

Mickey Mouse And Me Under The Sea

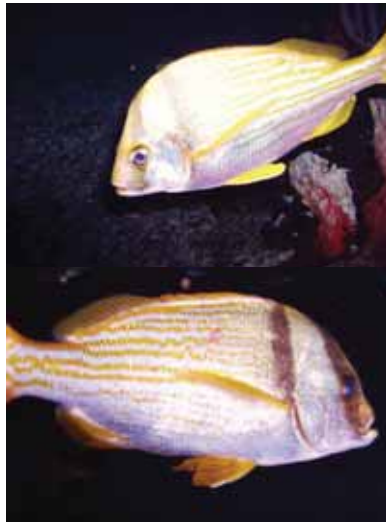
by Janice Raber

Ahhhh! It was the middle of February and the frigid northeast weather was far behind me as I cruised underwater, comfortably wearing a 3 mil wetsuit in water temperature of 72 degrees. I leveled off at 20 feet and started looking around while three silver lookdowns swam by in a row. Delicate, graceful fish in appearance with streaming dorsal and anal fins, they passed me with watchful eyes. A school of striped yellow porkfish paraded along the reef, obediently organized, following their leader in pursuit of whatever it is that yellow porkfish relentlessly pursue. Two curious mavericks broke the line and approached me, but only for a few seconds.

As I continued my exploration, a spotted eagle ray made a brief sojourn. This winged creature with a tapered snout and long thin tail is named for its dark-colored back peppered with white spots and circular markings. It soared gently though the water, a rare find that divers travel the world to see. What a thrill to have witnessed one so close! In the wild they usually veer away upon sighting divers, so I felt extremely lucky.

Rounding a coral mound, I suddenly came face to face with an enormous grouper, WOW, 400 pounds at least, resting comfortably in a coral and stone pocket alongside a big rock. I was startled, but this big bruiser didn't flinch or move. He stared me down with a very grumpy look due to my audacity in disturbing his privacy. Exhibiting a humble, and I hoped apologetic demeanor, I slowly changed direction leaving him to his solitude.

In search of friendlier species, I sought out a couple of familiar grey angel fish when out of the corner of my eye I noticed a larger grey



Porkfish



Green Turtle

mass that gradually loomed closer and closer. Recognizing the side-to-side swagger of a shark heading directly toward me, I froze momentarily in this tropical paradise environment. Then I remembered where I was and breathed easier.

This was Disney World and I was swimming in the aquarium at The Seas with Nemo & Friends exhibit in Epcot! Surely this shark was well fed and no threat to me! Although the sand

tiger has a menacing toothy grimace, even in the open ocean they are normally not aggressive to humans. This fellow was just fine with my being in his home water, as long as I moved out of his way and let him continue with his routine patrol of the aquarium perimeter. No problem, my pleasure, Mr. Shark. I am just a guest here.

I thought, "It just doesn't get better than this." Then, "Wait! What is that up ahead?" Awesome! It was dinner time and a family of *Homo sapiens* sat before me at a table, eating salad and sipping chardonnay. The children had big chocolate milk smiles and got all excited when they saw me. While I hovered in the

water observing them through the seven-inch-thick acrylic window, they waved and giggled and took my picture, and I had a strong urge to do the same to them. This surely felt strange being on the inside of the fish tank looking out at the people, especially people that were eating. Catch-of-the-day began to take on a whole new meaning in my mind, giving me a better appreciation of what a fish's life is like.

While I pondered this thought, a very, very large green sea turtle lumbered over to the same restaurant window and the two of us began mugging together for the audience. After a few minutes he turned and tried to nudge me out of the way with his huge head, not wanting to share center stage apparently. He was insistent and I certainly didn't want to aggravate him. In deference to his superior entertainment ability, not to mention his big fat flippers, hard-as-a-rock shell and the fact that his massive bulk outweighed me considerably, I grudgingly moved over.

Swimming to another set of windows in this 6-million-gallon wonderland, I came across another magnificent creature that can be seen nowhere else, not in any other body of water, not anywhere in the whole world! Clad in a yellow wetsuit, white-gloved, with big black ears and nose, breathing with a regulator and scuba tank, watching me through a very oversized scuba mask, was none other than Mickey Mouse himself! Hi, Mickey!

All of a sudden I was a kid again. The long-forgotten melody of the Mickey Mouse



Mickey and Jan underwater.

Club song began streaming through my brain along with the breathing exhalation sounds from my regulator. "Come along and sing the song, and join the jamboree...M-I-C...K-E-Y...M-O-U-S-E"

Did I say it doesn't get any better? It just got better.

We swam together to the observation windows on the second level of the Seas exhibit and waved to the people who lined up in the dimmed corridors of the aquarium tour gaping with delighted expressions into our watery domain. Cameras were flashing all over the place and I was feeling like a celebrity, too. Mickey put a white-gloved hand against the window and the children tried to touch him back in wide-eyed amazement. I followed suit, noticing that when two hands are on opposite sides of these windows, you can get a good visualization of how thick they are. Now that I was a kid again, I started playing patty cake with one of the children on the other side. I cavorted for a while blowing kisses, doing somersaults and other silly things. What unbelievable fun!

Then, just like my first childhood had ended all too soon, so did my new found second one as well as my time with Mickey

under the sea, and I swam back to reality and my adult life on the surface of the 30-foot-deep aqua playground. But I will tell you this, for a great vacation scuba dive, it can't get much better than that.

NOTES:

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