

## **Swimming With Belugas -- and Other Close Encounters of the Marine Kind --- Canada's Marine Science Centre: Where Curious Guests Can Belly Up to a Whale**

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VANCOUVER, British Columbia -- Sporting Neoprene boots and a life vest, I chuckled as I grabbed a Coleman cooler filled with herring and entered the beluga habitat at the Vancouver Aquarium Marine Science Centre. I was participating in one of the aquarium's Encounter programs and was about to come face to face and belly to belly with three of the aquarium's five beluga whales.

The Marine Science Centre sits in the heart of the city's world-renowned Stanley Park. When it opened in 1956, the original mandate specified that the aquarium needed to play a major role in education, conduct original research, help make Vancouver more beautiful and operate on a financially self-sufficient basis. But as time wore on, the aquarium's leaders felt they needed to re-examine and re-evaluate the organization's direction and role in society. Environmental and marine issues were becoming more complex, and extensive surveys and research revealed that visitors wanted more information to make sense of it all. The aquarium's executive director, Dr. John Nightingale, explained, "For the first 40 years, the aquarium showed and taught people about ecology, but ignored the human dimension. What our visitors were telling us was that when they watch television and read the paper they are confused by environmental issues. People turned to us to help understand what is behind those headlines."

A major capital campaign ensued, 10 million Canadian dollars (US\$6.6 million) was raised, and a long-term four-part plan was conceived. The first phase of that plan was completed on June 12 when the new C\$5 million Pacific Canada Pavilion opened its doors to the public. Featuring the ecosystem of the nearby Strait of Georgia, the facility addresses the complex conservation issues facing British Columbia today.

The most direct way the aquarium does this is with its interactive Encounter programs, which were introduced a year ago. Encounter coordinator Sarah Newton, and the aquarium's animal trainers, take visitors right into the animal habitats where they meet the animals and engage in everyday activities, such as play time, feeding and husbandry. When I booked my encounter, I could have chosen to meet a snake or cradle a giant octopus. I opted to feed the belugas instead.

Also known as the "canaries of the sea," the gentle giants are Canada's most abundant whale and live in massive numbers in the cold mysterious waters of the arctic. During my two-hour encounter, Ms. Newton gave me a behind-the-scenes tour of the aquarium. Peering into holding tanks equipped with carefully rigged laundry baskets, we marveled at sea cucumbers, giant male wolf eels and sunflower sea stars. We then strolled through the exhibit area where Ms. Newton pointed out everything from loggerhead turtles and buffalo sculpins to killer whales and white-sided dolphins. En route, we were treated to a spectacular sight when a normally quiescent octopus twirled gracefully in a tank during feeding time. We then settled down in the Encounter classroom where Ms. Newton used a computer, a large map, and a box of whale blubber to familiarize me with the belugas and the harsh environment in which they live.

After my classroom briefing, I left my recently reset wedding ring and sunglasses behind, donned an array of waterproof gear and headed for the aquarium's arctic habitat. Two large deep pools surrounded by rocks, the habitat is modeled after Lancaster Sound in Canada's Northwest Territory and makes a fine home for Imaq, Allua, Qila, Aurora and Kavna. Qila and Kavna were off duty, so I met the other three. Imaq and Allua were pleasant and exciting, but my encounter with Aurora was by far my favorite. Her slim trainer, Lisa Miyaji, who was sporting a wet suit, and I waded waist deep into the clear cold water and slowly followed the day's agenda. Because belugas are skittish, Ms. Miyaji continually reminded me to move slowly so as not to scare Aurora away. Speaking gently and reassuringly, Ms. Miyaji coaxed Aurora toward us and pointed out the blow hole located on her forehead. When Aurora manipulates the size of the hole, she changes her voice -- hence the "canary of the sea" nickname.

She then pointed out the dorsal ridge on the whale's back, explaining that unlike other whales, the belugas don't have a dorsal fin. A protruding fin would make it difficult to maneuver through the icy waters of the arctic. The beluga's long flexible neck, she explained, made it possible for the whales to stick their heads out of ice holes and survey their surroundings for prey. Next, Ms. Miyaji led Aurora onto her back, the so-called ventral position, so I could tap her belly and feel the thick layer of blubber that helps insulate her body. At that point, Aurora took control of the situation and relieved herself by passing a massive green bowel movement. We stepped aside and waited for the water to clear before we admired Aurora's beautifully curvaceous tail fluke.

To wrap things up, Ms. Miyaji then told me to open my Coleman and feed Aurora generously. Aurora had done very well, and positive reinforcement is always an important factor in an encounter. As I slipped copious handfuls of herring into her mouth, Aurora's eyes sparkled. Surely, I thought, she was flashing me a big beluga grin with each slimy serving.

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To book your own Beluga Encounter call the Marine Science Centre at (604) 659-3555. The aquarium is open seven days a week, and the summer hours (until Sept. 1) are from 9:30 a.m. to 7 p.m.