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HOME & AWAY

Closer Look: Galveston, Texas', Moody Gardens

By Karen Eakins

Creole had taken a shine to the brass ornament on my left shoe. He'd come strutting in the room—appropriate for a King, I suppose—and because his handler had just told our Penguin Encounter group that some of the birds would peck if one were to touch them, I stayed still. He was, ahem, the cock of the walk. It didn't hurt that the 20-pound BOI (born on island) bird was splendidly handsome. The cameras came out and stayed out for this curious, colorful creature.

While his brethren were churning the water—one character in particular turning, flipping, breaching and causing a general ruckus—in the tank outside, Creole made a beeline to check out the brass backstage. I resisted the incredible urge to reach out (he was so close!) as the handler recited penguin facts—they can see colors; their beaks are solid bone; and they use their colors and “song,” aka trumpet, to attract a mate.

He eventually lost interest and waddled around the room to spread the love. After 10 to 15 minutes, he was ushered out—still clearly in command of our attention. It was just the first stop my traveling group made in Moody Gardens, but it was a bang-up introduction.

Welcome to My House

Moody Gardens Galveston Island is impossible to miss. Whether visitors are driving onto the island from Houston via Interstate 45 or flying into Scholes Airport, its three glass pyramids nestled against Offatts Bayou are showstoppers. Aquarium Pyramid, Rainforest Pyramid and Discovery Pyramid—and the adjacent AAA Four Diamond-rated hotel, golf course and more—hold enough entertainment for all ages to load up a weekend on their own, even if a visitor didn't tour this eclectic island (which would be a real shame).

Inside the blue-glass, 1.5 million-gallon wonderland known as Aquarium Pyramid, I also



Creole, a 20-pound King penguin, makes his home in the Aquarium Pyramid.

Karen Eakins

got so engrossed watching Harbor seals and California sea lions such as Porter, Squirt and Sam glide through the water as if they were flying, I nearly lost my group. And trying not to bang into someone else while gawking up at the sharks and barracudas as I strolled through the water tunnel was a challenge.



A beautiful blue macaw perches on a branch in the Rainforest Pyramid.
Karen Eakins

The next stop was 10-story, clear-glass Rainforest Pyramid, where interactives that have visitors standing in animal footprints and listening to natural sounds such as squeaks, chirps, flutters and squawks entertain while they teach. Controlled access keeps people from overwhelming free-ranging animals such as white-faced Saki monkeys, Chinese alligators, Giant Amazon river otters, and scarlet ibis and macaws—whose colors blaze against the humid, deep-green foliage—as they traverse walkways at ground and canopy level.

Given all these exotic animals—which were mostly calm about being the center of attention—it was surprising that one of the most compelling exhibits was the enclosed butterfly pavilion. Children and adults alike were mesmerized by the flitting beauty. I hear the pavilion’s doors have now been removed, so guests should be on the lookout for them throughout the pyramid.

Digital and Watery World Delights

The pink-glass Discovery Pyramid is devoted to the wonders of science through traveling and interactive exhibits. It holds the award-winning Nickelodeon’s *SpongeBob SubPants Adventure*, a 3-D audience recognition theater.

The 4D Special FX Theater, a blend of hi-def 3-D video and sensory effects, is don’t-miss. My viewing of the animated *Ice Age: No Time for Nuts* included flashing lights, vibrating seats, an air blast through the seatback, plus getting sprinkled and snowed on. It doesn’t last but 15 minutes max, but it’s great fun. The MG 3D Theater—Texas’ largest screen—a visitor center, gift shop and restaurant are also nearby.

Those ready to leave the pyramids will find on-property the 25-acre indoor and outdoor Majestic Gardens and 72-par Moody Gardens Golf Course, plus a five-tier ropes course, zip line and one-hour bayou tours aboard the 1800s’ replica Colonel Paddlewheeler Boat. There’s also white-sand Palm Beach, with a variety of water options, but thrill seekers will want to trek a couple of blocks to Schlitterbahn Waterpark Galveston, one of the country’s top 10 (and voted world’s best indoor waterpark for eight years).

Schlitterbahn’s 26 acres not only hold 33 attractions in the Surfenburg, Blastenhoff and Wasserfest areas, they boast the world’s tallest water blaster. Massiv, eight stories tall, three football fields long, and featuring seven drops, four uphill blasts, three pitch-black tunnels and the first-ever triple-drop finale, is built for 45-second doesn’t-disappoint excitement.

Not enough? Moody Gardens' \$37 million aquarium expansion debuted this summer. It holds exhibits for a Gulf of Mexico oil rig, mangroves and flower garden banks; a Caribbean touch tank; and a new penguin habitat holding black, white and pink Humboldt penguins from Southern Hemisphere waters off the coast of Peru and Chile. I wonder if they've met King Creole?

For more information, call (800) 582-4673 or visit moodygardens.com. To learn more about Galveston, call (409) 797-5144 or log on to galveston.com. For travel-planning assistance, visit your local AAA Travel agent or AAA.com/travel.

Writer's Picks

Bishop's Palace

Built in 1892 for railroad magnate Walter Gresham and his family, this is the city's showcase home, guarded by twin griffins at the gate. Visitors can take a docent-led or self-guided, audio-aided tour through the three stories to gawk at such items as the library's burlled black-walnut bookcases and S.C. Johnson-designed parquet floors, the dining room's embossed leather wallpaper panels, and the three spigots—hot, cold and rainwater—in Mrs. Gresham's bathtub. This is living large in Texas.

The Bryan Museum

Sited in the 1895-built Galveston Orphans Home, the Bryan is the world's largest collection of historical artifacts, documents and artwork relating to the Southwest. Founded by the great-great-great-grandson of Stephen Austin's sister, its four galleries hold 70,000 items spanning 2,500 years, and a new treasure is around every corner: Santa Anna's 1836 smoking cap, an 1810 Austin signature plus one of Geronimo's, an original copy of the 1812 Nina Expedition, Andy Warhol paintings of Geronimo, Annie Oakley and George Armstrong Custer, and much more. Out back, down the garden's winding path, is the spectacular glass Victorian conservatory.

East End Historical District Tour

In 1900, before hurricanes were named, a powerhouse storm smashed into Galveston, killed 6,000 and almost wiped the city off the map. Tougher than any storm, the city rebuilt. History didn't quite repeat itself when Hurricane Ike hit in 2008, thanks to the post-1900-built seawall. Those who climb aboard a Galveston Historical Society electric cart can get a breezy retelling of the legend and lore of historical district homes and see the rebirth of oak trees devastated by Ike—now carved into whimsical sculptures. Galveston wins again.

Hendley Market on the Strand

Tucked away among the iron-front historical buildings holding boutiques, souvenir shops, bars and restaurants on the Strand downtown is Hendley Market. Opened in 1979 in the



Sights seen during an East End Historical District Tour include a tree-stump sculpture of a grandma reading to children.

Karen Eakins

Strand's first commercial building (built 1858), it's chockfull of fun. From Victorian-era items and children's books and toys to Day of the Dead merchandise and more than 200 nativities and santons, shopping here is not only low-key, it's inexpensive.

KAREN EAKINS is features/copy editor of *Home & Away*.

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