

Animal magnetism

Michaela Quinn, retail manager at Thomson in Bridlington, won a *Travel Weekly* competition to go to SeaWorld Orlando with her family. Here, she picks out her highlights

When I saw an 020 number pop up on my phone, I ignored it; then I had an email come through telling me I'd won a trip to SeaWorld and I couldn't believe it! My seven-year-old son Alfie couldn't either. He kept saying, "no it's not real, it can't be real!" It was very exciting.

And it didn't disappoint - I'd been before but my husband, Joel, and son hadn't and they loved it.

We went to Aquatica,


SeaWorld, Busch Gardens and Discovery Cove, and there were several new attractions so I saw lots I hadn't before.

▶ BUSCH GARDENS

It's hard to choose a favourite park, but Busch Gardens was up there. Because it's a little bit further out, it's a lot quieter than the others, so the queues are short, even in high season; the longest we waited was 35 minutes and that was in late July. It's a

great one if you've got families that want to go and experience the rollercoasters, as there are lots of adrenaline rides there.

We went on the new Cobra's Curse; you go up in a lift and then when you get to the top the cart turns sideways, meets the track and starts spinning round. The experience is different every time, which makes it quite special.

The park has a lovely 

TOP TIP

Infinity Falls opens at SeaWorld Orlando in summer 2018, plunging guests down the world's tallest river rapid drop



RIGHT:
Cobra's Curse

FAR RIGHT:
Electric Ocean,
SeaWorld

BELOW:
Michaela, Joel
and Alfie at
Antarctica:
Empire of the
Penguin



FAMILY VERDICT



Husband Joel:

"I loved the parks and there was plenty for us all to enjoy. My favourite ride was Cheetah Hunt at Busch Gardens, and the Serengeti Safari was out of this world. Then feeding a giraffe and swimming with dolphins at Discovery Cove were so chilled out. A holiday to remember, making the best memories with my family."



Son Alfie, aged seven:

"I loved seeing all the animals at the theme parks, as I'd never seen some of them before. I even got to swim with a dolphin! I loved Aquatica too as I love water slides. My favourite ride was Cobra's Curse because it was fast and a little bit scary."

→ relaxed feel and there are plenty of non-adrenaline attractions too, such as the Serengeti Safari, where we went out on the back of a truck and learnt all about the animals – the reasons people poach them, how many are left in the world and so on. It really makes you think about how we need to educate people and raise awareness, and you get to go out and feed the giraffes too, though it's up to them if they come over. We also saw white rhinos, black rhinos, zebras, buffaloes and lots of antelopes, which had my son enthralled.

The Summer Nights event was amazing too; it was a bit like a rave! They had stilt walkers going round in brightly coloured costumes, make-up stages, speakers, bubble parties and



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more – it's a great one for kids. They've also got a new ice show, which we didn't get to see, but we're going back next year so we'll definitely do it then.

SEAWORLD ORLANDO

Like Busch Gardens, SeaWorld Orlando has so much going on, including Electric Ocean, which took place in the

summer with a light and music show. We still did a few rides, such as Pets Ahoy and Journey to Atlantis, which was amazing; it's like a log flume that then turns into a rollercoaster, so the end is quite unexpected and my little boy really liked that, although we ended up drenched!

Beyond the rides, I loved the Behind the Scenes tour. Most people already know that if you buy a ticket to SeaWorld it goes towards conservation, but on the tour you find out about what it actually does for the animals and see the vehicles they use on rescues. They took us to see manatees that had been injured and told us how they'd work with the government and local wildlife experts to see whether they could release →



→ them back into the wild, and if it wasn't safe to do that then they'd find a home for them in one of their parks.

The park has also just opened a dolphin nursery, which gives you an opportunity to see these creatures all playing together. They're very sociable so they come up to the side of the tank onto the ledge, and you're literally inches away from them – Alfie loved watching them.



