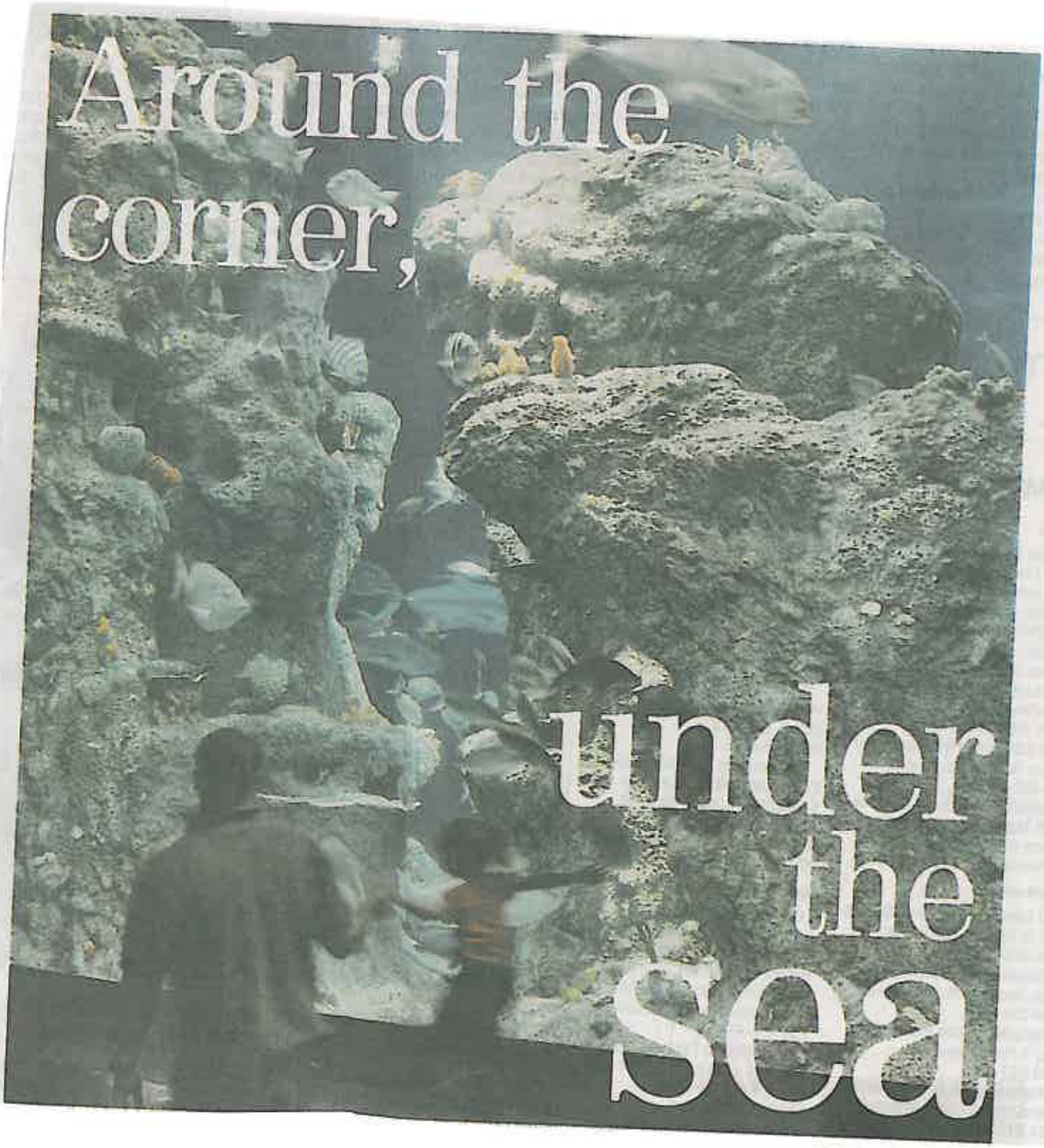
G-Ville News
7/8/2010



Nearby aquariums offer family fun, education with new exhibits, programs

By Amy Clarke
STAFF WRITER
arclarke@greenvillenews.com

One thing seems certain: People love aquariums.

And Upstate residents have several world-class aquariums within easy driving distance, ripe for a day or weekend visit.

Been there, done that? Maybe not. Our regional aquariums are constantly changing, adding new animals, new exhibits and new programs all the time. Check out what's new to see and do this summer.

