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Celebrating the good life in Southwest Florida | grandeurmagazine.com

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THE **island** **LIFE**

EXPLORE THE SECLUDED
FLORIDA PARADISE
OF UPPER CAPTIVA

STORY BY
JENNIFER THOMAS

In many people's bucket list is interacting with the endless sea life creatures. People living in Southwest Florida often get to see them up close and personal and in these animals' natural environments. Yet, another way to experience these beautiful animals is by participating in the various attractions throughout Florida, offering an even more interactive opportunity to meet manatees, dolphins, sea turtles and more.

Fort Myers resident Stacey Arrington is planning a dolphin experience this summer with her mom and daughter, Paige, who is 10, as part of a girls' weekend. "Coming from Oklahoma, we did not have the opportunities to get up close with these magical creatures," explains Stacey. "Beyond swimming with the dolphins, we are booking a 'trainer for the day' experience to really be able to learn more."

A few Florida attractions offer both the swimming and the training experience. At the Clearwater Marine Aquarium, guests have the opportunity to interact with the stars from the Dolphin Tale and "Dolphin Tale 2" movies – Winter and Hope. According to CMA spokesperson Amy Binder, there are several ways guests can interact with their dolphins.

"Most popular and widely offered would be our photo opportunities. This can be with Winter or Hope," she adds. "Our male dolphin, Nicholas also offers a photo op as well for guests that have larger groups."

However, if a guest desires a more robust experience, they can choose from the Trainer for a Day, or Winter's Trainer Assist programs. "Each program gets you some real hands-on experience," says Amy. "They gain a better understanding of conservation, and the impact that humans have on the environment. There is also a chance to gain some real knowledge about the animals we work with." t CMA, there is no typical day with their animals. ▶▶

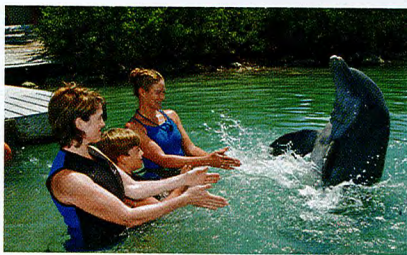


Discovery Cove in Orlando offers both sting ray and dolphin interactions.

UP CLOSE AND *Wildly* PERSONAL

Florida attractions offer opportunities for interaction with sea creatures.





Clockwise from top left: Hawk Cay Resort's Dolphin Connection; Winter and Hope live at the Clearwater Marine Aquarium; Plantation Crystal River offers packages including swimming with manatees.

Clearwater Marine Aquarium

249 Windward Passage, Clearwater
» 727-441-1790 » seewinter.com »

Rates: General Admission tickets for adults (13-59), \$21.95; Children (3-12), \$16.95; Seniors (60+), \$19.95 » Additional Experiences like Behind the Scenes Tours, Photo with a Dolphin or Trainer for a Day are additional. Trainer for the Day is \$325 for all ages. Winter's Assistant Trainer is \$449 for all ages and includes general admission. » **Note:** Age restrictions apply for some programs.

Sandpearl Resort

500 Mandalay Ave., Clearwater Beach
» 727-441-2425 » sandpearl.com »

Rates: OPAL Family Package is available and includes luxurious accommodations, \$50 resort credit per day, free breakfast for children younger than 12. Rates in March start at \$454/night.

» CMA Excursion with Sandpearl:

The Sea Life Safari Eco-Tour: Pricing is \$25.95 for adults and \$16.95 for children (3-12).

Discovery Cove

6000 Discovery Cove Way, Orlando
» 877-557-7404 » discoverycove.com »

Rates: Special Florida resident offer starts at \$219. » **Note:** Advanced reservations are required.

Hawks Cay

61 Hawks Cay Blvd., Duck Key
» 888-395-5539 » hawkscay.com

Rates: Rates start at \$408 in March. For Florida resident promotion, visit hawkscay.com/special_offers/

Dolphin Connection

At Hawks Cay Resort, 61 Hawks Cay Blvd., Duck Key » 888-251-3674 » hawkscay.com/experience/dolphin-connection-florida-keys/

Rates: Trainer for the Day program costs \$325 per person and Dolphin Discovery program is \$175 per group guest » **Note:** Age and height restrictions apply.

Plantation Crystal River

9301 West Fort Island Trail, Crystal River » 800-632-6262

» plantationoncrystalriver.com » **Rates:** Start at \$139 per night. A variety of packages are offered, including swimming with the manatees.

Plantation Crystal River Manatee Tours

9301 West Fort Island Trail, Crystal River
» 352-795-4211 » plantationoncrystalriver.com/manatee-tours.htm

Rates: Manatee tours are \$55 per person and that includes wetsuit, flippers and snorkels.

