




Penguins stretch flippers, make selves at home

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VIDEO

 Penguins settling in

Twenty African penguins are settling in to spacious new digs at the California Academy of Science's newly built museum in Golden Gate Park, and they are visibly pleased.

The San Francisco museum will open to the public Sept. 27, but the penguins held their debut for the media Wednesday happily mugging for cameras and flirting with reporters.

"I really think we went and did everything right for this group of birds," said aquatic biologist Pamela Schaller, who has cared for the penguins for eight years. "I can't believe how comfortable they are already."

Comfortable, indeed. Not only were the birds nesting, frolicking, diving and happily accepting fish from Schaller's bucket Wednesday, they are also getting busy, ahem, copulating.

The birds' new home, which includes a 25,000-gallon tank with a surge system to simulate wave action, can be seen through a 26-by-16-foot acrylic window.

"These penguins really like to interact with people," Schaller said. "You'll be able to walk right up and ceiling of the planetarium, plants are growing on the living roof, and a tropical reef is being recreated.

Even with all those gems in the new museum, the penguins are sure to be a favorite.

"This exhibit really shows the animals in as close to their natural environment as possible," Schaller said.

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feel like you're part of this penguin colony."

Chris Andrews, chief of public programs at the Academy, hopes the penguins will inspire people to care about the wild penguins that live in coastal South Africa and Namibia.

"Penguins are considered vulnerable in the wild," he said. "Their numbers have really been declining since the 1900s."

The penguin exhibit is at the end of the Academy's African Hall, which is still being put together. There are zebras and hartebeests waiting to be unwrapped from plastic, bushes waiting for thorns to be painted on them, a tree waiting for a leopard to be perched on a branch, and a stuffed gorilla waiting for a toupee to cover a bald spot.

African Hall is the only hall being recreated from the original museum. The two dozen 17-foot-tall dioramas will house the same 80-year-old animal specimens, with backgrounds painted to look like the originals.

"It's just a nice nod to the past," said Academy Studios artist Marc Nicely, who is painting the scenes using photos and chunks of the walls of the old displays.

Nicely said the hall should stand out because it is "painterly" rather than slick and modern as most museum exhibits are today.

The rest of the museum is also taking shape. A 65-foot-tall glass sphere houses a rainforest with live trees and walkways for people to view the habitat from various heights. Free-flying birds and butterflies, frogs and lizards will move in the coming months.

The last of the panels are being mounted on the