

Shark Tales

Dive in to the winter-sun season in Dubai with a stay at one of the emirate's best-known resorts, reports **Natalie Marsh**



We have four types of shark here: whitetip reef sharks, blacktip reef sharks, bonmouth sharks and giant guitar sharks," says our snorkelling instructor without hesitation, as if he were reeling off the most normal information in the world.

Some of us exchange nervous glances as we turn our attention to the huge aquarium. Inside are thousands of marine animals and we are about to join them.

We're at Atlantis The Palm in Dubai, on Gold Medal's Ultimate Atlantis Showcase fam trip, which took place prior to the Covid-19 pandemic. The 11-million-litre aquarium sits in the centre of the hotel, its marine life visible to all.

We don our life jackets and snorkelling gear, and lower ourselves into the water. As I put my head under, I'm greeted by a whole new world. Schools of shimmering silver fish dart around, beautiful rays glide gracefully between them, and soon I spot a shark zigzagging its way through the water.

Snorkelling in the Ambassador Lagoon is not the only option for getting close to some of the 65,000 marine animals here at Atlantis The Palm. Visitors can also pull on a helmet and walk along the bottom of the tank on an AquaTrek safari, or certified scuba divers can dive with an instructor.

But if your clients don't fancy sharing the same water as the sharks, back on dry land the Lost Chambers Aquarium is where visitors can learn about and look at the variety of marine life from the other side of the glass. The hotel also offers an insightful behind-the-scenes Fish Tales tour, which allows guests to visit the feeding room and the fish hospital, and learn about the shark and ray breeding programmes.

"It's really important when we have people here that our programmes highlight why [endangered animals] are in trouble and what the person can do to help," explains Kelly Timmins, director of conservation, education and corporate social responsibility for the hotel. ➤

DESTINATIONS

WINTER SUN | DUBAI

CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT:

Gold Medal fam trip agents prepare to snorkel in the Ambassador Lagoon; Wavehouse; Aquaventure; and Atlantis The Palm



PICTURES: Gold Medal; Kerzner International

ASK THE expert

“Atlantis The Palm is our top-selling Dubai hotel. It’s a perennial favourite for families but has plenty for couples too – it really does offer something for everyone and the superlatives often used to describe it are entirely justified. We’ve always found that complimentary access to Aquaventure water park is a big draw, as is the brand new Wavehouse, a lively entertainment spot with arcade games, bowling, dining and an epic wave rider.”

Colin Currie
head of sales,
Gold Medal



BOOK IT

Gold Medal offers three nights’ half-board in an Ocean Room at Atlantis The Palm from £829 per person. The price includes return flights with Emirates from Gatwick and is valid for departures June 10-24, 2021. goldmedal.co.uk



The Foreign Office currently advises against all but essential travel to the United Arab Emirates and visitors will be required to undergo a 14-day quarantine on their return, so ensure clients check the latest travel advice before departing.

WHAT’S NEW?

Atlantis The Palm stood out, a magnificent stamp on the skyline, as we drove up the central spine of the Palm Jumeirah. The hotel has all the glitz and glamour you’d expect in Dubai but packs a punch when it comes to keeping couples, friends or the whole family entertained, with celebrity restaurants, a water park, spa and more.

The rooms and suites have benefited from a \$100 million refurbishment at the property over the past two years. Last year also saw the opening of Wavehouse, a restaurant and family entertainment premises rolled into one. An establishment this laid-back can be hard to find in swanky Dubai. It’s home to a bowling alley, arcade, children’s play area and outside bar, which is the perfect place to relax with a drink after dinner. While the food menu strikes a casual tone, it doesn’t skimp on quality – even if kids are bound to go for the deep-fried babybel, a surprisingly delicious starter!

Atlantis The Palm’s relaunched Imperial Club is arguably the jewel in the crown, opening up a range of added extras including access to an exclusive beach area and use of a bespoke lounge, which provides a tranquil escape from the hotel’s main lobby. It serves up a generous breakfast and afternoon tea, as well as an abundance of hors d’oeuvres and complimentary drinks between 5pm and 7pm.

The property’s half-board package allows guests to dine at 16 of its restaurants, although some of the more renowned venues, including Nobu, Hakkasan and Gordon Ramsay’s Bread Street Kitchen, require a supplement – well worth it for a special dining experience.

The Platinum half-board option also comes with a drinks package, if guests really want to make the most of their food and drink options.

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WATER WORLD

One of the biggest selling points for families is having action-packed water park Aquaventure on site.

We were calmly floating along its lazy river on rubber rings when we turned a corner and I caught a glimpse of what was ahead of us. There was no time to change course as we drifted towards the rapids, growing closer and closer until suddenly we were thrown into disarray, water spraying all around as we gripped tightly onto our rubber rings. Then, as quickly as it started, we found ourselves back in calmer waters.

The rapid river was the best – and the most bracing – way to start the day at Aquaventure, offering a 45-minute loop around the park to give us our bearings as we decided which rides to head to next.

There are around 30 to choose from: daredevils can try the Leap of Faith, a sheer vertical drop, while my personal favourites were the tube slides, plus renting a private cabana meant we could come back and relax in our own reserved area before heading back out into the park.

Wondering where to go next, I saw others drifting along a water-filled flume on rubber rings while admiring all manner of fish and other marine life that surrounded them, and I decided that should be my next ride. This time, though, the sharks were behind the glass. **TW**