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Fancy Diving With Dolphins During the Pandemic? Coral World Has Risen to the Occasion

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ST. THOMAS — Coral World Ocean Park has launched what the company is calling "Dolphin Trek", which combines helmet diving and swimming with dolphins.

According to a release issued Tuesday, Coral World's dolphin welfare specialists often heard from guests during existing interactive dolphin programs that they would really like to see the dolphins swimming underwater. Coral World Curator Lee Kellar said, "The dolphin and dive teams heard the call and went to work. Over the course of 6 months they developed a new program – Dolphin TREK - that combines two of our very special activities: helmet diving and swimming with dolphins."

There were a number of logistical hurdles, said Coral World. The team had to figure out how to lower an 80-lb helmet onto each guest's shoulders, secure the air source to the helmet, and safely get the guest to stand on the sea floor from a dock that sits four feet above the water line.

"Our team came up with a creative solution – a crane that allows for lowering and raising the helmets onto guests' shoulders safely and comfortably while they stand on the dive ladder," Keller said. "Participants then step down from the ladder onto the sea floor."

To stabilize themselves once under water, participants will hold onto a lightweight, removable rope that is stretched tight across the habitat using a winch, according to the release.

Michelle Vincent, Coral World Dive Operations Manager, said, "We had to acclimate the dolphins to the helmets by having staff in helmets walk around the habitat as the dolphins engaged in their usual exploration. The dolphins were very curious and acclimated quickly to this new strange looking object in their environment."

Prior added, "The effort paid off and now we are ready to welcome the public to engage in this amazing experience. Using Sea TREK helmet diving technology, participants will walk along the ocean floor to observe dolphins swimming in and exploring their natural habitat."

Some dolphins will show their curiosity by swimming up close while others may display their personalities from a distance. Assistant Curator of Marine Mammals and Birds, Kristine Tartaglio, said, "You'll see the underwater agility of the dolphins – how they use their flippers for steering, balancing, and stopping, and how their powerful muscles move their tails up and down for forward motion – this program offers a very different experience than observing them at the surface."

The park is now open to visitors Friday to Monday from 9am to 3pm. For more information on Dolphin TREK, contact Coral World reservation desk at (340) 775 1555 ext 233.