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Long Island Aquarium, Riverhead NY: A Must See Stop On the Way to the Hamptons

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Marie Yolen-Cohen
Publisher,
GetawayMavens.com;
Northeast getaway expert



If you're driving from New York City to the Hampton's and you have never been to the [Long Island Aquarium](#), or it's been years since you have – this home to a cornucopia of sea creatures and mammals, first opened in June 2000, has never been more interactive, compelling, and immersive in the most literary way. A three-person cage plunges you safely into a 120,000-gallon shark-infested tank. This **Shark Dive with Dive Master** (\$165 per person) is so popular, it usually sells out quickly and is a huge hit with thrill-seeking romantics: There were 6 weddings performed in the shark cage just last year.

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But the sharks are just one of the many exciting exhibits and programming here. And the Aquarium has been adding new ones every year both indoor and out. In addition to the sharks, the aquarium has tanks full of sea life found in local waters – flounder, dogfish, Striped Bass, and the bird-like Sea Robins and Flying Gunards.

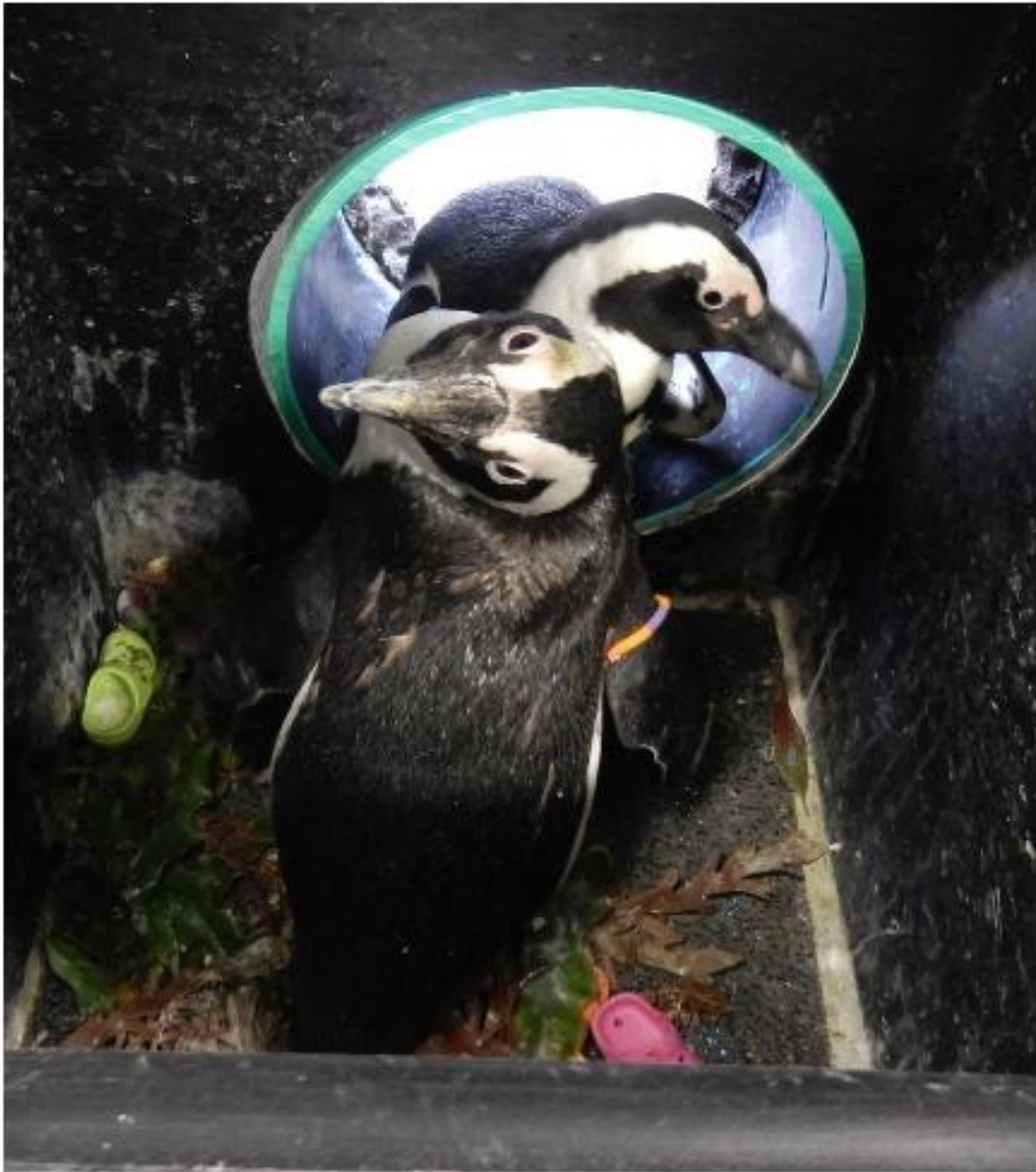
There are also flesh-eating piranhas and schools of vibrantly colored tropical fish, colors mirrored in the Aviary where jewel-toned parrots squawk up a storm whenever a visitor walks into their cage. Butterflies land within inches of your face in the Butterfly exhibit, bats fly around a very active and sharply quilled porcupine, and Sea Lions shout out greetings (or is that “feed me”) as you walk by. The Japanese Snow Monkeys are as curious about us as we are about them. “The big one likes to come to the window and watch videos on my phone,” claims marine biologist and Aquarium co-founder, Joe Yaiullo.



I couldn't decide what I loved better – the fact that Yaiullo has been playing a part in re-propagating the world's dying coral reefs through Reef Gen, his LI Aquarium-based company that grows a plentitude of coral in a 20,000 gallon reef tank, or his penchant for naming the Aquarium's 15 South African Penguins after TV sitcom characters, or for that matter, Joe's fatherly love of these flightless seabirds. (Photo shows Joe with Phil – named for *Modern Family's Phil Dunphy*).



There is plenty to love in this incredible place through small-group experiences. The daily Behind the Scenes Tour (at 1pm, \$5), brings you upstairs to the tops of the fish-tanks, shows you the pumps and filters – “what it takes to make the aquarium look the way it does” – to the food prep area, and to the lab where algae, shrimp, fish and coral are grown.



The Penguin Encounter (one to 3 times per day, \$50 per person) enables visitors to learn how staff takes care of these engaging creatures and allows you into the fun-loving Penguin Pre-School to meet those cute little guys.



In addition to the cage dive, the new "Shark-Keeper" experience allows visitors to help feed these predators (\$50), and joins the animal feeding/training sessions, Reef Snorkeling cove, canoe and kayak rentals, tours on the research boat *Atlantis Explorer*, the Discovery Tower (a ride that provides birds-eye views of the Peconic River), archeology for kids, Sea Ray touch and feeding tank, and other exhibits as convincing reasons to come here over and over again. Just 25 minutes from Southampton, it's a great stop on the way. *Open 10-5 daily. \$28 adults, \$21 kids, some programs extra fees.*

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