

My Dive with the " Gentle Giants"- Dive Immersion Program

A few weeks ago we received an email inviting Rory and myself to be the guest of the Georgia Aquarium and dive with the Whale Sharks! As some of you may remember ARDSC hosted a trip to Holbox, MX in 2006, I thought: I have swam with them for real!, but hey! I can dive and have fun with it.

Donna and I headed downtown and arrived about an hour before the dive time, where we were met at the door and escorted upstairs by Ed Ryan, Ed took us the long way around so we could see some of the behind the scene areas before our dive time.

We arrived at the Dive Kiosk where we met Patti Eberhart and Tom Carter. Rory had been in for a little while before that, so he was waiting on us also.

They took our "C" Cards and driver license so they could make copies for the Aquarium records. Tom and Pattie gave us a brief description of the dive and tried to make us feel at ease.... No problem- large fish large sharks- what could go wrong! These guys (sharks) are fed on a regular schedule so we would be fine.

We were escorted up stairs and shown around the wonderful facilities. Donna had a private tour with Tom, during our orientation, showing her areas in the aquarium of interest.

At 3:00 Rory and I were escorted to the Coral classroom with Patti, she introduced us to the program and what we could expect. After we filled out paperwork, we watched a short program on the whale sharks. Georgia Aquarium is the only place you can sign up for a PADI Whale Shark Specialty- and be guaranteed to get it when you leave!!! You WILL See a Whale Shark and be able to meet the requirement of the specialty class...

At 3:30 we went to the diving area to prepare for our dive, I was able to leave my dive mask with them to be cleaned, You are able to bring your mask to use, everything else is furnished...Of course I had to have my mask or I would not be able to read the gauges...

The locker room was great- we had lockers for our personal gear, The Aquarium provided everything, Gear, towels, shampoo, crème rinse, even bottled drinking water.

After we changed into our wet suits we met in the diving area with our dive team members:

Lead Dive Master, Anne Lewin,

Safety Dive Master: Myra Wisotzky,

Videographer: Wanda Rodriguez

Our Tender, Will Burtle invited us down to the dock!: Yes, Dock, a floating dock! They think of everything. This dock was wonderful: we geared up and fell face forward into the water. The dock is lifted out of the tank when not in use.

We were able to dive the 6.3 million gallon Aquarium exhibit of the Ocean Exhibit of Ocean Voyager, We experienced diving with fish from 3 different Oceans including: 4 Whale Sharks, 2 Manta Rays, 3 Hammerheads, 6 Sand Tiger Sharks plus thousands of other rays and fish from the Indian, Pacific and Atlantic Oceans.

Our dive started with meeting our Videographer, Wanda in the sand below the dock. This gave us time to adjust our gear and check out the beautiful surroundings. Our Lead Dive Master Anne started us on our dive tour of the Aquarium with a slow and lazy dive.

I had an issue with my mask-fogging up- but nothing a little water would not cure...

You could always tell when the Whale Sharks or Manta are passing over head by the shadow it cast below, we had made several passes around the main viewing area when our Divemaster signaled for us to kneel low in the sand bottom. During the pre dive orientation she said: just "do what I do" - so we did...

After a short minute I could see why!- the Manta put on a wonderful show for the crowd watching on the main viewing area. She would very gracefully swim in and just skim the top of our heads then very slowly make a loop- so graceful it was breath taking.- you had to be there!

We swam around several more times and we were able to wave to the people in the glass tunnel and inside the viewing area's – One of the highlights of my dive I will not ever forget-

While slowly swimming along following Anne, I noticed a small little boy standing beside his father in one of the floor length viewing windows, so I made a slow turn and swam over to the boy- he hid behind his father's pants leg and stuck his head around to see if this big ugly thing swam off- I waved to him and he- waved back- I put my hand flat to the window- (The glass is 22" thick), with a little coaching from his father he reached out and touched the glass with his hand, his father stepped back, then the little guy moved up to the window; smiling from ear to ear- I played with him for a minute or two, smiling and laughing at his mother and father... I then waved good bye and backed away- his father gave me a thumbs up sign and a thank you- This will be one trip the little guy (or this big guy) will not forget- the day a big ugly sea monster dressed in blue and black, blowing bubbles- touched a little boy's hand...and the day a little boy touched a big guy's heart with a smile!

