

Monterey aquarium a Central Coast must-see

By Capt. Todd Fleming
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While stationed at Wright-Patterson Air Force Base, Ohio, the kids loved visiting the Newport Aquarium in Cincinnati. So with family visiting recently, we decided to head up to Monterey on an overnight trip and check out California's most famous aquarium.

The trip here was my mom's first visit to California. So, we decided to take the scenic Highway One route to Monterey instead of shooting up 101. If there's a more scenic drive in this country than that one, I've never seen it. The views were absolutely breathtaking, from Morro Bay up to Big Sur and finally in to Carmel and Monterey. It may add an hour or more to the trip, but it's well worth it.

I was cautioned that the trip up Highway One is curvy. That's an understatement. I felt like an Indy racecar driver as we wound up and down the mountains on steep curves while overlooking the Pacific Ocean. It was great.

We arrived in Monterey about lunchtime and headed to Fishermen's Wharf in search of some seafood. I think that was a mistake. The places were pricy and the restaurant we ate at wasn't all that great. There were much more reasonable places just off the wharf on Cannery Row of John Steinbeck fame, although the walk along the bay from the wharf to the aquarium almost makes it worth it.

After lunch, we headed to the aquarium. Words do not do justice to the Monterey Bay

Aquarium. It's amazing. From the kelp forest to the Outer Bay exhibit loaded with massive tuna, sea turtles, and sunfish to the multiple jellyfish exhibits to the shark exhibit, the aquarium takes your breath away at every turn.

Everyone stationed at Vandenberg owes it to themselves and their families to visit this world famous aquarium before they leave California's

Central Coast. It's absolutely spectacular.

For those with young children, the aquarium has clever play areas and plenty of interactive activities to keep them amused for hours. From holding hermit crabs to touching live sharks our kids had a blast. They played in a fish shaped playground and made shark-shaped hats. In fact, nearly every exhibit area had a

children's area or activity nearby.

Another fan favorite at the aquarium is the otter exhibit. Although I didn't find the exhibit as impressive as some of the others, it was educational. Considering how many otters we saw just off the coast, especially down by Pebble Beach, I'm glad we saw it.

We spent a few hours at the aquarium, but we could have easily spent longer. I recommend going during the off-season or during the week. Although the crowds weren't too bad on the day we were there, it was easy to see that they could get bad. And parking is at a premium.

Afterward we did some shopping in town, which was surprisingly reasonable. Most of the many stores on Cannery Row by the aquarium were running impressive specials. My mom and sister, who both love to shop, had a blast. It's not a bad place to do some Christmas shopping off-season when nearly everything is deeply discounted.

Before heading back home the next morning, we did the 17-mile drive around Pebble Beach. Then

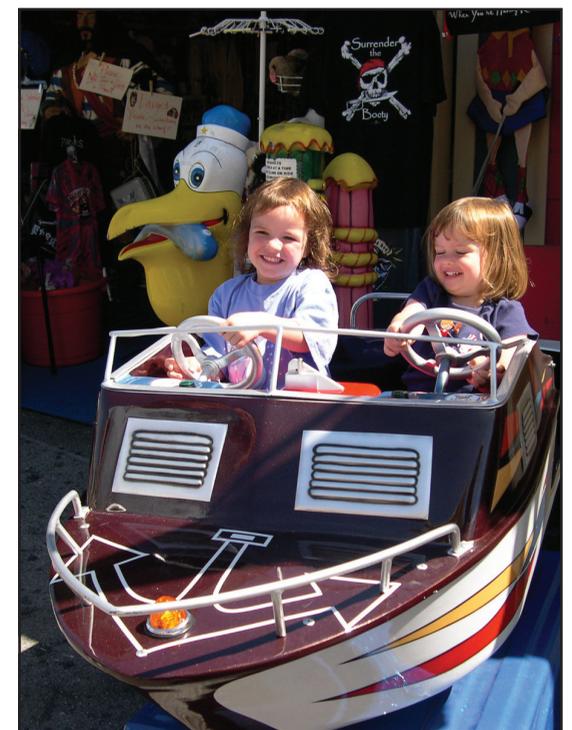
we headed to Carmel for lunch.

Although we didn't see Clint Eastwood, the former mayor of Carmel, it made for a nice last diversion on the trip. Visiting Pebble Beach and Carmel is like stepping into an episode of *Lifestyles for the Rich and Famous*. I actually walked through an art story where paintings were priced around \$100K. Maybe next time.

For the trip home, we came back on 101 and made it here in 3.5 hours. It wasn't worth the time saved. Driving through Salinas and down 101, I felt like we were in the "Grapes of Wrath." But, all in all, it was a very worthwhile trip.



PHOTOS BY CAPT. TODD FLEMING
Rachel Fleming, 3, appreciates the real-life fish from her favorite movie, "Finding Nemo" at the Monterey Bay Aquarium about 3 hours north of Vandenberg.



Hannah Fleming, 4, (left), and her sister Rachel, 3, enjoy a ride on Fisherman's Wharf in Monterey, Calif.