

TRAVEL

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Hualien's castle by the sea

There are plenty of reasons to visit Hualien. It is arguably the most spectacular part of Taiwan, with the vastness of the Pacific Ocean stretching out into a seemingly infinite distance on one side and the lushly forested mountains of the Huatung Rift Valley (花東縱谷) on the other. Needless to say there are plentiful opportunities for boating, cycling, hiking or driving around to see the riches that Mother Nature has on offer.

Apart from these wonders of nature, there is also the profoundly artificial and man-made entertainment offered by Farglory Ocean Park (遠雄海洋公園), a popular tourist destination just half an hour's drive south of Hualien City. This theme park takes as its point of departure the wonders of the ocean, and provides an opportunity for visitors to get up close with many of its more lively inhabitants.

"We are not making any effort to compete with Pintung's aquarium," said Jannette Lee (李成麗), vice president of sales and marketing for the Farglory (遠雄) group, referring to the National Museum of Maritime Biology and Aquarium (國立海洋生物博物館) in Pingtung County, Taiwan's most ambitious aquarium facility. "We incorporate the education into a fun time for the whole family."

The fun aspect is immediately evident on arriving at the Ocean Park, announced by its Disney-style fairy-tale castle perched on the mountainside above the rocky Pacific coastline. Beside it there is an "Aztec" temple and fiberglass volcano, which serves as the platform for a water ride. A cable car and Ferris wheel provide views from on high. But there is more here than meets the eye.

Hidden amid all this theme-park entertainment is a well-planned mixture of animal shows and informational lectures that can help structure the most aimless of visits. Currently, one of the highlights is a 9m-long model of a two-month-old blue whale, which is visiting the park as part of an international tour to promote National Geographic Channel's groundbreaking documentary *Big Blue*. The park hosts two talks each day about blue whales in conjunction with the exhibit at its Ecological Museum of Marine Mammals (海洋哺乳動物生態館), which also houses resident manatees and dolphins. There are few things calculated to attract a child's attention as a diver feeding and playing with a manatee, and information about new discoveries regarding the blue whale made by the National Geographic team were slipped in unobtrusively during a 15-minute lecture that contained plenty of fascinating facts and figures to amaze both children and parents. (The exhibition runs until Monday and will be followed by display of a 13m-long whale skeleton, the first of this size and detail made by local researchers, from Aug. 14 to Sept. 30.)

These models, which draw on the most advanced modern research, are complemented by old-fashioned seal, sea lion and dolphin shows. The lively shows pack in the crowds and serve as an appetizer for other activities in which the public can get up close and personal with the creatures of the deep. These activities, which start from having your photo taken with a cooperative sea lion or dolphin, extend to swimming with them (NT\$2,000 for 30 minutes), or spending the day with them together with an instructor (NT\$10,000 for eight hours). The most recent refinement to intimate association with dolphins is what is billed as the world's first dolphin sleepover (NT\$2,299 for adults; NT\$1,199 for children).

FarGlory Ocean Park brings guests face-to-face with the creatures of the deep

BY IAN BARTHOLOMEW
STAFF REPORTER

This activity, which according to Lee, is aimed primarily at school children, allows people to bunk down in a special area beside the dolphin tanks. According to Lee, the ever-curious dolphins will come and look at them, giving the impression of great intimacy with these marine mammals. The sleepover is usually coupled with other activities within the park, Lee said, to create a two-day, one-night package.

The park also has a small but well-designed aquarium, focusing heavily on the more spectacular of the ocean's creatures. The giant catfish and the moray eel are designed to catch the attention, and the short underwater tunnel provides plenty of close-up views of rays and some of the smaller sharks.

This is all much more convenient than heading out on even the best-appointed boat services in the hope of catching a glimpse of whales and dolphins in the wild — at least this seems to be the logic behind this remarkable establishment. Hualien has a host of dolphin- and whale-watching boat services, which offer three-hour tours of Hualien's coastal waters for around NT\$1,000. Actually catching sight of dolphins cutting their way through the water around the boat beats anything an ocean park can hope to offer, but the long ride out on a boat in the summer heat and the possibility of returning to shore with nothing to show for the time spent (reputable tour operators will generally give customers on trips that failed to make any sighting a free ticket to use at another time) gives Farglory Ocean Park considerable appeal.

With its clever arrangement of activities and displays and its mix of theme-park entertainment with natural history education, Farglory Ocean Park provides packaged entertainment for the whole family. It has more to offer than the Cinderella castle might at first suggest.

National Geographic's Big Blue documentary will be screened in the original two-hour English version on the National Geographic Channel on Aug. 14 at 7pm.



Top: A view of Farglory Ocean Park in Hualien County. PHOTO COURTESY OF FARGLORY OCEAN PARK
Clockwise from above: Among the attractions at Farglory Ocean Park are a 9m-long model of a two-month old blue whale, sea lion shows, and a tunnel that provides close-up views of rays and sharks.

PHOTOS: IAN BARTHOLOMEW AND HUA MENG-CHING, TAIPEI TIMES AND COURTESY OF FARGLORY OCEAN PARK

IF YOU GO:

» Admission to the Farglory Ocean Park is NT\$890 for adults and NT\$790 for children and includes all rides and shows. More information can be found on the Net at www.farglory-oceanpark.com.tw

Getting there:

» Farglory Ocean Park is about a half hour's drive from Hualien City. The route is served by a number of local buses, with fares all less than NT\$50. You can take the Hualien Bus Service (花蓮客運) departing from the Old Hualien Train Station, at the corner of Jhongshan (中山) and Chongqing (重慶) roads in Hualien City, bound for Fengbin (豐濱), Jingpu (靜浦) or Taitung (台東). Disembark at the Farglory Ocean Park (遠雄海洋公園) stop. Taxi fare from Hualien City should be roughly NT\$400

Where to stay:

» Farglory Hotel (www.farglory-hotel.com.tw) is located in the hills above Farglory Ocean Park. Hao Wang Jiao (好望角; www.shan-ling.com.tw), a bed-and-breakfast, is perched on an outcrop that provides a 360° panorama of the surrounding area