

# There's something fishy about Vegas

BY ALEZA FREEMAN  
*Vegas.com*

People slide through them. Couples say, "I do," inside them. Fish call them home. Aquariums filled with multicolored, exotic fish and other various sea creatures are becoming a standard design feature at hotels in Las Vegas.

Of course in a Vegas aquarium, excess rules the day. From a \$30 million, 200,000-gallon shark tank with a water slide running through the center to a 14-exhibit, 1.6 million-gallon predator-based aquarium with more than 2,000 animals, it isn't just a fish story to call aquariums in Las Vegas anything but standard.

Hotels cite a variety of reasons, from education to entertainment, for the inclusion of aquariums among their design plans. They often hire a qualified aquatic staff and put ample resources toward maintenance and upkeep.

"Hotels take their aquariums very seriously," said Dave Blasko, director of animal care for The Mirage. "The most important thing is the quality of care and management of the fish."

One might conclude that a Las Vegas hotel without an aquarium is a bit like a fish out of water.

## Not just a Mirage — the ocean comes to the desert

"Aquariums have a calming, soothing effect on people," Blasko said, and he knows from experience. The 52-foot-long by eight-foot-tall, 20,000-gallon Mirage aquarium sits behind the hotel's front desk where tourists stand in line with their luggage and children while waiting to check in.

The aquarium went through a two-month transformation a couple years ago and the fish weren't the only ones to feel the change.

"People were much calmer when it was open than when it was down," said Blasko. "When you're standing in a line, there's not a whole lot of entertainment. When you have such a large surface area, with so many fish moving around and so many colors it has a tendency to be a comforting distraction."

The Mirage aquarium houses more than 500 fish representing 80 species of tropical marine life and originally opened with the hotel in 1989. For the most recent enhancements in 2007, the hotel collaborated with top aquarium design experts to install new filtration and a new artificial coral reef system, polish the aquarium's four-inch acrylic surface and add hundreds of new sea creatures.

"The technology for water quality and filtration has really evolved in the last 17, 18 years," said Blasko, explaining that the systems were replaced with computerized technology that improves visibility and monitoring.

Now, if anything like temperature, water pressure or salinities falls outside of the normal boundaries, the computer automatically calls Aquarium Curator Nicholas Davi on his cell phone. He can then make the needed adjustments right from his own computer.

The coral reef systems used by the Mirage are artificial and tend to lose color over time. The old one was donated to the Las Vegas Natural History Museum and replaced with a new system, modeled by specialists after actual coral reef from tropical locations like Australia's Great Barrier Reef.

The use of artificial reef systems helps to preserve endangered coral reef ecosystems in the wild.

"Most people are surprised to find out



Visitors enjoy a 180-degree view of the sharks and fish from the reef tunnel at Shark Reef at Mandalay Bay.

Las Vegas Sun

## One fish, two fish, red fish, blue fish

### Lobby Aquarium

**Location:** The Mirage  
**Hours:** 24 hours  
**Admission:** Free

### Shark Reef

**Location:** Mandalay Bay  
**Hours:** Open daily, 10 – 11 p.m.  
**Admission:** \$16.95 for adults; \$10.95 for kids 5 - 12; kids 4 and under, free; Guided tour and classroom presentation, \$24.95.

### The Aquarium

**Location:** Silverton  
**Hours:** 24 hours; Daily fish feeding at 1:30 p.m., 4:30 p.m. and 7:30 p.m.; Mermaid show Thurs. – Sun., every 15 minutes between 2:30 p.m. and 6:45 p.m.  
**Admission:** Free

### The Tank

**Location:** Golden Nugget  
**Hours:** 10 a.m. – 5 p.m.  
**Admission:** Open to hotel guests

### Dolphin Habitat

**Location:** The Mirage  
**Hours:** 11 a.m. – 5:30 p.m., Mon. – Fri.; 10 a.m. – 5:30 p.m., Sat. & Sun. (including holidays)  
**Admission:** \$15 for adults; \$10 for kids 4 – 12; kids under 3, free

### Aquarium at Atlantis

**Location:** Forum Shops at Caesars Palace  
**Hours:** Shops open from 10 a.m. – 11 p.m., Sun. – Thurs.; 10 a.m. – midnight, Fri. – Sat.; Daily feedings at 1:15 and 5:15 p.m.  
**Admission:** Free

that coral reef is actually an animal," said Davi. "It provides such a great habitat for a lot of fish because there are always nooks and crannies for them to hide in, while the colors on the coral reef allow the fish to blend in and hide. It's the primary spot for the fish to be."

During the transformation, half of the fish were kept in the Mirage's quarantine tanks while the other half went to the quarantine tanks at Mandalay Bay's Shark Reef. The quarantine facilities typically serve as the holding tank for new arrivals to the hotel, where they go through a 30-day process to rid them of any infections.

With such a rigorous checklist for fish

care, it is only natural that the hotel's aquarists would develop an affinity for some of the fish. The animals, too, don't seem to mind the attention.

"Some of the aquarists here have their favorites, as well as the crowds that come up to the front desk to see the fish," said Davi. "The porcupine puffer and stars and stripes puffer seem to be a crowd favorite because they have a lot of personality. They will actually sit and watch you, and follow you back and forth."

## The little mermaid

Your eyes aren't fooling you if you happen to see a mermaid floating through the aquarium at the Silverton Casino



Mandalay Bay Shark Reef  
Lionfish at the Shark Reef.

