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ST. THOMAS, Virgin Islands – October 6, 2020

CORAL WORLD LAUNCHES “DOLPHIN TREK”

Like other non-essential businesses in the Virgin Islands, Coral World Ocean Park closed for the second time on August 19, 2020. General Manager Trudie Prior stated, “Closing to the public on March 25, reopening on May 25, and then closing again on August 19, created special challenges for Coral World. But there was a thin silver lining to the situation. Our staff had the opportunity to fine tune existing programs and create new ones.”

Coral World’s dolphin welfare specialists often heard from guests during existing interactive dolphin programs that they would really like to see the dolphins swimming underwater. Coral World Curator Lee Kellar said, “The dolphin and dive teams heard the call and went to work. Over the course of 6 months they developed a new program – Dolphin TREK - that combines two of our very special activities: helmet diving and swimming with dolphins.”

There were a number of logistical hurdles. The team had to figure out how to lower an 80-lb helmet onto each guest’s shoulders, secure the air source to the helmet, and safely get the guest to stand on the sea floor from a dock that sits four feet above the water line. Kellar observed, “Our team came up with a creative solution – a crane that allows for lowering and raising the helmets onto guests’ shoulders safely and comfortably while they stand on the dive ladder. Participants then step down from the ladder onto the sea floor.” To stabilize themselves once under water, participants will hold onto a lightweight, removable rope that is stretched tight across the habitat using a winch. Michelle Vincent, Coral World Dive Operations Manager, noted, “We had to acclimate the dolphins to the helmets by having staff in helmets walk around the habitat as the dolphins engaged in their usual exploration. The dolphins were very curious and acclimated quickly to this new strange looking object in their environment.”

Prior said, “The effort paid off and now we are ready to welcome the public to engage in this amazing experience. Using Sea TREK helmet diving technology, participants will walk along the ocean floor to observe dolphins swimming in and exploring their natural habitat.” Some dolphins will show their curiosity by swimming up close while others may display their personalities from a distance. Assistant Curator of Marine Mammals and Birds Kristine Tartaglio, observed, “You’ll see the underwater agility of the dolphins – how they use their flippers for steering, balancing, and stopping, and how their powerful muscles move their tails up and down for forward motion – this program offers a very different experience than observing them at the surface.”

The park is now open to visitors Friday to Monday from 9am to 3pm. For more information on Dolphin TREK, please contact our reservation desk at (340) 775 1555 ext 233.

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About Coral World Ocean Park

Coral World Ocean Park is a marine park in St. Thomas, U.S. Virgin Islands and is accredited by the Alliance of Marine Mammal Parks and Aquariums (AMMPA). Dedicated to providing the highest quality of care for marine mammals and contributing to conservation efforts through scientific research, Coral World offers programming to educate visitors about conservation and how they can make a positive impact on maintaining the integrity of the marine ecosystem. Through interactive experiences that allows visitors to get up close and personal with marine life surrounding the Virgin Islands, Coral World strives to inspire the next generation of animal advocates and conservationists. For more information, visit the Coral World website at https://coralworldvi.com/.