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“Butterflies Are Free”

by

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Having grandchildren visit lends itself to making oneself get out of one's normal comfort zone and seek places of interest so as to entertain, educate, excite and tire out the visiting children. Jude and I were fortunate to have two of our grandsons, ages 5 and 8 years with us recently and we chose to visit an attraction that was new to us as well and I'm glad to say, we thoroughly enjoyed it. If you guys out there reading this haven't been to the Florida Museum of Natural History located in Gainesville, FL you owe it to yourself, with grandchildren or not, to make the 1 ½ hour trip from The Villages and take it in.

Our main purpose for going there was to see the Butterfly Rain Forest attached to the Museum where hundreds of beautiful butterflies fly around a manmade large screened vivarium constructed like a tropical/subtropical rain forest with many varieties of trees and plants supporting the butterflies.

As we wound around a circuitous walkway through the “forest,” waterfalls and rippling brooks could be heard and seen running over rocks and fallen trees as the sun shone through the screened ceiling 30 or 40 feet above. Since it is a screened vivarium you might want to check the weather forecast the day you go, but the butterflies would be just as lovely in the rain.

Butterfly experts are sprinkled throughout the journey to explain in more detail the ways of butterflies and to keep you from trying to snatch one with your hands. In fact they encourage you to keep your hands at your sides to entice the multi-colored Lepidoptera to use your head or arms as landing zones. If they do land on you as you go through you the exhibit you are informed it is because the butterfly senses you are a kind person and therefore deserving of their interaction. There are roughly 50 to 60 different species of butterflies flying around your head and they truly are wondrously colorful and beautiful. The kids loved it and each had a butterfly attest to his goodness while we were there.

Part of the total wing devoted to the study and preservation of Lepidoptera is available to touring as well and thousands of pinned examples of the different species are on display with charts, maps and info nearby giving their individual characteristics and native habitats. I was surprised that butterflies are found living over 12,000 feet high on the Andes Mountains as well as the murky, tepid waters of the Amazon. It was very interesting to note just how each species adapts itself to its hometown.

Of course, the Rainforest (Vivarium) was only a small part of the museum's total attraction. A large art collection was also on display in separate buildings and a great interactive display on the

life of Florida's indigenous Indian population and how it has evolved from their original tribes to mixed intermarrying with African-Americans and Cubans, and their ultimate destruction and dispersal through disease and war.

One exhibit dealing with Florida's shark history showed a mockup and information on a humongous species named Megalodon... a 60 foot shark that supposedly existed in Florida over 2 Million years ago. His mouth was so big we could stand in it with a lot of room to spare plus a set of over 200 serrated teeth, including some longer than 6 inches. His menu consisted of 2,500 pounds of fish and whales each day. (In case you're interested, that would average over 6,667 6 oz. cans of Starkist Tuna daily.)

The museum has many exhibits children and adults can find interesting and captivating. We spent a good 4 hours walking around the place and nary a whimper or whine from the boys... that is until we got to the paintings on display and our 5 year old asked, "Are we really here for a reason?"

There is also a very nice, casual, café on the grounds, a little pricey, but very good food such as sandwiches, soups, etc..

Just head up Interstate 75 and think of something to talk about the 90 minutes it should take to get there and you should have a great day. Oh, we made the day perfect when we illegally parked outside the 2007 College Football Champion's stadium, (the infamous Gator "Swamp",) and took the boys inside... snuck onto the field and snapped a few pictures. That was the piece de resistance for at least three of us.

See you next week.

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