

# Rio takes dive into South America's biggest aquarium

October 18 2016, by Claire De Oliveira Neto

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Marine biologist Marcelo Szpilman shows the glass tunnel at the entrance of the AguaRio aquarium in Rio de Janeiro on October 13, 2016

The great skeleton of a humpback whale will greet visitors to the opening next month in Rio de Janeiro of South America's biggest aquarium—with sharks waiting for them inside.

The November 9 opening in Rio's port zone, part of the large-scale

refurbishment of the city for the Olympic Games, will be Rio's first aquarium and one of the biggest anywhere.

The impressive whale skeleton is the remains of a whale found on the beach at Macumba, in Rio, and had probably been killed in a collision with a ship, said marine biologist Marcelo Szpilman, who headed the AquaRio project.

But the focus is very much on the living, both to show ocean wonders to an expected million [visitors](#) a year and to promote protection of [vulnerable species](#).

The five-story AquaRio has 1.18 million gallons (4.5 million liters) of saltwater collected by ship well off Rio's polluted coast and kept under close observation once at the aquarium.

A 66-foot (20-meter) tunnel of clear acrylic snakes seven meters under water will give visitors "a sensation of total immersion," Szpilman says.

## **Sleeping with the sharks**

The stars of the show are [sharks](#) that swim around outside the tunnel. In what could quickly become a huge hit in Rio, visitors will also be able to bed down for the night.



View of different marine species at the AguaRio aquarium in Rio de Janeiro

"The idea is for children from six years old to be able to spend the night with their parents and experience the feeling of being at the bottom of the ocean," Szpilman said.

For visitors who want to get even closer, then swimming in the shark tank will be on the menu.

But it's not all about the 40 or so species of sharks. AquaRio will stock some 3,000 fish from 350 species in total, with a capacity of 8,000 fish.

Szpilman said 90 percent of the specimens have been captured at sea and are of the types found ordinarily along Brazil's coasts, often fished for eating. The point, he said, is to educate the public about the wonders on their doorstep.

"When you bring people to this extraordinary universe you inspire them to want to help conservation," he said.

AquaRio also will host a research center for the study of reproduction in captivity.

The aquarium was built on a 130 million reais (\$40 million) budget in four years as part of the revitalization of Rio's ramshackle port area ahead of the Olympic Games that were held in August. It has a capacity of about 1,000 visitors an hour and will be open seven days a week.

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