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WITH THE KIDS

More watery thrills

Southland marine fun includes summer festivals, new aquarium exhibits and ship excursions.

By Brenda Rees, Special to The Times

How's a visit to the Pacific Islands this summer sound? At last there's a way to immerse yourself in island culture, song, dance, food, geography, zoology and horticulture that doesn't require dreary hours in flight and a second mortgage on the house.

It's the Pacific Islands Summer program at the Long Beach Aquarium of the Pacific, one of several new attractions and activities at local aquariums and marine institutes offering a taste of life in the tropics within an hour's drive from most parts of the Southland.

The most elaborate program is in Long Beach, where visitors can view new animal exhibits, experience the recently remodeled 3-D movie theater and learn about various Pacific Island cultures through daily song, dance, storytelling and craft performances.

The summer-long event, which opened last week, explores the animal and plant biology as well as the human cultures of Hawaii, New Zealand, Fiji, Japan and the Philippines, among others islands.

Redesigned displays and new passport-type guides aim to raise awareness of individual islands' ecological profiles and problems. A new exhibit in the Tropical Pacific Gallery describes the effects of invasive species on plant and animal life.

Representatives from various Pacific Islands cultures will perform songs, dance, stories and art daily through the summer. Children can create crafts inspired by each featured culture.

On July 11, the aquarium will host a traditional island luau on its front lawn that will also feature artisan demonstration of traditional crafts as well as music and dance performances.

The aquarium's Lorikeet Forest has new tenants since the colorful Lorikeet birds are currently off display to protect them from the potential risk of Exotic Newcastle Disease. The forest space now features a collection of unusual and rare animals found only on certain Pacific islands: coconut crabs, a binturong (a tree-climbing mammal), dusky pademelons (small forest kangaroos) and Prevost's squirrels.

The 3-D film "Animal Vision 3-D" along with "Destination Pacific Island" will be shown daily in the aquarium's recently renovated theater.

Nearby, the Cabrillo Marine Aquarium is featuring a new exhibition of underwater photography by Mark Buchfuhrer, a freelance photographer who has captured sea life in the Galapagos Islands, Papua New Guinea and other remote locales. A bit farther up the coast at the newly remodeled and recently reopened Roundhouse Marine Studies Lab & Aquarium, visitors will discover renovated displays as well as a new archway tank where schooling mackerel and moray eels dart and swim overhead. Also new is a ray petting pool, a shark tank and tide pool touch tank.

Opening July 18 at the Birch Aquarium at Scripps is "Sounds of the Sea," an exhibit that showcases sound galleries where guests can hear whale songs, ship propellers and other underwater noises. Visitors will learn how scientists use "sound research" to better understand animal behavior and Earth's changing climate. In addition, families can check out the popular seahorse exhibit that features 13 species and their relatives, a breeding nursery and interactive displays.

The Ocean Institute in Dana Point will launch its first public program with new interactive displays and activities scheduled for summer weekends that includes three mini events.

The kick-off event is Stingray Days (June 28-29), featuring animal displays, an exhibition of Stingray cars, surfboard-making demonstrations and music by--who else? -- the Stingrays. During Island Surf Days (July 26-27) guests can take a ride on an outrigger canoe, enjoy Polynesian music and make leis. And finally on Killer Dana Days (Aug. 16-17), visitors can learn about local surf culture, watch surf movies and view a surf art exhibit.

In addition, the institute continues to offer summer cruise experiences on its two ships: a replica of a clipper schooner and a research laboratory vessel. Guests aboard the tall ship Spirit of Dana Point can get involved in raising the sails and other nautical tasks in addition to learning how to tie knots and sing sea shanties. Accompanied by scientists on the 70-foot Sea Explorer, visitors can help researchers conduct experiments with mud and sea samples as well as record the movements of blue whales and other sea life.

Can't get enough of boat rides? Head down south for Family Day (June 8) at the Maritime Museum of San Diego. Children will get in free and families can sign up for free trips aboard the museum's 1914 Pilot boat. In addition, kids can participate in mini-boat races, practice raising the sails and make crafts.

Splashy affairs

Long Beach Aquarium of the Pacific: 100 Aquarium Way, Long Beach. 9 a.m. to 6 p.m. daily. \$18.75 adults, \$9.95 children. (562) 590-3100.

Cabrillo Marine Aquarium: 3720 Stephen White Drive, San Pedro. Tuesday to Friday, noon to 5 p.m., Saturday and Sunday, 10 a.m. to 5 p.m., closed Mondays. Suggested donation: \$5 adults, \$1 children. (310) 548-7562.

Roundhouse Marine Studies Lab & Aquarium: Manhattan Beach Pier, Manhattan Beach. Monday to Friday, 3 p.m. to sunset; Saturday and Sunday, 10 a.m. to sunset. \$2 suggested donation. (310) 379-8117.

Birch Aquarium at Scripps: 2300 Expedition Way, La Jolla. 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. daily, \$9.50 adults, \$6 children. (949) 534-3474.

Ocean Institute: 24200 Dana Point Harbor Drive, Dana Point. Saturday and Sunday, 10 a.m. to 3 p.m. \$5, general; \$3, ages 5-12; free, 4 and under. (949) 496-2274.

Maritime Museum of San Diego: 1492 N. Harbor Drive, San Diego. Daily, 9 a.m. to 9 p.m. \$7, adults; senior citizens and children 13-17, \$5; children 6-12, \$4; under 6, free. (619) 234-9153.