We swam around some more and watched the hammerheads, sand tiger sharks and other fish just enjoy the water. Our Lead Divemaster Anne, gave us a thumbs up (end the dive) sign- the dive was over already- we just got started!

I looked around and started a slow rise to the surface, you do not have to worry about boat traffic just whale shark traffic- they have the Right of way! I was met at surface by Will, who asked me "How was the Dive?" Wonderful I replied. As we had worked out before the dive, I inflated my BCD and removed my gear in the water. Even an 80 cu foot Aluminum tank is tough on my knees and hip. I swam around the dock- removed my fins and climbed up the ladder. Will recorded my ending PSI and time. Rory had

surfaced and was working his way around the dock to exit the tank also. All under the very watchful eyes of our Divemaster and Safety divers.

We had a short visit (whale story) with everyone before we went to the locker room to change.

After a nice hot shower and changed into our dry clothes, we met up with Patti again in the dive area. She escorted us back to the Coral Classroom for a Dive Debriefing- we filled out a questionnaire about our dive experience in and out of the water. We were then treated to a viewing of the movie footage shot by Wanda our Videographer. It was Great !!! Donna had joined back up with us at this time and she was able to view the footage also. Donna had taken some great video from the viewing areas- and was excited about viewing the footage from inside the tank. Tom had shown her all the viewing areas and was giving her information about the tanks, fish and just how the Aquarium was working on different projects and areas of interest.

Since now it was after closing time Tom escorted us to the parking deck where we parted ways and a promise of seeing him again later.

This was a wonderful dive experience and I recommend it to everyone. The Dive staff makes you feel welcome and safe.

One of the biggest things I noticed is everyone is concerned about safety: When you enter an area that maybe wet and slick, they were sure to point this out- Asking you to be careful! Just like on a boat deck the concrete gets wet and slippery.

I noticed several times our safety diver Myra-was escorting a large grouper away from us...guest he thought we were supper???? But at no time did I ever feel threaten.

We wish to Thank:

Greeter: Patti Eberhart

Lead Dive Master: Anne Lewin

Safety Dive Master: Myra Wisotzky

Videographer: Wanda Rodriguez

Tender: Will Burtle

Editor: Windsor Gray

MODs :

Susan Oglesby

Ed Ryan

Volunteer: Tom Carter

Rory and I are working on a special arrangement with the Georgia Aquarium for our membership to get special pricing for this adventure.

One word of warning: Ladies be prepared to give them your weight!!!- This is how they tell the amount of dive weight to put in your BCD! Shoe size and clothes sizes too!- But all of this is done in private if you really want to...

The gear is top notch gear Scuba Pro-
BCD are weight integrated.
Regulators Breath nice- cracking pressure is nice and easy.
Pressure gauge is analog –do not need a dive computer. This is a timed dive.
Depth is 20 foot before glass tunnel, drops to 30 feet on main tank.
Water temp is 76-77.
Vis is 100 feet easy!

Sign up and take the Whale Shark Specialty it will be well worth it.

You get:

Georgia Aquarium Dive Team Sticker for your car!

I Dove with Gentle Giants Tee Shirt.

Special Dive Log Page for you Dive Log Book

Bragging rights for Life!

You can purchase a Video of your dive.

Sign up for and get your Whale Shark Specialty Card from PADI.

Dive Safe!

David N Scarborough

Below is some follow up information furnished by Georgia Aquarium about these programs:



at  Pemberton Place

Congratulations!

You are going to experience something very few in the world will ever have the opportunity to do—swim or dive with whale sharks. We welcome you in joining our conservation mission as you journey with “Gentle Giants” and thousands of other fish.

Below is information for receiving your ticket

Online Registrants – Online registrants should have received an e-ticket to their email address following your reservation. If you did not receive your e-ticket please respond with your online order number. On the day of your visit proceed to the entrance for your ticket to be scanned.

Call Center Registrants – If you placed your order through the Call Center, you should come to the main entrance on the day of your visit and present your order number to ticket agent to receive your ticket for entry and proceed to the entrance for your ticket to be scanned.

