

take the plunge

Swim with the fishes at Melbourne SEA LIFE Aquarium's Oceanarium tank, full of scary sea creatures you will rarely see in the wild

» Jumping into a tank full of sharks, manta rays and one giant grouper might sound insane to some, but that's what I'm preparing to do as I heave on my wetsuit and load up with heavy scuba equipment. Before jumping into Melbourne SEA LIFE Aquarium's 2.2 million-litre Oceanarium tank I stand with Brett, my dive instructor, by the ray-feeding post, and curious sea creatures surface to greet me, including a couple of huge manta rays and a vivacious bowmouth guitarfish called Dino.

"Don't worry, they're only waking up, so they won't be too hungry just yet," says Brett as we head to the entry platform. As the cold tank water seeps through my wetsuit, I have the thought that I'd actually prefer the sea creatures not to be hungry whatsoever.

I've dived before, so I'm familiar with the use of the gear, but beginners can rest assured their instructor will take them through the use of the diving equipment.

We're soon plunging into the tank. I immediately see a host of alien



Melbourne SEA LIFE Aquarium's Oceanarium tank is filled with exotic marine creatures



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aquatic creatures from small fish and rays to mantas that measure 2m long and wide. I watch out for the rays' tails, and although Steve Irwin's fatal encounter comes to mind, I'm immersed in the tranquillity and silence that accompanies diving. It's not long before I encounter Mitch,

the enormous grey nurse shark. While I know in the back of my mind that this is a peaceful species of shark, his open mouth full of wicked white teeth still sets my heart pounding a little. He swims by, his beady white eye following me with what I hope is placid curiosity.



We continue to explore the Oceanarium – I’m patted on the head by an enormous ray as it swims past, and a small bull-nose ray takes an interest and circles me for a few minutes. Children gawk from the dry side of the aquarium glass, and they timidly wave back as I greet them.

I spend nearly an hour with these creatures in this alien environment, and when it’s all over I’m just a little relieved to step from the water onto firm land. ★

★ NOW YOU DO IT ★

The Shark Dive Xtreme experience is available on weekdays in the morning or early afternoon; \$200 for a non-certified diver, \$155 for a certified diver.

Melbourne SEA LIFE Aquarium, Cnr Flinders and King streets.

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