There's so much to take in and it's only when you come back you realise how much you did, and what it meant at the time

▶ FAMILY MEMORIES

SeaWorld is a great option for family holidays because of the activities – if you've got an adrenaline junkie there's something for them, or if your kids want to learn something you've got that because it's educational as well as fun. You don't feel like you have to rush around and the parks are not overly huge, so if you've got people with walking difficulties it's not a problem – people can take it at their own pace. There's just everything, and it creates memories kids will never forget.

Even now, Alfie will talk about “when I was in Florida I did this, I stroked a giraffe, I swam with a dolphin.” There's so much to take in and it's only when you come back and have time to reflect that you realise just how much you did, and what it meant at the time.

Those memories will never leave us. We loved it so much that we've booked to go back to Orlando next year, and we'll definitely be doing SeaWorld as part of our itinerary again.

Book it: Thomson offers seven nights' room only at the Hilton DoubleTree by SeaWorld, with flights from Bristol on August 3, 2018, for £3,661 for a family of four. A Discovery Cove Ultimate Package including a swim with dolphins, entry to SeaWorld Orlando, Aquatica, Busch Gardens and parking, valid for 14 days, costs £340 in August 2018; a ticket without the swim is £217.

thomson.co.uk 

4 TOP TIPS

Recommend clients stay on site so they don't have to rely on public transport or driving.

Highlight offers. Clients get free parking at all parks when they book the three-park ticket or Discovery Cove Ultimate Package in advance.

Encourage clients to book all-day dining. It's great value and you know that everything's budgeted for already.

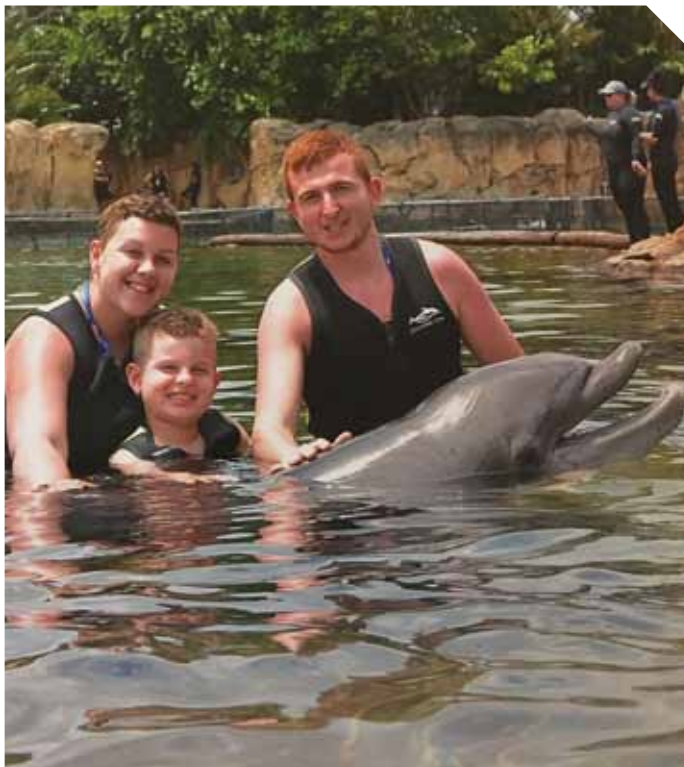
Take the agent training – you qualify for a free 14-day ticket when you complete it, plus you might learn something you can use to help enhance your customer's holiday.

seaworldagents.co.uk

▶ DISCOVERY COVE AND AQUATICA

Swimming with dolphins at Discovery Cove was even more magical. A lot of people drive down to Clearwater for the beach when they're in Florida, but if you don't want to drive an hour and a half to get to the beach, this should be on the list. After a day walking round the theme parks, you're in this quiet oasis just chilling out. There's no rush, no queues – it's just heaven.

There's also a new Shark Swim attraction, where you can get in the water with a shark. One of the reasons they're doing it is to try and dispel the idea that sharks are scary, and instead tell people how necessary they are for the eco-system. It's about giving people the opportunity to go and swim with the sharks themselves to form their own opinion.



LEFT: Dolphin Swim, Discovery Cove

ABOVE: Journey to Atlantis, SeaWorld