Dive/Swim Participants can enter the Aquarium at any time on the day of your swim or dive. After you enter the Aquarium, please proceed to the Dive Kiosk in front of the Ocean Voyager gallery 30-minutes before your scheduled time. You will see Ocean Voyager to your right, near Café Aquaria, after you enter the Aquarium. We recommend that guest arrive to the Aquarium at least 1hr. prior to your program time to insure arrival at the Dive Kiosk 30-minutes prior to your scheduled program time. If you would like to visit the main floor of the Aquarium, we encourage you to arrive earlier to provide yourself ample time to see everything!

There are numerous opportunities for your friends and family to see and photograph you while you swim or dive in Ocean Voyager. You can make reservations and purchase tickets online at georgiaaquarium.org for other guests, or they may purchase tickets on the same day at the Aquarium entrance. They will not want to miss the opportunity to see you swimming or diving alongside the world's largest fish and other incredible creatures!

Please bring your bathing suit, and if you are a diver, bring your certification card and photo identification. On the day of your experience, please try to refrain from using any perfumes, lotions, sprays or hair care products (such as hairspray and gel). We will furnish you with a towel, group photo and all equipment necessary. We will also provide a locker room, showers, body-wash, shampoo and conditioner. You may bring your own mask if you wish, however, we will need to disinfect it for animal health reasons.

We've included some frequently asked questions for you to review in preparation for your experience. Now, get ready to have the experience of a lifetime! See you then!

Attention Divers:

Dive Participants can now enhance their Dive with the add-on of the Whale Shark Specialty.....

Certified Open Divers participating in Georgia Aquarium's Journey with Gentle Giants Dive Immersion Program now have an opportunity to earn a unique PADI Distinctive Specialty offered nowhere else in the world. Become one of the first to earn the Georgia Aquarium Whale Shark Specialty Dive Certification. This unique opportunity is available to all divers certified by any recognized national or international training organization, similar to the PADI Open Water Diver Certification.

The PADI Whale Shark Distinctive Specialty at Georgia Aquarium offers the unique opportunity for guests to learn more about the whale shark through academic materials and direct observation. Students participating receive a Student Manual beforehand, a mini behind-the-scenes tour, the possibility of an intimate whale shark encounter, collector's pin, bracelet and a PADI Whale Shark Distinctive Specialty certification card.

Georgia Aquarium is the only place where a diver is guaranteed to see a whale shark. And now you can get the card to prove it!

HOW: The PADI Whale Shark Distinctive Specialty is available as an add-on to your dive when you purchase online. If you have already purchased your dive, please call the Call Center at 404.581.4000 to add the whale shark specialty to your program.

WHEN: Dives occur daily at 3 p.m. and additionally on Saturday and Sunday at 11 a.m. Participants in the PADI Whale Shark Distinctive Specialty should arrive at the Dive Kiosk, located next to the Ocean Voyager gallery, no later than 45 minutes before the dive event (10:15 for Saturday/Sunday morning dive; 2:15 for daily afternoon dive).

WHO: Registered participants in the Journey with Gentle Giants dive program can sign up for this whale shark specialty. Minimum age is 12 years old, and any diver under the age of 18 must be accompanied by a participating open water certified adult diver. Proof of open water SCUBA certification from a nationally or internationally recognized organization must be provided, along with photo identification.

WHAT TO BRING: Proof of open water SCUBA certification from a nationally or internationally recognized organization; completed forms; passport size photo (please no hats or sunglasses); swimsuit

COST: The whale shark specialty is a \$74 add-on to your purchased dive.

To add this program to your reservation – contact our Call Center at 404-581-4000. Please have your order number available to provide to the agent to add this program to your order.

Journey with Gentle Giants

Frequently Asked Questions

What is the purpose of this program, and why did Georgia Aquarium initiate it?

The program was initiated as an exploration of the Ocean Voyager exhibit and introduction to the Georgia Aquarium conservation and whale shark research program. Journey with Gentle Giants is the only opportunity in the world where you are guaranteed to swim or SCUBA dive with the largest fish in the world, the whale shark. The program not only drives knowledge and appreciation for this amazing species, but a portion of the proceeds from this program support the Aquarium's 4R conservation program. For more information about the Georgia Aquarium's 4R program, please visit the Web site at www.georgiaaquarium.org.

What is included in the experience?

