including

through a cave, a forest, and by several beach and pool areas. Flotation devices, or "floaties," are provided if needed since there are several depths throughout the course.

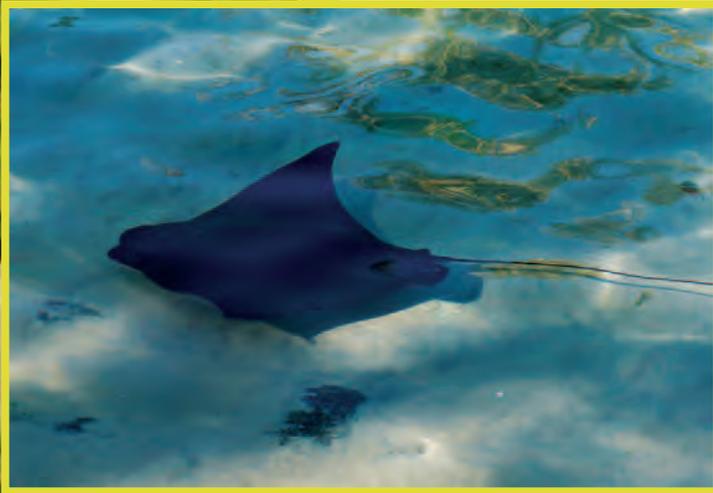
When you're ready to take a break, several white sand beaches with umbrellas and chairs are scattered throughout the park, including beside the Dolphin Lagoon. Some of the dolphins are ex-performers from the various SeaWorld parks and still seem to like pulling off a trick or two, even when hardly anyone is around. There's nothing like lounging by an un-crowded pool and watching what feels like an exclusive show by these enchanting creatures as they jump and frolic with each other.

For an additional fee, private cabanas are available with lounge chairs, refrigerators, private lockers and more.

Other Animal Encounters

The free-flight Explorer's Aviary is home to 250 exotic birds, almost all of which can be hand fed. Carts are set up with cups of free bird food, as well as ID sheets to help identify the different species. This is a great place for some fun photos as many of the birds will walk right up or even perch on top of an outstretched arm. If you want them to really come towards you, be sure to ask the aviculturist on duty if there are any special treats on hand. And then get your camera ready.

Conservation Cabana is a small tent dedicated to providing information on



The Tropical Reef



Assistant supervisor of animal training at Discover Cove, Scott DeJesus.



The Ray Lagoon, where schools of southern and cownose rays swim by close enough to touch.



Some of the many inhabitants of the Explorer's Aviary.

ways guests can help with conservation efforts. Kids can touch replica bones of endangered and exotic animals or sit at a small activity desk with informative coloring and activity books. There is also a small area for sending out e-cards to friends back home.

Throughout the day, different animals, such as birds, reptiles, or an anteater, are brought to this area or carried throughout the park as educators answer guests' questions.

Space Fills Up Fast

When it comes to food and drinks, "everything included" means unlimited all day access to snacks such as soft pretzels, yogurt, and cookies, as well as bottled water, juices, sodas, beer, and wine. Snack stations are located throughout the park.

Meals include a light continental breakfast and several lunch options including hot offerings such as pasta or seafood dishes, or cold choices such as salads



Eat up! Several food choices are offered at the park throughout the day, including hot dishes and sandwiches for lunch.

and sandwiches. And of course there's always dessert.

"I thought they did this quite well," said Mulligan. "They had a nice selection of different types of food during lunch and I was impressed."

Overall, DeJesus said anyone wanting to come to the park should make their reservations as soon as possible as space can fill up months in advance. However, because there are cancellations, go ahead and call if you come to town and find an unexpected

open day in your schedule.

"I think Discovery Cove is what people have wanted for a long time – the opportunity to get so up close and personal with so many different animals," said DeJesus. "When I was a kid I would go to SeaWorld and then dream about what it would be like to be in one of the shows or be with those animals. Discovery Cove is a place where you can fulfill that dream in a safe environment."



DOLPHIN FACTS

- Since opening more than 10 years ago, more than 20 baby dolphins have been born at Discovery Cove.
- They try to ask each of their 40 dolphins to participate in at least one guest interaction a day, although many seem to like to participate in more.
- Trainers may come in as early as 3 a.m. to prepare the food for the dolphins.
- The dolphins are constantly examined to make sure they're healthy.

RATES

Standard Package – Regular rates through the rest of 2010 are \$199 with a dolphin interaction and \$99 without the interaction or for kids between the ages of 3 and 6.

Ultimate Experience – Includes 14 consecutive days of admission at SeaWorld and Aquatica in Orlando and Busch Gardens Tampa Bay, along with the one-day pass to Discovery Cove. \$279

Trainer for a Day – This experience includes three personal interactions and behind-the-scenes time with a dolphin trainer, as well as the standard Discovery Cove package features. Prices start at \$398. Those between the ages of 6 and 13 must be accompanied by a paying adult.

SPECIAL DELIVERIES

What better way to say "I love you" than by dolphin delivery? Discovery Cove has been offering several Special Occasion packages for birthdays, Valentine's Day and marriage proposals featuring the delivery of a personalized message on a keepsake buoy by one of the park's resident dolphins.

Visit www.discoverycove.com or call 1-877-557-7404 for the latest prices.

Online Extras: Video & Photos



Photo Submitted By Discovery Cove