

REAL PIRATES

An exhibition from National Geographic

Nov. 21, 2009 through April 4, 2010

For ticket information call (757)664-1000 or 1-800-664-1080

Hello, I'm Edgar Loessin with Loessin at Large.

"Now and then we had a hope that if we lived and were good, God would permit us to be pirates." Those are words written by none other than Mark Twain. He joins dozens of writers, poets and composers who have been intrigued by the lore of the golden age of piracy in the late 17th - early 18th centuries.

Many of the tales of derring-do on the high seas are more fictive than factual. In 1984 Barry Clifford discovered the remains of The Whydah wrecked in a violent storm off Cape Cod. The hundreds of artifacts give us concrete evidence of what the life of a pirate actually entailed... The Whydah was one of the most advanced ships of her day and is the only authenticated pirate ship to be discovered in U.S. waters. She set sail from London in 1715 destined for West Africa to buy and barter 700 slaves to be sold or traded to plantation owners in the Caribbean. That was her only such voyage because shortly after the slaves were sold, the Whydah was captured by Sam Bellamy in the Bahamas. The crew hoisted the Jolly Roger and continued their journey northward. On April 26, 1717, the Whydah, heavy with loot from more than 50 captured ships, encountered that fateful storm and hit the bottom of the sea.

Now in a unique and totally fascinating 16,000 –square-foot exhibit one can see the Whydah's bell, chests of real gold and silver and hundreds of every day items that give us detailed knowledge about the people who used them. We can board a replica of the ship and go below to see what the crew is up to on a typical day. There might be a good bit of drinking and gambling. We see a surgeon amputating a sailor's leg, reassuring his patient that "it will be over before you know it." Elsewhere there may be singing and dancing. The pirates liked to capture musicians and other talented and skilled men to make life on the high seas pleasant and less boring. Nearby is a rehearsal of a one act play that displeases of few of the drunken crew. We see jewelry, silver plates and flatware that are signed by the pirate who used them and cuff links and buckles that show a sophisticated sartorial flare.

The exhibit tells its story with mannequins, printed information here and there and authentic looking props and scenery. There are even literal smells of the ship. You stroll through the vast displays at your own pace. I suggest you give your self at least two hours to grasp fully the meaning and significance of what you are seeing. There are benches at intervals if you need to rest. I've only touched upon the vast and thoroughly captivating aspects of this one of a kind experience. You'll gain insightful knowledge of a period of American and world history in a most enjoyable manner...

As a companion exhibit, which examines modern piracy, is the actual Maersk Alabama lifeboat which Navy personnel used to rescue Captain Richard Phillips from Somali Pirates in 2009. We see how piracy is connected to Hampton Roads today through the heroic acts of Captain Phillips and the Navy Seal snipers,

Pirate crews were made up of unemployed sailors and a wide array of men and a few women. About 25% or more were African slaves who found piracy the lesser of two evils. If one looks at the pirates in the light of the times in which they lived, they are more egalitarian and less cruel

then we think of them as being. Not that they didn't slit a throat or two when necessary. For instance, those outraged drunks watching the play broke a leg of the leading actor, took an arm off the playwright, and killed an audience member. Life upon the wicked stage has never been easy.

This is Edgar Loessin with Loessin at Large and I'll see you at the next opening.