Lodge. Throughout the afternoon and evenings Thursday through Sunday, women dressed as mermaids join the 4,000 tropical fish, including five species of stingrays and seven species of sharks, in the 117,000-gallon, curved acrylic tank, for a 15-minute show. While hotel guests are entertained and amazed, the fish, themselves, remain fairly aloof.

"The fish don't seem to care one way or the other that we're in there," said Timery Middelton, a mermaid at the Silverton. "We're just another object in the water and they pretty much stay out of our way. There are some fish that are curious because our costumes are bright and shiny and that's very appealing. But for the most part they know us and go on their way."

The Silverton tries to find unique ways to utilize the aquarium, which opened four years ago and has become a focal point of the hotel.

One couple literally "took the plunge," when they got married inside the aquarium and illusionist Criss Angel made a Houdini-style escape while submerged underwater.

"We're fortunate to have some pretty creative people here as well as the luxury of trying to utilize this exhibit for more than just a pretty tank," said Thomas Harder, aquarium manager. "We want to make the aquarium a showpiece. We want to make sure our guests come back and see something new, something different."

That's not to say that the aquarists at the Silverton take aquarium care lightly. Everything and anything that goes into the tank undergoes careful consideration, with an eye toward the fishes' well-being.

"Everyone is very diligent about making sure the animals are happy and healthy, from the mermaids to the safety divers, even the management," Harder said. "Everyone is very concerned about the fish and will do anything that we can to ensure they are safe."

## Born to be wild

A trip to the Shark Reef Aquarium at Mandalay Bay takes guests on a 14-mandaly journey through a jungle environment into a sunken shipwreck where they will see 2,000 animals,

including some of the most dangerous predators in the world. Accredited by the Association of Zoos & Aquariums, the Shark Reef offers a pre-taped tour and has naturalists positioned throughout the exhibit to answer questions.

Some may be surprised to find that the sharks at the Shark Reef – including a Sandbar Shark, a Sandtiger Shark and three Sawfish sharks – are actually not the most dangerous creatures on display.

"Our golden crocodiles are far more dangerous than any shark we have," said Adrienne Rowland, director of the Shark Reef. "Those are the ones we have to be extremely careful with. They're some of the most unpredictable animals."

The Shark Reef also has an eight-foot-long Komodo dragon, another extremely dangerous predator.

Contrary to popular belief brought on by movies like "Jaws," sharks have a very slow metabolism and are not relentless eating machines.

"They can eat a reasonable meal every other day and not be hungry, at least hungry enough not to eat their friends," Rowland. "When people see them swimming around in our exhibit and that there's no aggression, I think they start to realize the beauty of the animals. They have existed for millions of years and have survived because they are very intelligent animals, not because they are going around eating everything they can get their hands on ... well, their fins on, actually."

Another Shark Reef surprise is the timidity factor of piranhas.

"Often you will hear that a piranha will strip your hand of flesh in a matter of seconds if you stick it in the water, but that's not in case," said Rowland. "They're actually very timid animals. When a piranha feeding frenzy occurs it is because there is the smell of blood in the water. If you're not bleeding and you stick your hand in there, they're actually more afraid of you than you are of them."

Overall, keeping the animals' aggression low involves careful planning and dedicated care.

"You have to plan your collection so that the animals that you are specifying for an exhibit are known to live in some form of harmony in their natural state," said Rowland. "Then it's the goal of aquarists who take care of the animals to keep them comfortably fed."

A staff of 65 operates the Shark Reef on both the animal care and operations side.

Each exhibit has a separate filtration system and divers can be found at all times throughout the exhibits scrubbing artificial corals and cleaning algae. One staff member prepares meals for 2,000 animals, including a wide variety of foods like chicken, lettuce, nuts, berries, mackerel, jumbo prawn and specialty gels and cakes infused with proteins.

Another unique feature of the Shark Reef is a touch pool, where guests can touch a variety of fish and rays.

"If the fish get tired of people sticking their hands into the water they'll swim out into the center and rest," Rowland said. "Then after awhile, they'll come back out and let people start touching them again. They balance themselves and we of course monitor them."

In general, animals at the Shark Reef will tell you when they're stressed, Rowland said. Their color or their behavior will change and trained aquarists will pick up on it.

"There are extensive veterinary measures we go to – we weigh and measure the animals, we control their food intake – just to keep them at the pinnacle of health," said Rowland. "We've had many people come through the aquarium from other facilities comment on the appearance of the animals, the color of the animals, and how healthy they look."

## Swimming with the Sharks

Now that the myth of the flesh-craving shark has been broken, how about swimming along side them?

In The Tank at the Golden Nugget Hotel and Casino, an enclosed three-story water slide allows guests to practically do just that. The Tank is maintained by the hotel's Life Sciences Department and houses 300 animals from around the world, including six species of elasmobranchs (sharks and rays) and bony fishes. Installed after Landry's Restaurants purchased the hotel in 2005, it is the centerpiece of the pool area.

"We wanted to create an atmosphere that was completely original to not only downtown, but Vegas as a whole, and the 'swimming with the sharks' idea really encompasses something you won't find anywhere else," said the Golden Nugget's Public Relations Manager Justin McVay. "The Golden Nugget is the only place you can swim this close to such beautiful aquatic creatures, enjoy three levels of sun bathing and cabanas, and ride a three-story waterslide straight through a 200,000-gallon shark tank."

Only in Las Vegas.



Silverton Casino Lodge

The Silverton allowed one couple to wed underwater in the 117-gallon aquarium, which houses 4,000 tropical fish as well as women dressed as mermaids.