

Sugar Land residents invited to visit culture close to home

By Natalie Harms | October 2, 2012

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Photo By Suzanne Rehak

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Tyrannosaurus Rex, known as the "Tyrant Lizard King," was a vicious predator that lived 65 million years ago. He is on display near the first-floor entrance of the Houston Museum of Natural Science at Sugar Land, 13016 University. Hours are: 9 a.m.-3 p.m. Thursdays and Fridays, 9 a.m.-5 p.m. Saturdays and noon-5 p.m. Sundays. The museum is closed Mondays through Wednesdays.

The Houston Museum of Natural Science at Sugar Land will welcome new aquatic friends when it unveils its 2,000-gallon fish tank at a birthday-themed



fundraiser in early November.

More Information

If you go

What: Houston Museum of Natural Science at Sugar Land

The celebration marks the satellite's third year of operation. The cocktail party will be 6-9 p.m. Nov. 8 at the museum. Tickets at \$50 are available online.

Where: 13016 University Blvd., Sugar Land
Hours: 9 a.m.-3 p.m. Thursdays-Fridays; 9 a.m.-5 p.m. Saturdays; noon-5 p.m. Sundays; closed Mondays-Wednesdays
Information: 281-313-2277 or sugarlandprograms@hmns.org. You can also go to www.hmns.org/ and visit the Sugar Land link.

Patrons are invited to purchase inhabitants for the saltwater tank as well as enjoy drinks, hors d'oeuvres, a live auction and other activities throughout the museum.

Beginning Friday, Nov. 16, the activities are open to all with the price of regular exhibit admission. Guests can likewise purchase fish for the new tank and kids are able to design tile handprints to decorate it.

The museum opened on Oct. 3, 2009, on the property of a prison nicknamed "two camp."

The 40,000-square-foot brick building speckled with dozens of white panel windows was erected in 1939 as a part of the Central Unit state prison system.

The museum gift shop and box office are placed, said **Adrienne Barker**, director and chief development officer, right in the middle of where the nearly 400 prisoners used to bunk.

The red bricks, which were kilned just down the street, set the building apart from other prisons.

"It was actually one of the first brick buildings in the department of correction systems," Barker said. "Up to that point, buildings were wooden structures, so this building was really state-of-the-art."

The prison closed in 1969 and became a miscellaneous area used by Sugar Land for storage. It even served as the set for the movie "Powder."

Then the Houston Museum of Natural Science, located in Hermann Park just north of the Texas Medical Center, and its board of directors rescued the building and turned it into an unheard of second location.

"The city of Sugar Land approached us actually," said **Latha Thomas**, vice president of marketing at HMNS. "They asked if they offered us the site would we be interested in doing the inside of the building."

A task not to be scoffed at.

"It was a big undertaking," Thomas said. "Especially filling the whole area, but to be honest most museums only show a fraction of their collection. We had so many things that were off site that we could have been putting on display."

Sugar Land's development lately has been based on community requests and opinions. Sugar Land officials established a city task force to discover what community residents want, and they heard a resounding desire for more enlightening attractions.

"It was actually one of our first projects culturally," said Assistant Communications Director **Doug Adolph**. "Since then, other projects have built off of the museum's success, such as Constellation Stadium, and more to come. It served as sort of a springboard for a lot of projects."

To get its name on the map as well as attract visitors, the museum satellite focused on filling exhibit halls to keep visitors coming.

Along with the paleontology hall and a mixture of other traditional exhibits, its first season attraction was "The Chronicles of Narnia" exhibit.

"Since Narnia, we have worked to fill the museum halls," Barker said. "We've been here long enough that we've sort of settled in and we've learned a little about what the schools (and other guests) want."

HMNS Sugar Land plays host to about four schools a day during its busy spring season, and the field trips aren't just visiting from the Fort Bend area.

"We really have schools come from all over," Barker said. "I'm really surprised sometimes with how far away they will come."

Barker said schools like to mix it up from the Hermann Park location and experience the different temporary exhibits - of which Sugar Land does around two a year.

This summer, Sugar Land wrapped up "Animal Secrets" where children experienced natural wildlife.

"It was a huge hit," Barker said. "Children could come and learn about nature, animals and habitats. They could play as if they were that animal in those habitats. We even had a chipmunk suit they could put on."

The next exhibit hopes to educate all ages on a hot topic: energy conservation. The exhibit, dubbed "Conservation Quest," will demonstrate how people can leave less of an imprint on Earth in their daily life. The quest will conclude in January.

While these temporary features tend to be the museum's draw, the location offers a few standing, unique displays, such as "Science on a Sphere."

Developed by the **National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration**, the rotating, 10-foot-diameter orb usually shows the Earth's face including weather patterns as recent as 48-hours, but can become any of the planets, said Barker. The museum has detailed footage - developed by NOAA - from the 2011 tsunami that affected Japan and the surrounding areas, showing the rising water levels around the world.

Also special to the Sugar Land location is the frog area. Living animals are few and far between in museums, but the amphibians offer an educational asset as well as being cute and fun to spot, Barker said.

About a dozen species from all over the world, such as the giant African bullfrog and the tiny Amazon milk frog, make up the amphibian collection, which is adjacent to the T-Rex.

Although the museum's geode hall is not a rarity, one of its pieces was recently a topic of national discussion. The museum houses a fraction of the Allende meteorite that thumped onto New Mexico's ground about 40 years ago. Geologists have been experimenting on a piece of the meteorite since then trying to identify a mysterious mineral. Just three months ago they finally called it a brand-new entity and named it "panguite."

"Now we have a very unique piece of science," Barker said, "at least until another mineral is discovered - which could be decades."

With all that the museum has to offer, Barker wants to build up the cultural attractions in Sugar Land to the community.

"We need to start getting people to think locally because once they do that they'll realize that it's easier to get here," Barker said. "They can go and do something spontaneously over the weekend and don't have to plan to go to Houston."

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