



Behind the Scenes: Charlotte's Discovery Place

A wizard behind the wonder gives us a peek past the curtain

Though most visitors never see him, Discovery Place's Live Care Coordinator Elliot Provance plays an important role in much of what they do see in the Uptown Charlotte science center. Elliot oversees many of the center's exhibits—designing and maintaining life-support systems for marine life, choosing and obtaining fish and animals for live collections, and even cultivating coral.

As the museum gears up to celebrate its 30th anniversary in October, Elliot gives us his insider's guide to five must-see exhibits at Discovery Place.

WORLD ALIVE AQUARIUM

WHAT YOU SEE: An up-close look at the wonder of the sea, thanks to an aquarium filled with a whopping 24,000 gallons of water and ecosystems that range from a live Indo-Pacific coral reef to a North Carolina salt marsh.

BEHIND THE SCENES: Elliot and his staff breed jellyfish and grow live corals in massive, brightly lit tanks punctuated with colorful fish that serve as valuable members of a coral reef community. "Coral grows photosynthetic algae in its tissues, so we put these really bright, full-spectrum lamps on them," Elliot says. "Any time I have corals, I like to have fish there because they keep the rocks and water clean by eating pests. We feed the corals plankton, and some of it falls to the bottom. The fish pick that up and eat it, cleaning the excess so there's no waste to gunk up the water."



WORLD ALIVE RAINFOREST

WHAT YOU SEE: A revamped rainforest that teems with bird, amphibian, and lizard species. The center's 22-year-old blue-and-gold macaw, BJ, is usually found perched on a boulder high above the lush forest. Below BJ, animals such as the blue poison arrow frog feed on insects and a few special treats from the staff.

BEHIND THE SCENES: "The frogs need mineral and vitamin supplements, so we cultivate fruit flies," Elliot says. "We coat the fruit flies and their larvae with a solution of vitamins and minerals and then feed them to the frogs." ⇨

ABOVE: The KidScience exhibit surrounds young visitors with flashing lights and whirling winds.

RIGHT: Elliot Provance and Slinky greet visitors to the World Alive Rainforest.

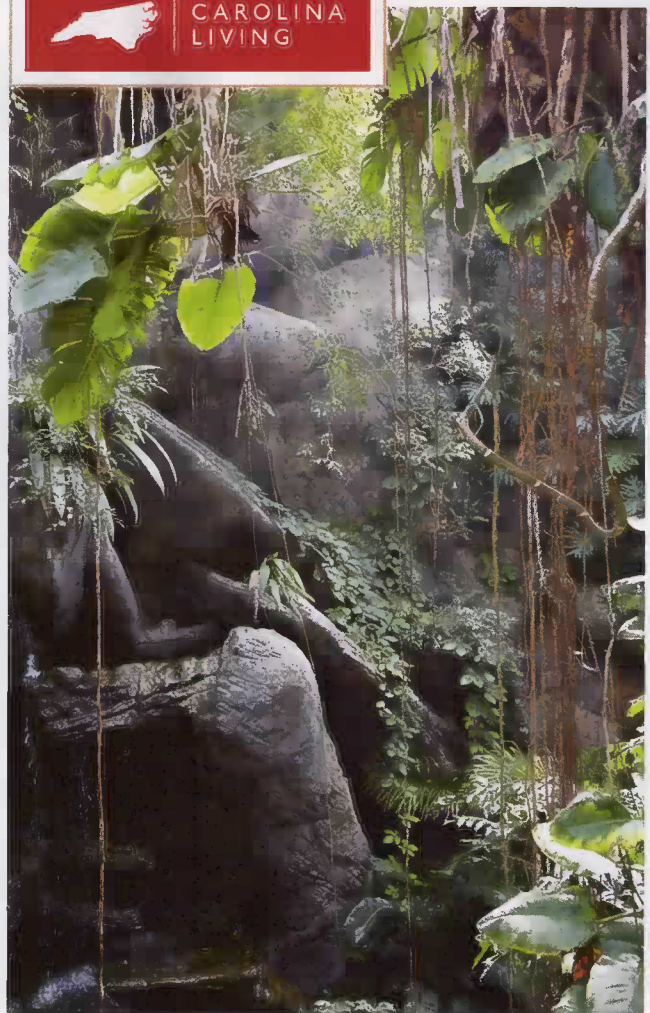


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TOP: The World Alive Rainforest re-creates a jungle indoors.
ABOVE: BJ, a 22-year-old macaw, watches visitors from her perch high above the rainforest.
RIGHT: It seems impossible, but you can safely lie on the Cool Stuff exhibit's bed of nails.

KIDSCIENCE

WHAT YOU SEE: Colorful, oversize exhibits that encourage hands-on learning for kids ages 7 and younger. A giant fan called the Wind Wall gives kids a wind tunnel effect, teaching them about aerodynamics. Nearby, a massive version of the classic Lite-Brite toy teaches children about colors and light, while giving parents a childhood flashback.

BEHIND THE SCENES: Some 176 tinted acrylic cylinders make up the Lite-Brite screen.

COOL STUFF

WHAT YOU SEE: Fun physics-based activities such as the Air Chair—a turbo blower that creates a pressure differential great enough to lift a seated person (weighing up to 175 pounds) in the air. Crowds often gather around the bed of nails, a platform made of 4,788



(4-inch-long) carpentry nails that lifts visitors several inches without hurting them.

BEHIND THE SCENES: Museum insiders know that the nails on the bed can pierce an apple if dropped from a few feet! However, they can support people without hurting them because of the even distribution of the body across each nail.

THINK IT UP

WHAT YOU SEE: Hands-on exhibits designed for tweens and teens, such as Go Motion, a mini-production station where they can create and film stop-motion animation films. Touch screen computer stations throughout allow teens to share their creations via e-mail or add them to a Discovery Place online database.

BEHIND THE SCENES: There are more than 13,000 Go Motion creations presently stored in the database.

DISCOVER DISCOVERY

PLACE 301 North Tryon Street, Charlotte, NC 28202; discoveryplace.org or 704/372-6261 (admission \$10 ages 2-13, \$12 adults). "Mummies of the World" makes its Southern premiere at Discovery Place on November 11. The traveling exhibit of 150 human and animal mummies and related artifacts (the largest collection of its kind in the world) will be on display at the museum until April 8, 2012.

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