

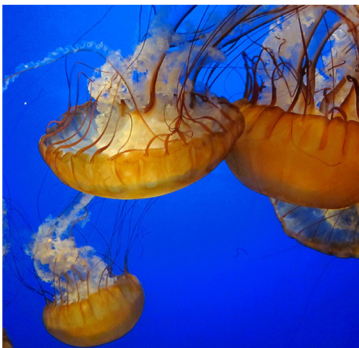
The Great Tide Pool

TALES OF PACIFIC GROVE, CALIFORNIA

by local award-winning author, Brad Herzog

SEA AND BE SEEN

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Since its grand opening on October 20, 1984, the Monterey Bay Aquarium – 320,000 square feet of ooohs and aaahs on Pacific Grove’s eastern border – has been awash in superlatives. Roughly two million visitors annually. Nearly 200 exhibits celebrating the diverse habitats of Monterey Bay. A 1.2-million-gallon Open Sea exhibit. A Kelp Forest exhibit 28 feet tall. A 10,000-square-foot Into the Deep exhibit. Nearly 1 billion gallons of seawater flowing from the bay through the Aquarium and back into the ocean each year...

But of course, the lifeblood of the Monterey Bay Aquarium, quite literally, is the collection of more than 80,000 animals and plants therein. Of course, some are more remarkable than others. And some are so unusual, so astonishing, so gob-smacking that they boggle the mind. Over the years, Aquarium staff members have been asked to cite their favorite species, a tall order when some 771 of them populate the place. Their choices represent superlatives of the sea, and they serve as a sort of scavenger hunt of the Monterey Bay Aquarium.

Of their chosen marvels, I’ve selected ten of them – wonders worth looking for the next time you find yourself wandering around one of the jewels of the Monterey Peninsula:

Pacific sea nettle – This creature is brainless, boneless, spineless, yet the sea nettles exhibit at the aquarium is perhaps the most popular, certainly the most photographed. Its tentacles are covered in lethal stinging cells and can grow as much as 16 feet long, and it can commute more than one thousand meters up and down in the water daily.

Scalloped hammerhead shark – Arguably the most easily identifiable resident of the aquarium, its eyes and nostrils are located at the extreme ends of its head. With a relatively small mouth, scalloped hammerheads commonly prey on stingrays. One shark was found with 96 venomous stingray barbs imbedded in its mouth and jaws.



Giant Pacific octopus – These underwater chameleons are experts at camouflage, using a remarkable combination of nerves, muscle fibers, and pigment cells to change color and shape at will. They feature more than 2000 suction cups across their eight arms, which they actually use for smelling. The largest one on record had a 20-foot arm span.



Predatory tunicate – A deep-sea Venus flytrap of sorts. Picture a giant, translucent open mouth attached to the seafloor. When tiny animals swim in, the mouth closes. Or there's this: These "simultaneous hermaphrodites" produce both eggs and sperm, thus a predatory tunicate can reproduce by itself.



Giant deep-sea isopod – Think of the tiny roly poly pillbugs you might find in your yard... if they were football-sized, 14-legged crustaceans. One of an estimated 10,000 species of isopods, it roams the deep-sea floor – as much as 1,600 feet below the surface – feasting on falling debris like fish heads, crab bits, and marine worms.

Nudibranch – Imagine sea slugs in various vibrant colors – orange and white, cerulean and yellow, lavender and gold. Longtime aquarium executive director Julie Packard once called them "a work of art." There are over 3000 species of soft-bodied marine mollusk... and counting.



Ocean sunfish – A favorite of Packard's, it has been described as a pancake with flaps. Or take a massive pizza, stand it on its side, and add fins at the top and bottom. The largest bony fish in the ocean, they can weigh as much as 5,000 pounds.

Japanese spider crab – Consider a crab that has been known to grow as large as a Volkswagen Beetle, a seafloor scavenger whose ten legs continue to grow in adulthood and can span up to 12 feet from claw to claw.



Giant sea bass – Few fish start out so adorable (bright orange with black spots) and grow into something so... unattractive (a slow-moving, hulking gray behemoth). With its gaping mouth, the giant bass has been known to suck in small sharks.

Rockfish – Some of these seafaring animals, ubiquitous in the aquarium's kelp forest exhibit, can live as long as 200 years. Yes, two centuries, meaning there may be a rockfish cruising around that was hatched about when Thomas Jefferson was alive.

So there you have it. Ten marvels to seek out at one of the premier aquariums in the world. And once you've done that, you have only 761 to go.