The program includes a 30-minute swim or SCUBA dive in the Ocean Voyager exhibit. Participants will also view some behind-the-scenes areas of the Georgia Aquarium. Below is a program schedule:

DIVE IMMERSION PROGRAM SCHEDULE

DIVERS

2:30-2:45	Check-in at kiosk at entrance to OV gallery. Meet Dive Master
3:00-3:30	Attend orientation session in Coral Classroom
3:30-4:00	Change into gear and receive topside orientation
4:00-4:30	In the water
4:30-5:00	Shower and change
5:00-5:30	Attend debriefing session in the Coral Classroom. Review underwater video and receive your takeaway items
5:35	End of Program session

Divers must be open water certified



Whale Shark Specialty Requirements

Completion of **PADI Physical Statement** (similar to statement in Open Water Training, included in **student packet** available upon registration and payment); completion of **Safe Diver Statement and Liability Form** (included with student packet available upon registration and payment); prior reading of the **student packet** (available upon registration and payment). It is not required, however, the Georgia Aquarium recommends that any diver who has not recently been in the water participate in a refresher course with the emphasis on buoyancy control. Any medical conditions checked "yes" will require a medical doctor's release on physical statement form.

- Open Water Certification card or higher.
- Completion of PADI Physicians Statement (similar to statement in Open Water Training, included in student packet upon registration and payment)
- Completion of Safe Diver Statement and Liability Forms (included with student packet upon registration and payment)
- Minimum age is 12 years old (Dive Immersion Program requires all divers in the Ocean Voyager exhibit to be 12 and over)
- Any diver under the age of 18 must be accompanied by a participating certified adult diver.
- A Passport size photo (please no hats or sunglasses)

**Whale Shark Specialty Forms* are available for download from the Georgia Aquarium website (www.georgiaaquarium.org) under the "Journey with the Gentle Giants" section of the website under the Dive Program link.

Frequently Asked Questions

How big is the Ocean Voyager exhibit, and what will I see?

The exhibit contains 6.3 million gallons of water and ranges in depth from 20 to 33 feet deep. This exhibit houses thousands of fish including whale sharks, zebra sharks, sawfish, leopard whiplays, bowmouth guitarfish, humphead wrasses and schools of tarpon, pompano and cownose rays. That's just to name a few.

What is the difference between SCUBA and swim?

SCUBA diving is the act of swimming underwater while using self-contained underwater breathing apparatus. There are several large diving organizations that train and certify divers and dive instructors. The Aquarium's swim program will allow individuals to swim at the surface with an air supply, and this does not require any certification. *Divers must be open water certified*

Do I have to be SCUBA certified?

Yes, if you would like to SCUBA dive. Proof of SCUBA open water certification from a nationally or internationally recognized organization must be provided, along with photo identification. There is no certification necessary to participate in the swim program. *Divers must be open water certified*

What is the cost of the program?

For the swim program, the cost is \$225 for non-members and 10% off for Annual Pass members. For the SCUBA dive program, the cost is \$325 for non-members and 10% off for Annual Pass members. Program price includes admission to the Aquarium, all equipment, the swim or dive, log book, certificate of participation, dive logbook, t-shirt and souvenir photo. DVD will be available for purchase. Equipment provided: mask, fins, tank, buoyancy device, regulator, weights, booties and wetsuit. Personal masks are permitted, but will be required to be disinfected.

Can I pre-register? Do I have to pre-register?

We encourage guest to pre-register as there are a limited number of spaces per dive.

What are the age requirements?

All participants must be age 12 and older. Guests under the age of 18 must be accompanied by a participating adult. The SCUBA option is open to all certified divers. Proof of SCUBA open water certification from a nationally or internationally recognized organization must be provided, along with photo identification. *Divers must be open water certified*

Are you able to dive/swim with special needs?

Yes, we have designed the locker room and dive platform to meet ADA regulations. When you call to make a reservation, please let the reservists know you have special needs and someone from the dive program will call you prior to your visit to review your special needs, motility issues and equipment.

What should I bring with me?

All you will need to bring is your swimsuit. If diving, you will have to provide proof of SCUBA open water certification from a nationally or internationally recognized organization, along with photo identification. Georgia Aquarium will supply all equipment (mask, fins, tank, buoyancy device, regulator, weights, wetsuit and booties) and towels. Please do not bring your own equipment or camera of any kind. Personal masks are permitted, but will be required to be disinfected. Comfortable changing rooms with showers and lockers are provided. Please refrain from using hair care products (such as hairspray and gel), lotions, sprays and perfumes on the day of your experience.

