



MONTEREY'S AQUARIUM

Offers Effortless, Entertaining Education

by Amanda Bjerke

I never need an excuse to visit the world-famous Monterey Bay Aquarium on historic Cannery Row. The sense of calm that prevails even on a crowded Sunday afternoon always soothes my soul. Learning about the seldom-seen watery world is effortlessly educational and utterly addictive. I leave freshly equipped with the Aquarium's pocket-sized *Seafood Watch* Guide—a handy meal planning and dining aid—and a fresh resolve to do more to save our oceans, sustain their populations and be a better steward of the world we all share. This year, the facility's 25th anniversary celebration further whets my appetite for all things aquatic with special events including a fascinating seahorse exhibition. (Yes, the males really do give birth.)

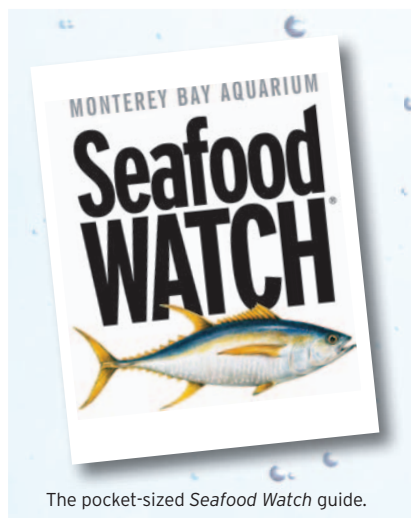
All the oceanic wonders aside, one of the best things about the aquarium is its location. Housed in the old Hovden Cannery, a structure built in 1916, the facility gives a hearty nod to a gritty chapter in California's history with an exhibit featuring vintage industrial films. That presentation captures the essence of the world immortalized in John Steinbeck's novel *Cannery Row*. At first I found its inclusion a bit unsettling. Then I realized that learning about both the once-booming sardine factory and the gorgeous ocean animals living under its roof underscores the aquarium's over-arching call to responsibility. Visitors gaze upon the gleaming schools of sardines swarming the aquarium tanks, then moments later confront the creatures' historic vulnerabilities.



One of the species featured in *The Secret Lives of Seahorses*, a lined seahorse peeks out through the grasses.

Back in Hovden's heyday, this warehouse was among more than a dozen canneries processing a seemingly endless sea of sardines. By 1926, Monterey workers were scaling 70 tons of the fish each hour. Grainy black and white film footage salvaged from the company vault reveals weary-faced women, hairnets neatly in place, working assembly lines and processing a rapid parade of tins crammed full of the silvery fish. With a little imagination you can almost smell the stench.

Literature buffs recall that Steinbeck washed his Cannery Row depiction in a foul stink. The book didn't bother documenting the fishing, or even the processing of 1930s Monterey—perhaps Steinbeck thought the canneries would go on forever. Cannery Row, the place he depicts, sets the stage for a personality study, exploring a colorful cast of residents. None looms larger than "Doc," a philosophical marine biologist, who like many of the author's characters was based on a real person. Fans of the book undoubtedly know that Doc thinly veiled the persona of Steinbeck's best friend Ed Ricketts. An erudite scientist and author Ricketts operated a shabby laboratory and research facility in the heart of the cannery district. Today, a plaque commemorates its location. In the heat of the sardine frenzy, much of Rickett's work sometimes addressed the need to harvest fish judiciously. His early conservation efforts fell on deaf ears. The sardines were fished out by the 1950s. With their demise, Monterey fell on hard times.



The pocket-sized *Seafood Watch* guide.



Ironically, Steinbeck's popularity fueled the community's rebirth a half century ago. By then, Ed Ricketts was dead and Steinbeck was firmly entrenched in New York's literary world. Savvy locals traded on the novel's enduring popularity and renamed the crumbling Ocean View Avenue Cannery Row. A tourist mecca began to emerge in the old industrial district.

In the early days, visitors came to take in the salty breezes, gaze at the handsome convergence of sea, sky and mountain range and ramble through Cannery Row's restaurants and shops. The nice thing about a modern-day Monterey is that all those diversions still apply—only more so. The aquarium of course now serves as the main attraction. It merits its many accolades. The surrounding area is now a marine sanctuary and home to a delightful sea lion population.

The aquarium's veteran patrons and newcomers all find something to love at this ever-evolving facility. Cannery Row has grown up, too. Sports fishermen find plenty of public facilities. Runners, joggers and bicyclists take to the Coastal Recreation Trail. For more passive pursuits, a new IMAX theater opened last year. The county's emerging wine industry sponsors tasting rooms and the retail options continually expand. Excellent restaurants abound. Top-notch hotels offer exceptional lodging including spa services within a brief stroll of the aquarium's front door. A vast selection of accommodations dot Monterey County's lush countryside. There's a place for every inclination and income level. Many offer special aquarium packages. All provide a gateway to the "must-do-before-I-die" experience that is Monterey.

OTHER THINGS TO DO

While an aquarium-centric getaway is an ideal way to spend a relaxing Monterey weekend, the surrounding area offers enough diversion for a week or even longer. The canneries occupied a very brief era in Monterey's long history. Among the state's first settlements it served as capital of Alta California under Spanish rule. History buffs enjoy exploring the old adobe downtown area. Families revel in the Monterey County Youth Museum on Washington. Just five miles south of town, the white sand beaches of quaint Carmel lure visitors, while Steinbeck's Salinas with its ag-tours and a museum devoted to the author is a half-hour drive to the northeast. Pebble Beach with its legendary golf course and awe-inspiring 17-mile drive through the Del Monte Forest is another Monterey must-see. ■



The Monterey Bay Aquarium



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A photograph of a bottle of Lockwood Vineyard wine in the foreground, set against a background of rolling hills and mountains under a hazy sky.

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