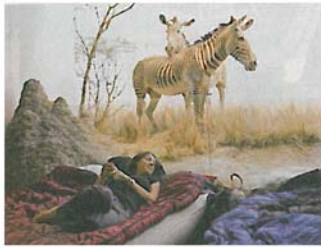


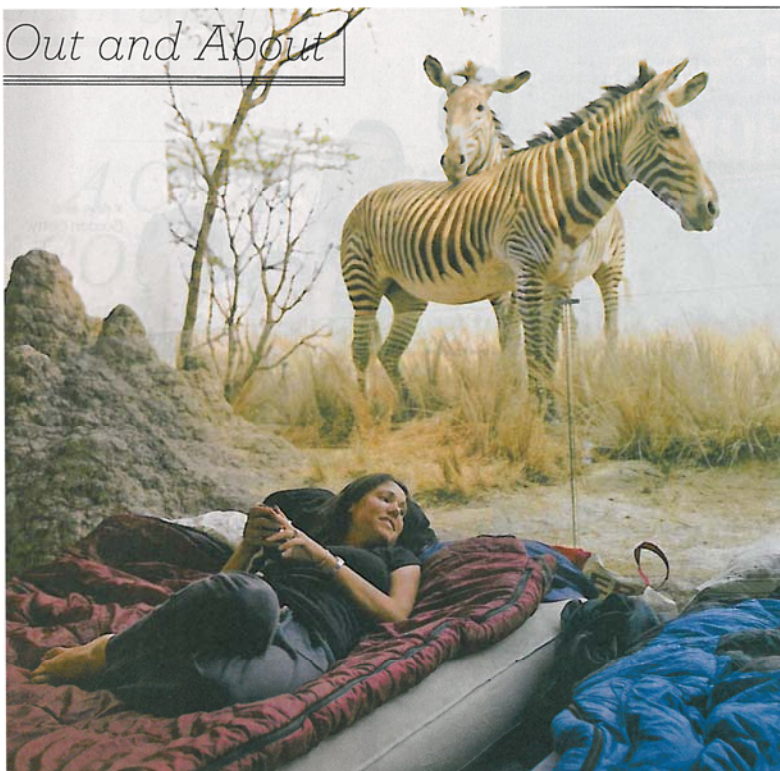
The Scene: Penguins and pajamas, the adults-only version. Page 9



SLEEP WITH THE FISH

California Academy of Sciences' first adult overnighter features hibernation, libations and insomniac jellies

Out and About



Photos by Laura Morton / Special to The Chronicle

Alicia Grimes relaxes on an air mattress in the African Hall at the California Academy of Sciences' first adult sleepover. For details on family sleepovers, go to www.calacademy.org/events/sleepovers.

By Steve Rubenstein
SPECIAL TO THE CHRONICLE

An ordinary person would probably not pay \$119 to sleep next to a penguin, but these were not ordinary people.

They were full-grown, adult human beings, most of them in flannel pajamas. They were pioneers in uncharted realms. For although the California Academy of Sciences has for years conducted a sleep-at-the-museum program for children, it had never before hosted a similar event exclusively for grown-ups.

"Normally this place is overrun with kids," said Patrick Grimes of San Francisco, who was setting up his sleeping bag in the African Hall next to two stuffed zebras. A few feet away, the decked-out penguins were staring at Grimes and the other decked-out humans through a sheet of glass. What were their fellow two-legged vertebrates up to now?

From sunset to sunrise, it was no kids allowed. Minimum age 21, strictly enforced. Alcohol will be served, and served some more. Please be responsible and do not toss the remains of your \$8 rum-and-Champagne Penguin Punch into the alligator lagoon, as Claude the albino alligator — whose girlfriend not long ago chewed off one of his toes — has troubles enough.

Long before sundown, the grown-ups had lined up at the front door of the museum with their sleeping bags. It paid to arrive early, as the best sleeping spots — next to the penguins, the tropical fish and the sharks — would go fast. Latecomers would be stuck alongside grim jars of dead fish in formaldehyde.

Keeping relationship alive

Most folks said they did not exactly know why they had signed up to sleep over at the science museum, other than sleeping over at the science museum had never been allowed before, and investigating new stuff is part of science.

"Anybody can take a girl to dinner and a movie," said Guillermo Sanchez, who was setting up a double air mattress next to the giant tropical fish tank for himself and his sweetheart, Martha Chavarro.

"You have to do something different to keep a relationship alive," Chavarro said. "This is different." The two of them smooched and snuggled, in full view of eight fellow campers and a thousand fish. "For tonight, we will try to behave ourselves," Sanchez said. "I said try. I'm not



Joseph Rocha (left) and **Will Muldowney** check out the Philippine coral reef at the California Academy of Sciences.

going to promise anything."

A half dozen security guards patrolled the halls through the night to make sure the wildlife was not unduly shocked. The museum may have 38,000 live creatures on exhibit, all of which came into being through the process that Sanchez and Chavarro were contemplating. But museum guard Roderigo Benjamin said he was sworn to uphold decency.

"We have to break up any funny business," he said. "Sure, it could be considered a live scientific demonstration. But I would have to tell them to get a hotel room."

Most of the academy exhibits are already breathing and moving around. They need not spring to life in the middle of the night, as they did in "Night at the Museum," the 2006 movie about the adventures of a New York museum guard that apparently is required viewing for anyone contemplating an overnight stay in a museum. Several campers were quoting key bits of dialogue by heart.

Before lights out, there was the standard lineup of museum offerings — the fish, the rain forest and the elevator ride to the "living" roof to look at the revolutionary shrubbery. And there was some special stuff, too — a peek at the usually off-limits mineral collection and an honest-to-goodness planetarium show instead of an Imax movie. (Some nostalgic campers recalled that, before moving into its \$500 million showplace in 2008 and tripling its admission price to \$30, the museum offered a planetarium show with planets and a mineral hall with minerals.)

At midnight, there was milk and cookies and a movie. It turned out to be a very educational documentary about lions eating zebras, and more than one queasy camper

walked out halfway through. Nature is red in tooth and claw, a bit of biology as basic as anything going on in the sleeping bags.

Jillian Kwan and Charmagne Kringstein skipped the movie and bedded down next to the jellyfish tank. The jellies drifted about, like plastic supermarket bags in a high wind. The women said they were going to wait for the jellyfish to go to sleep, but it didn't work out that way. Jellyfish have been around longer than people and know what they're doing.

Cheaper than a hotel room

Meanwhile, Grimes fluffed up his pillow and said goodnight to the stuffed zebras on his right and to his mother, Sheri, on his left. He had invited his parents and brother to be fellow campers as part of a family reunion. Sleeping next to his mother, Grimes said, was just as special as sleeping next to a dead zebra.

"It's a wild adventure tonight, on many levels," he said.

During the night, the dinosaur skeleton at the front door did not spring to life. This was confirmed during frequent checks by the older-than-50 crowd on their nocturnal bathroom breaks. At sunrise, the penguins seemed to take a genuine interest as dozens of folks rolled up their sleeping bags. Lori and John Redding, visiting from Southern California for the weekend, said sleeping on the floor with penguins is a great way to save some dough.

"We were going to spend \$200 for a hotel room until I found out about this," Lori Redding said. "At first I thought this was going to be weird. But we had a good time and learned something and made money."

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