

# In Detroit, Belle Isle Aquarium is a forgotten gem for fish aficionados

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A boy admires a flowerhorn cichlid fish at the Belle Isle Aquarium in Detroit. (John T. Greilick/AP)

Crossing the bridge onto Belle Isle in Detroit feels like stepping into the past — I can almost imagine gentlemen checking their pocket watches as they lounge upon the riverbanks, see lovers paddling the canals and women in Victorian dresses strolling the carefully kept grounds to the tinkling music of the carousel. Once Detroit's epicenter of glitz and glamour — the island boasted a zoo, beach, water sports, amusement rides and a respite of natural beauty during its heyday in the early 1900s — Belle Isle is now a forgotten gem in a decaying city.

Having lived in Michigan my entire life, I was surprised to discover that the country's oldest operating aquarium, the Belle Isle Aquarium (1904), is housed on the tiny island. I wanted to catch a glimpse of the Detroit landmark for myself, so off my husband, four young kids and I trekked last February to the 982-acre state park straddling the border between the United States and Canada.

You need a state recreation passport (\$11 if you live in-state, \$31 if you don't) to enter the island from the MacArthur Bridge, elegantly designed with 19 cantilevered arches and dotted with streetlamps designed to look like vintage gas ones. Even the bridge to Belle Isle is ripe with history: it was rebuilt three times and the site of one of Harry Houdini's most famous escapes; he leaped from it, handcuffed and legs bound, into the Detroit River in 1906.

Once on the island, we make our way through a maze of wide, winding roadways that remind me of Paris, complete with towering statues and monuments, and immediately take a wrong turn. We end up driving along Riverbank Road, where the original boathouse is being restored, and past the once-grand zoo, now abandoned and lined with barbed wire. Crumbling facades and scrubbed-off graffiti betray the signs of decay on the island and speak to Belle Isle's fight to reclaim its former glory.

On its Opening Day in August 1904, 5,000 people flocked to this brick building. (Jessica J. Trevino/AP)

Belle Isle has been kept alive by the people who refused to give up on it — such as Belle Isle Conservancy board member Vance Patrick, who maintained the aquarium after it was shut down in 2005; and a volunteer who housed some of the fish in his private residence during the closure. Today, the Belle Isle Conservancy is made up of board members and volunteers who continue to work on projects such as restoring Pewabic Pottery tile mosaic in Scott Fountain;

working in the expansive gardens; cleaning the Lily Pond; and organizing a community-wide spring cleanup each year. The aquarium reopened in 2012 and last July greeted its 500,000th guest.

Although the flowers are not yet in bloom during our visit, I am told that it comes to life in spring, bursting with color from the famous Floral Clock — filled with more than 2,111 flowers — that greets visitors at the entrance.

Older generations tell me that they remember Belle Isle in its heyday, when it was teeming with visitors who flocked to enjoy summer picnics, rent canoes and bikes, stroll through the zoo and splash in the water at the beach and boathouse. After purchasing the island in 1879, the City of Detroit hired Frederick Law Olmsted, the famed urban park designer responsible for Manhattan's Central Park, to develop Belle Isle into the paradise they envisioned. Olmsted sprinkled Parisian influences through the park, such as clean-cut, symmetrical gardens, central fountains and grand statues flanking expansive entryways.

The Belle Isle Aquarium was, and continues to be, the main attraction on the island. On its Opening Day in August 1904, 5,000 people flocked to the brick building housing more than 44 tanks of sea creatures. When we visit, there are only a handful of visitors roaming around the island. We soon spot the aquarium, still housed in the original building designed by famed Detroit architect Albert Kahn.

As we enter, our eyes are drawn to the green glass tiles covering the curved ceiling. Kahn designed the aquarium to give visitors the impression that they are underwater. His vision survives; the light and water reflecting off the green tiles creates a hazy, hushed atmosphere, as if you are navigating beside the fish through murky water.

We are guided on a tour by Amy Emmert, the school programs director, who works to bring Detroit students onto the island. Exuberant and knowledgeable, Emmert gives a presentation that is both interactive and incredibly fun. Even my brood of four children, all 6 and younger, are riveted by her every word.

Emmert walks us through exhibits that feature sea horses (my personal favorite); piranhas ("They're a really misunderstood fish," she explains as my children take a dubious look at the tank); the country's largest collection of air-breathing fish; and the fascinating African lungfish, a remarkable creature that can survive in the ground and often — during dry months — ends up in the walls of homes built from mud.

Following our tour of the modestly sized aquarium, we head next door to the Anna Scripps Whitcomb Conservatory, a 13-acre tropical paradise including outdoor gardens, lily ponds and an indoor space where my children excitedly point out bananas growing from a tree, coffee beans dotting branches and more cactuses than they can count. It makes my children giggle that despite the chill outdoors, they are able to whip off their jackets in the warm, humid air and run along the plant-lined paths.

Next up? The Belle Isle Nature Center, where the whole family clamors for a chance to feed the white fallow deer, descendants of the original population gifted to the Isle from French President François-Félix Faure in 1895. Our exploration yields winding hallways filled with nature exhibits, hands-on educational displays and an indoor treehouse. The bee exhibit yielded 40 pounds of honey last year, we learn. There are also plenty of frogs, snakes and turtles indoors.

After purchasing Belle Isle in 1879, the City of Detroit hired Frederick Law Olmsted, the famed urban park designer responsible for Manhattan's Central Park, to develop it into the paradise they envisioned. (Alamy Stock Photo)

Afterward, we drive by the island's other popular attractions, such as an active Coast Guard station, a historic lighthouse and police station, museum, golf course, giant slide and beach.

Looking around the island, it's easy to forget that Belle Isle is also a symbol of Detroit's racial tension. The infamous race riot of 1943 started at the Naval Armory, located just off the Belle Isle bridge, spilled over onto the island and spread into the city after a rumor started that a white man had thrown a black mother and baby off the bridge. The fighting culminated in what would become one of the deadliest race riots in history; by the end of the week, 25 black residents and nine white residents had lost their lives.

The memory of that incident was still alive in 2012, when a proposal was first made to lease Belle Isle to Michigan to supply it with much-needed funding and direction. The proposal was met with some dissent from black Detroit residents who felt that the decision was racially motivated and insisted that the island should stay under the city's ownership. The park was officially turned over to the state in 2013 with a 30-year lease, which promised \$20 million worth of improvements and a savings of more than \$4 million to the city under its leadership. The initial hesitation was addressed through grass-roots efforts of the conservancy to help make Belle Isle the place of community it is today.

In her book "Island in the City: How Belle Isle Changed Detroit Forever," third-generation Detroit resident urbanist Janet Anderson, whose grandfather was the first curator of the now-defunct Belle Isle Zoo, describes Belle Isle as a living record of the city of Detroit, from its early and forgotten beginnings inhabited by Native Americans (who called the Island "Swan Well") to a leading park attraction propelled by the power of the auto industry, to a place of renewal as Detroit fights to blend past and present for a peaceful and hopeful future.

And that's exactly what Belle Isle represents today; a melding of old and new, past hurts and future hope, of dusty memories and fresh starts to come. The Belle Isle Aquarium may fondly reminisce over the good old days, when large crowds graced its grand entrance, but something tells me it will gladly embrace the excited children tumbling in, the families, loyal Detroit residents, and visitors that still enter its doors.

Just watch out for those piranhas.

Brusie is a writer based in Michigan. Her website is [chauniebrusie.com](http://chauniebrusie.com).