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TRAVEL & EXPERIENCES

San Francisco's new California Academy of Sciences a natural wonder

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California Academy of Sciences, San Francisco.

San Francisco

World-class, unparalleled, greatest, biggest, most diverse, greenest and eco-grooviest. Able to leap tall buildings in a single rave, the new state-of-the-art and state-of-the-planet incarnation of the California Academy of Sciences is generating kilowatts of excitement and kudos.

This weekend marks the long-awaited grand reopening of the academy, which is unusual in that it houses an aquarium, planetarium, natural history museum and educational programs under one roof. In commemoration of the very big deal that all of this is, several hundred butterflies were to be released at its Saturday debut in San Francisco's Golden Gate Park, starting two days of hoopla that's set to include music, Chinese acrobats and a Native American blessing.

But the star attraction is the building itself, designed by Pritzker Prize winner Renzo Piano (Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Pompidou Centre in Paris) and poised to be one of the world's greenest buildings.

CALIFORNIA ACADEMY OF SCIENCES

Admission: \$24.95 for adults; \$19.95 for ages 12 to 17, seniors ages 65 and older and students with valid ID; \$14.95 for ages 7 to 11; free for children ages 6 and younger.

Admission free on the third Wednesday of each month.

Hours: 9:30 a.m. to 5 p.m. Mondays through Saturdays, and 11 a.m. to 5 p.m. Sundays.

Location: 55 Music Concourse Drive in Golden Gate Park; (415) 379-8000, www.calacademy.org.

Call it the “unmuseum,” said Gregory C. Farrington, executive director. “Museums are supposed to have thick walls and dark corridors. You’re supposed to get lost.”

“This,” he said “is entirely different. It’s welcoming and full of life and light.”

The place is spacious, sunlight-soaked, with glass walls surrounding a central atrium, but its crowning achievement is the living roof: a 2.5-acre biotic expanse with seven grassy domes creating a roof-scape of rolling hills and valleys that echoes San Francisco’s topography and its seven predominant hills. The steepest peaks carpet the academy’s domed planetarium, rain forest and aquarium exhibits.

The museum “is visually and functionally linked to its natural surroundings, metaphorically lifting up a piece of the park and putting a building underneath,” Piano said. If you were a bird, you wouldn’t even see the museum from above. You’d be mostly concerned with the 1.7 million native plants growing on top (including strawberries) and the various bugs snuggling in.

From an environmentalist’s-eye view, the green roof embodies natural cooling and heating systems, water conservation, solar panels and a new habitat for birds and butterflies.

From a kid’s-eye view, the rooftop may strongly resemble Teletubby-land. But fans of Teletubbies may be even more interested in the museum below, where the giant Pacific octopus in the Steinhart Aquarium can stretch 7 feet

or shrink to tennis-ball-size.

And the pasty albino alligator can be viewed from above or below swamp level. Here, the great glass elevator takes visitors from the Amazon forest to the misty rain forests. You can take the long way up -- a winding ramp through the 90-foot-diameter glass dome (with detours for exhibits of a bat cave in Borneo, chameleons in Madagascar) to the treetops of Costa Rica, where a butterfly could land on your head.

Throughout the comprehensive exhibits on evolution, climate change, California tide pools and Philippine coral reefs, there is an array of clever touches. In the African Hall, looped digital projections of elephants crossing the painted veld enliven the zebra diorama. Kids will also love the Wii interactive stations, and adult gear-heads will like the option of hearing audio tours over their cellphones or on their iPods.

Post-adventure sustenance can be had at the museum's two sustainable restaurants. Renowned chefs Loretta Keller and Charles Phan have partnered to create the casual Academy Café and the fancier Moss Room, with outdoor dining during and after museum hours.

Farrington likes to call the academy the "kingdom of wow." The wow-worthy Morrison Planetarium is an enormous all-digital facility. Its opening show, "Fragile Planet," has a surround-scope domed screen providing a 360-degree immersive experience, an astronaut's-eye view panning out from the museum roof to infinity and beyond. NASA satellite images of ocean hot spots and greenhouse gas concentrations pull back 6 million light-years to galaxies far, far away.