“Our trainers play with our animals each day and every session is different,” explains Amy. However, in each session, the trainers work on relationship building, play, cognitive, exercise and husbandry.

“Relationship building is the foundation of training,” asserts Binder. “We spend countless hours with our animals working toward building a series of positive interactions with them getting to know what they like. This is very similar to the way we build our relationships with one another.”

For guests visiting CMA, nearby is the luxurious Sandpearl Resort, on Clearwater Beach, that has partnered with CMA in offering their guests these experiences. “It has always been the vision at Sandpearl to provide our guests with enriching experiences while they are visiting the resort,” says resort Director of Sales & Marketing Nancy Cimney. “One of our key values is to educate our guests on the importance of sustaining the environment and the Clearwater Marine Aquarium Sea Life Safari is the perfect excursion for exploring and learning about sea life in our immediate area. The hands-on activity is

enjoyed by all ages and continues to be one of our most popular guest excursions.”

Another location that is extremely popular with its swimming programs is Orlando's all-inclusive Discovery Cove, where its guests are inspired to care for animals, and the environment, by the connections they make with the amazing collection of animals, according to the attraction's Vice President, Stewart Clark.

“Visitors from around the world fulfill lifelong dreams of swimming with dolphins,” Stewart says. “Accompanied by a trainer, small groups of guests wade into shallow water and become acquainted with their dolphin through hugs, kisses and rubdowns. Then, taking the adventure one step further, guests interact with their dolphin in deeper water for an exciting dorsal fin tow ride back to shore.”

While the dolphin swim is a favorite, guests are also wowed when snorkeling alongside giant rays and thousands of tropical fish in The Grand Reef. Clark continues, “SeaVenture, the 30-minute underwater journey, gives guests a fully immersive adventure into the Grand Reef sea floor and is regularly mentioned by guests as a highlight of their visit.” »

grand | GIRLS' GETAWAY

In the Keys, a highly interactive dolphin experience awaits at Dolphin Connection, located at Hawks Cay Resort on Duck Key. "This three-hour program is a dolphin lover's dream come true," says co-owner of Dolphin Connection Cheryl Messinger. "This gratifying, memorable experience allows guests to join the Dolphin Connection team and become an actual trainer for a day."

The Trainer for a Day program is an in-depth, behind-the-scenes look into the daily activities of the Dolphin Connection training team. "This program offers a unique opportunity to experience what it's like to be a dolphin trainer," Cheryl says. "The program includes ample opportunities to interact with the dolphin family: the in-water Dolphin Discovery and the Dockside Dolphins programs are included as well as a short private training session with the dolphins from the docks. Participants have individual time with the trainer and are involved in various hands-on activities

regarding the care and training of our dolphins."

At Dolphin Connection, conservation of natural resources, especially those of the fragile Florida Keys, is the most important mission. "By providing an opportunity for guests to have direct contact with marine mammals, the team strives to inspire awareness and positive change on behalf of the environment," adds Cheryl. "The essential educational components of our dolphin interactive programs are intended to engage the public and increase concern for the overall health and protection of marine habitats. At Dolphin Connection, the team believes that experiential learning, meeting a dolphin face-to-face, encourages and motivates guests to make a difference on behalf of our planet."

For those wanting to interact with Florida's state mammal – the manatee, often referred to as "gentle giants" – in a natural environment, swimming

opportunities exist at Crystal River. Naples resident Melissa Cunningham dove into these waters to swim with the manatees this past year as part of her son's 10th birthday experience. "The experience was so surreal. To be in the animals' natural habitat and for them to be so curious about us was awe inspiring," Melissa says. "It was a fantastic learning experience for our entire family. We get so involved with day to day activities and the routine that we forget about nature and the beauty around us. My son had a mama and baby manatee get nose to nose with him. We respected their environment but they were very curious about us."

Cunningham selected the swimming with manatees versus dolphins due to their son's interest in animals and on a personal level, she craved a more natural experience. She also stayed at the Plantation on Crystal River during her stay. "The hotel is a very Old Florida-style property with a great pool atmo-

sphere," she says. "Carrie, who used to work at The Naples Beach Club, works there and she knows how to take care of guests. The town was charming and had some great restaurants."

The Plantation on Crystal River is surrounded by the natural springs of Kings Bay. This bay, in Crystal River, is one of the largest aquifers in the state and home to more than 400 West Indian manatees that migrate each year to the warmth of the springs, according to Plantation on Crystal River General Manager Michael Mancke.

"Explore our underwater world of the manatee in Crystal River, Florida, the only place in North America where you can legally swim and passively observe the endangered West Indian manatee," he adds. "This is a once-in-a-lifetime travel opportunity, where you can swim alongside these gentle giants as they play, eat and socialize with one another. In winter months, swim with up to 350 different manatees." **G**