

The Kuroshio Sea tank, home to a whale shark named Jinta that is currently setting the world record for the longest period in captivity.

Okinawa Churaumi Aquarium: Highlighting the fascination of Okinawa's Oceans

In Okinawa Prefecture, the Okinawa Churaumi Aquarium is dedicated to the theme of 'Encounters with Okinawa's Sea.' This aquarium highlights the fascination of Okinawa's oceans, including an exhibit where you can see a whale shark that holds the world record for the longest period in captivity. We spoke with a spokesperson to learn more. (Text: TANAKA Nozomi)

Located at the southwestern tip of the Japanese archipelago, Okinawa Prefecture is home to the Okinawa Churaumi Aquarium. About a two-hour drive north from Naha Airport, the gateway to Okinawa, the aquarium is situated on the west side of the island and overlooks the beautiful coastline of Motobu Town. Opened in November 2002, it evolved from the Okinawa Commemorative National Government Park Aquarium, which originally opened in 1976.

A staff member from the Okinawa Churaumi Aquarium describes its features and attractions: "Visitors enter from the top floor, the fourth floor, and then proceed downward through the exhibits. Our theme, 'Encounters with Okinawa's Sea,' allows guests to experience Okinawa's waters in a journey from shallow coral reefs to the open Kuroshio Sea, and then to the deep sea. It's like diving deeper into the ocean

to explore the rich marine environment of Okinawa."

The aquarium reproduces the marine environments of Okinawa, from the shallow waters full of some of the world's most diverse species to depths of around 700 meters. It incorporates a generous amount of seawater drawn directly from the surrounding ocean into the tanks, ensuring that the habitat closely mirrors natural conditions in terms of light, water quality, and clarity.

"One of the most impressive features you'll see immediately upon entering the aquarium is the Coral Sea tank, which showcases approximately 80 species and 460 individual coral colonies. This display is based on the real coral reef scenes observed by our staff during their dives in the waters of Motobu Town.

Next to the coral reef observation area is the Kuroshio Sea tank, which attracts many tourists want-



Photo: Okinawa Commemorative National Government Park (Ocean Expo Park) / Okinawa Churaumi Aquarium

The Coral Sea tank, maintained with fresh seawater supplied from the ocean in front of the aquarium and featuring a near-natural environment with sunlight.

ing to take photographs. Behind the massive acrylic panel, measuring 22.5 meters in length, 8.2 meters in height, and 60 centimeters in thickness, you can see the majestic sight of a whale shark, measuring 8.8 meters in length, swimming leisurely.

“The whale shark currently in our care has been here for 29 years, since March 1995, when it was still part of the Okinawa Commemorative National Government Park Aquarium, and continues to set the world record for the longest captivity of its kind. This is the only aquarium in the world to exhibit a giant manta ray (*Mobula birostris*), one of the largest in the world, measuring up to nine meters in length. Reef manta rays (*Mobula alfredi*), which measure around five meters in length, were successfully bred for the first time ever here in 2007, and there was another birth in August 2024.”

Another feature of the Okinawa Churaumi Aquarium is its deep-sea section, which showcases creatures never before displayed elsewhere in the world, as well as newly discovered species. The aquarium is dedicated to unraveling the mysteries of deep-sea life and is actively involved in deep-sea research in the waters around Okinawa.

In addition, the aquarium has achieved the world's first successful breeding of sharks by artificial device, contributing to the research and conservation of rare shark species.

Inside the facility, there is a special exhibit known as the Shark Research Lab, where the results of this research are displayed.

“The ‘Chura’ in Okinawa Churaumi Aquarium means ‘beautiful’ in the Okinawan dialect. The name reflects the aquarium’s aim to recreate the beautiful seas of Okinawa and to be approachable and memorable to many people.

Recently, visitors from nearby Asian countries and other international locations have been coming in increasing numbers, showing growing interest in the aquarium. The pamphlets, official website, and app currently support English, Korean, and Chinese (both Simplified and Traditional), while in-house signage is provided in both Japanese and English. We hope that people from around the world will gain a deeper understanding of the beautiful seas of Okinawa. If you visit Okinawa, we would be delighted if you could come and see us.”



The Shark Research Lab displaying shark specimens and related materials.

Photo: Okinawa Commemorative National Government Park (Ocean Expo Park) / Okinawa Churaumi Aquarium

Left: The reef manta ray (two seen here just to the right of center) primarily inhabits the warm and tropical waters of the Indo-Pacific region, south of Okinawa.

Right: A dark tank featuring mysterious deep-sea creatures.



Photos: Okinawa Commemorative National Government Park (Ocean Expo Park) / Okinawa Churaumi Aquarium