



"M-I-C-K-E-Y S-C-U-B-A"

In this 6,000,000-gallon aquarium, the fish are real;
the coral is pure Disney.

- Gil Zeimer

I met Walt Disney in 1956 in Anaheim. Forty years later, I never imagined that I'd dive in his aquarium in Orlando, Florida.

My secret entry key was Walt Disney World's EPCOT Dive Quest Program. Limited to eight certified divers per day, it's a pleasantly-packaged, behind-the-scenes tour of the Living Seas exhibit, with the bonus of a 40-minute dive into the 6-million-gallon tank. The dive operators ask you to bring your mask and certification card. For a fee of \$140, they supply everything else.

Once in the water, my dive buddies and I were transformed from mere divers into entertainers as part of the "Disney experience". We were asked to be cordial to the viewing public. So we waved enthusiastically like Mickey at our families and others viewing us from the Observation Deck. We smiled like Ariel, The Little Mermaid, at folks dining in the Coral Sea Restaurant. And we generally acted Goofy for all the folks riding through the aquarium on its People Mover.

Since this was my first dive in 3-1/2 years, I was pretty jazzed at the idea of getting wet in what the Disney PR folks call "The world's sixth largest ocean". A tank 200-feet square by 27-feet high is pretty humungous. In fact, it's the world's second biggest aquarium. But it sure ain't no ocean.

What was amazing was both the variety and the diversity of fish - over 65 species and thousands of marine creatures - including three six-foot black-tip reef sharks, a few 300-lb turtles, eagle rays, triggerfish, parrot fish, other tropicals, even a hefty 450-lb grouper aptly named Orson. The water temperature was a pleasant 75

degrees. The vis was about 80 - 100 feet, and limited to that because of the minimal aquarium lighting to maximize viewing for the dry spectators.

What was amusing was the coral, starfish and sand, which were formulated by the Disney folks especially for this tank. The coral was hand-painted. Up close, it looked pretty phony. But from a few feet away and further, it looked and felt as brilliant and real as any I'd seen in the Caribbean or Australia.

As for the dive itself, any dive after so long would be expected to be great. It was.

Especially since I got to swim right up to the window where my wife and daughter were looking for me. Being able to share this experience with them made it extra special. And I don't ever remember seeing such a diversity of marine life on just one dive before. That's memorable, too.

The dive operators thought of everything. We got commemorative T-shirts. They also create a 20-minute video of each dive, with footage of our group edited into it. Naturally, this cost extra. But the \$35 fee was a reasonable price for a good quality video of yourself diving with sharks, turtles, and lots of fish.

Overall, I give EPCOT's Dive Quest 2 fins up. If you're going to Walt Disney World and don't want to miss the opportunity to take a dive, Gil Bob says "Check it out".