English journeys: Hull: From sea to sea: Hull's museums for children

## From The Guardian - 03/03/2007

Guardian Newsprint Supplement

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The anchovies appear first. A whole school of them, swimming along the pavement towards the marina. Isobel, my five-year-old daughter, is instantly captivated. "I can count 14 of them!" she yells, before charging off in the direction of the Humber.

The Seven Seas Fish Trail is one of Hull's most popular attractions for kids. Artist Gordon Young created the trail of sculptures using traditional materials, from the tiny bronze anchovies to a York stone lumpsucker. The A-Z of fish introduces children to the rich maritime heritage of the city as well as taking them on a fascinating journey through Hull's historic Old Town.

"Very few cities in the UK have so many excellent and free museums catering for children, and in such a compact space," says John Pywell, head of education for Hull Museums. "The challenge is getting people to come to the city in the first place. Once they're here, they're hooked."

A shark surfaces next, cut in slate outside a leading high-street bank. The lesson is quickly lost on Isobel, however, who having caught sight of the city's beautiful iconic landmark, The Deep, is immediately off.

The Deep is one of the deepest aquariums on the planet and the world's only "submarium", a unique blend of marine life and the latest interactives. It's also the most successful millennium project after Eden. Once inside, it's not difficult to see why.

"It's amazing, Mummy! Why have we never been here before?" cries Isobel. Descending into the oceans, we are soon face-to-face with zebra sharks, golden shimmering trevally and hundreds of other exotic species.

"The overall concept of the Deep is that it should transport you from the dawn of time, through the oceans of past, present and future," explains charismatic marine biologist and curator of exhibitions, David Gibson. "Your journey takes you from tropical lagoons to the icy waters of Antarctica."

A tank displaying long-horned cowfish, potato cods and warty frogfish has Isobel in hysterics, but then for five alarming minutes she disappears. Fears of her diving into the octopus pool prove unfounded. We find her, instead, in the spectacular Lagoon of Light, transfixed beneath a tunnel of blue jellyfish.

Back on dry land, we head towards Spurn Lightship, another free museum, and ideal for kids of all ages. Built in 1927, it now enjoys a leisurely mooring in Hull's marina. Below deck, children can explore the crew's cramped living quarters, and discover how the ship served as a navigational aid in the treacherous Humber.

High Street, in the heart of Old Town on the banks of the river Humber, is the city's oldest and most fascinating road. The area is now the "museums' quarter" - home of Hull and East Riding Museum, which tells the story of East Yorkshire from the beginning of geological time. Next door is the Streetlife Museum of Transport, which allows children to sample the sights, sounds and smells of 200 years of transport history.

In Hands on History, where kids can discover Childhood in the Victorian Era downstairs and Egyptian Mummies on the floor above, tragedy strikes. Nemo, Isobel's stuffed orange and white fish, a present from the Deep, and already her most treasured possession on earth, is gone - flushed down the Hands on History girls' toilets.

A Brownie sleepover party is heading down to the ocean floor by the time we reach the submarium. But Isobel is in despair over Nemo's disastrous first swimming lesson and will not be distracted. A quick-thinking waitress from Dining With Sharks, the Deep's award-winning restaurant, which has breathtaking views out to sea, offers iced buns and blackberry smoothies while I run off to find a replacement.

Outside, as the sun sets over the Humber, we discover a beautiful ice fish, carved in Carrara marble next to the Tidal Surge Barrier. "I want to stay here forever," announces my daughter, covering Nemo 2 with kisses. "It's a million times better than where we live. Can I have a sleepover now?" AR

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