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### Great Explorations

Over are the days of stuffy museums. Now these pillars of knowledge are hands-on and happening. In Hampton Roads, a montage of living and vibrant museum experiences await, inviting you to tickle a stingray, step inside a bubble, or marvel at a Monet.

By Donna Rich

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### Virginia Living Museum

Welcome to Appalachian Cove, where free-flying songbirds dart about and a mountain stream flows to a trout-filled lake two stories below. This is one of the two massive glassed-in habitats show- casing the diverse mountains-to-the-sea environs of the Old Dominion state.

Stroll over to the Cypress Swamp exhibit where alligators and snapping turtles cruise among massive cypress trunks. The Coastal Plain Gallery explores the great Chesapeake Bay: A convex aquarium is home to loggerhead sea turtles, nurse sharks, black drum, and cobia. Outside, there's a three-quarter-mile elevated boardwalk that crosses Deer Park Lake and winds around "natural" settings where bobcats, river otters, beavers, and wild turkeys await.

Unique sights: Take a walk through the Virginia Underground Gallery, a re- created limestone cave, just like the ones in the northwestern part of the state. Inside lurk cave-dwelling creatures such as tiny blind cave fish and packrats.

Don't miss: The highlight of the museum's newest outdoor exhibit is a pair of endangered red wolves.

Special exhibits: At the Robot Zoo, try taking aim with the "Tongue Gun" to see how a real chameleon shoots out its long, sticky tongue to lasso its lunch. Through Jan. 8, 2006.

Visit: 524 J. Clyde Morris Blvd., Newport News. Mon.-Sat. 9 a.m.- 5 p.m.; Sun. noon-5 p.m. 757- 595-1900 or <http://www.thevlm.org>.



### Mariners' Museum



From stem to stern, this international maritime museum is filled with a fine collection of everything related to boats, from military memorabilia and shipbuilding ephemera to an extraordinary collection of boat models and historic navigation tools (including some used on Capt. James Cook's voyages). There's even a life vest from the Titanic.

Unique sights: Check out the world's largest collection of figureheads (ninety-two), including the 1874 polar bear used on Admiral Byrd's famed expedition and the Jenny Lind figurehead, believed to be from the 1851 schooner, Nightingale. The Swedish soprano's charity work with disabled sailors made her beloved by seamen.

Don't miss: More than seventy-five boats from thirty-six countries flood the international Small Craft Center, housing everything from Native American dugout canoes to sleek yachts—as well as a gondola straight from the canals of Venice.

Special exhibit: Civil War buffs will enjoy "Ironclad Evidence: Stories from the USS Monitor and the CSS Virginia." See the cannon and anchor that belonged to these famous ironclad warships, the first ever to battle—and right here in Hampton Roads in 1862. The Monitor's turret, raised in 2002, will be on display in a new center soon.

Visit: 100 Museum Dr., Newport News. Daily 10 a.m.-5 p.m. 757- 596-2222 or <http://www.mariner.org>.

### Hampton University Museum



Founded in 1894, the Hampton University Museum is the oldest African-American museum in the United States and one of the oldest museums in the state of Virginia. Its 9,000-item collection ranges from traditional African art to works by African- and Native Americans to Pacific Islanders. You'll find works by contemporary artists such as John Biggers, Elizabeth Catlett, and Jacob Lawrence, as well as pioneering African-American artists like Joshua