Georgia Aquarium

Since its opening nearly five years ago, the Georgia Aquarium in Atlanta has garnered praise and prestige for the size, scope and quality of its exhibits.

"We are the world's largest aquarium, any way that you measure it," said Mackenzie Whalen, public relations director for the aquarium.

With a "new every 90" initiative, the aquarium seeks to introduce new animals or programs at least every three months.

Most recently, the Cold Water Quest gallery was renovated to allow more interaction with two of its main attractions — the African penguins and Southern sea otter.

The new penguin habitat holds twice as many birds and features new acrylic tunnels and pop-up windows to bring visitors face-to-face with the penguins.

The renovated sea otter exhibit introduced additional deck space for trainer-animal interactions and viewing features that allow guests to see the animals from various angles.

A returning aquarium program, Jazz Journeys, fea-



The South Carolina Aquarium, shown above and at top, offers large viewing walls and a chance for kids to touch sting rays, sea urchins and horseshoe crabs.

See SEA on page 3D

SEA

FROM PAGE 1D

tures live jazz performances Friday evenings through September. Check out the performer lineup or get information about a VIP experience at http://georgiaaquarium.org/visitus/friday-night-jazz.aspx.

Coming in November is the aquarium's largest new addition: an 84,000-square-foot dolphin exhibit that will include an indoor arena for dolphin shows.

The Georgia Aquarium houses five themed galleries, including Tropical Diver, freshwater exhibit River Scout and Ocean Voyager, the world's largest aquatic exhibit housing four whale sharks — the only place outside Asia that the massive creatures can be seen — two manta rays and hundreds of other fish in more than 6 million gallons of water.

South Carolina Aquarium

From the mountains to the coast, the Palmetto State boasts its own diverse array of aquatic wildlife, and the South Carolina Aquarium in Charleston is dedicated to highlighting native species.

"It really gives the visitor a chance to experience things that are around them that they may not actually see," said Elizabeth Bender, marketing and public relations coordinator for the aquarium. "They're really able to dig deeper into the area that they actually live in."

The newest resident at the aquarium is an albino alligator, housed in the newly renovated and expanded Coastal Plains exhibit.

"He is quite a sight to see," Bender said.

He's 7 feet long and nearly translucent in color, and he's one of only 50 albino alligator specimens in the world.

Also new at the South Carolina Aquarium is a 4-D theater, which opened less than two months ago. Currently showing at the theater is "Happy Feet," to coordinate with the Penguin Planet exhibit, visiting from Sea World in San Diego until October.

Bender said one of the unique features of the aquarium is the sea turtle hospital, where visitors can see up close the efforts to rehabilitate and release sea turtles back into the wild.

"It is one of those star gems of the aquarium," she said.

The South Carolina Aquarium, located in the heart of downtown Charleston, offers regular programs, dive shows, feedings and animal encounters. Check out Shark Week coming up the first week of August.

Ripley's Aquarium of the Smokies

It's not the biggest, but it claims to be the best.

Ripley's Aquarium of the Smokies has been voted the world's best aquarium by tripadvisor.com users, and marketing director Karl Thomas said it's because of the focus on guest experience.

"You will learn something, whether you want to or not, but that's not our primary purpose — it's to entertain people," he said. "Ripley is a 90-year-old entertainment company, and they actually made aquariums fun."

Music, lighting, décor are all carefully designed to create the best possible experience for visitors.

"When you get finished with it, you go, 'Wow, that was really, really neat.'"

After 10 years nestled in the mountains of Gatlin-

burg, the aquarium recently added its first new permanent exhibit since opening.

Penguin Playhouse opened two months ago with 22 African black-footed penguins. The indoor-outdoor exhibit offers multiple ways for visitors to view and interact with the birds, including a glass floor under which penguins swim to move from the outdoor to indoor portions of the exhibit.

"There's actually one penguin that likes to follow your feet. You can dance around, and he'll just dance around with you," Thomas said.

Two acrylic tubes leading to pop-up windows take visitors nose to beak with the penguins underwater and on the beach.

Ripley's Aquarium of the Smokies was already renowned for its shark exhibit — a 750,000-gallon tank housing some 30 species of sharks. A 345-foot tunnel takes visitors through the heart of the giant tank.

"Inside of there, you're within inches of 14-foot sharks," Thomas said.

The aquarium features hourly dive shows in the three biggest tanks and regular educator programs.