Should I refrain from using any personal care products the day of my swim or dive?

Yes, please refrain from using any hair control products (such as hairspray and gel), lotions, sprays and perfumes.

Will there be a guide in the water with me?

There will be three dive masters in the water with you at all times. Dive team members are CPR, first aid and emergency oxygen trained. Both the dive and swim programs are a guided tour; they are not a free swim.

How do I make a reservation?

You can make a reservation by registering online or calling 404-581-4000.

Are their set times available for Swim with Gentle Giants, or do I pick my own time?

Currently, the dive program is offered at 3 p.m. daily, and the swim program is offered at 4:30 p.m. daily.

What is your rescheduling policy?

The Georgia Aquarium does not offer refunds, but will reschedule your dive/swim for a minimal change fee. All reservations and cancellations are processed by phone or in person. Program no-shows will not be refunded nor rescheduled. Like all diving environments, the schedule is subject to change, based on health of the animals and your safety.

Reservation Change Policy

At the Georgia Aquarium, we recognize that vacation plans can change. A date may be changed if it is made more than 48 hours in advance. Date changes cannot be made less than 48 hours prior to the program – the reservation is considered a cancellation. There will be a change fee of \$50 per ticket. Program no-shows will not be refunded or rescheduled. To change your reservation, please contact the Georgia Aquarium Call Center at 404.581.4000.

How do I get to the Aquarium?

The Aquarium is located downtown right next to the new World of Coca-Cola and Centennial Olympic Park. [Click here](http://www.georgiaaquarium.org/visitUs/directionsAndParking.aspx) for directions. (link to <http://www.georgiaaquarium.org/visitUs/directionsAndParking.aspx>)

Where do I go when I arrive?

Please arrive 30 minutes prior to your experience at the Dive Kiosk (guests are encouraged to arrive at Aquarium an hour prior to the scheduled program in order to insure arrival at the Kiosk in a timely manner). Online purchasers will use your print-at-home ticket to gain access to the Aquarium, then proceed to the Dive Kiosk located next to the Ocean Voyager gallery entrance. Guest who purchased the program online should receive an e-ticket to their email address following the reservation and can proceed to the entrance to have their ticket(s) scanned for entry.

Guests who purchased through the Call Center will come to the will-call window at the main entrance to pick-up their ticket by referencing your order number.

Are guests welcome to watch? Do they have to buy a ticket?

Yes, friends and family can watch you in the Ocean Voyager exhibit at the tunnel and big window. They must purchase general admission tickets.

What happens to our friends and family while we swim?

While you are enjoying your swim or dive, your friends and family will be escorted through the gallery to make sure they see you in the water having a great time. Be sure to tell them that in order to come and see you, they will need to purchase an admission ticket.

What if our dive or swim ends after the Aquarium closes and our friends and family are still in the building?

As you finish up the program, your friends and family will be accompanied by a Team Member who will make sure you all meet up after the program concludes.

Can I bring my own equipment and wet suit?

All necessary equipment and a wetsuit will be provided. You can bring your personal mask.

What's the water temperature?

The water temperature is 75 or 78 degrees F.

Can we feed the animals?

We do not permit the feeding of the animals during your experience.

Can I buy out a time slot to swim alone?

Yes.

Can I bring a photographer or person with me to film underwater?

A souvenir photo will be provided to you and a DVD containing underwater footage will be available for purchase. Photos and video taken during the dive are the property of Georgia Aquarium. We reserve the right to use any photos and video for promotional purposes. Photos and video may only be taken by Georgia Aquarium designates

Will tickets be available for walk-up guests?

Yes.

Can we touch the animals?

The swim and dive are for observation only, and we require everyone to keep their hands to their sides.

Will I be swimming alone?

Each experience can accommodate up to six participants, and you will have Dive Masters in the water with you at all times.

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS FOR WHALE SHARK SPECIALTY PROGRAM

What if I am late?

We will be glad to reschedule another dive for you to complete your whale shark specialty (WSS). You will not need to pay for the WSS again (only the dive).

Can I get my money back if I am late?

Due to the GAI no refund policy, we cannot refund your money. We can, however, reschedule the whale shark Specialty to another dive. You will not need to pay for the WSS again, only the dive.

Can I do the whale shark specialty without the dive?

No. PADI standards require a dive during the whale shark specialty certification.