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Address redacted for portfolio

2000 words

## Underwater Attractions

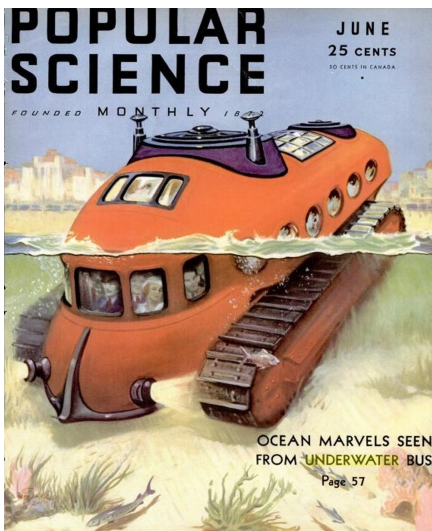
by

David Szondy

*I can imagine the foundations of nautical towns, clusters of submarine houses, which, like the Nautilus, would ascend every morning to breathe at the surface of the water, free towns, independent cities.*

**Jules Verne**

*20,000 Leagues Under the Sea (1870)*

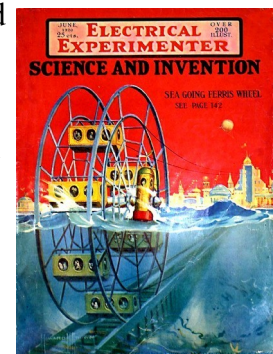


Some hotels give you spectacular views of the metropolitan skyline. Others boast breathtaking mountain vistas. Still others look out on the calming surf of a tropical beach. But how many hotels are there where you can pull open the curtains in the morning and a fish stares back at you?

There are more than you might think, because 2009 marks a new age in tourism when going on holiday can mean staying in a reverse aquarium with five-star service where the sea life look in and rain can't possibly ruin your day. It's the age of the undersea hotel.

At one time, “underwater attraction” meant a ground floor hotel room that flooded at high tide, but in the past forty years holiday makers have been able to make brief visits to the undersea world either by scuba diving or in those tourist submarines that advertise hour excursions to the local reef. Staying beyond that, however, with any degree of comfort has been much longer in coming.

It isn't for lack of trying. Great visionaries, engineers, and lunatics have long tried to come up with ways of turning the world under the sea into a recreational area. Back in 1932, for example, a French engineer had the idea of conducting tours of the sea bottom in a submersible bus running on electric tank treads. The slow, stately progress of the machine would allow the passengers to become completely engrossed with the wonders of the deep and, hopefully, take their minds off the long, skinny and incredibly vulnerable snorkel that was thing that stood between them and suffocation. This may sound crazy, but maybe not so much in the '30s when it would have seemed downright level-headed compared to the idea put forward and patented a few years previously by the science fiction pioneer Hugo Gernsback for an underwater Ferris wheel that was supposed to be dragged along on a submerged track by a cable like a horizontal yo-yo. Presumably, the passenger gondolas were solidly glassed in,



otherwise the experience of crashing down into the waves and out again would soon have given the ride the nickname of “the drowned rat”.

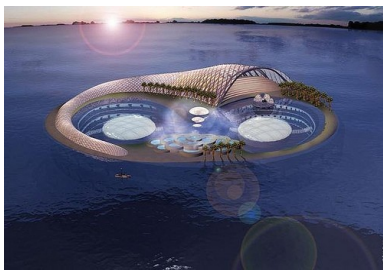
It wasn't until the 1960s that the idea of underwater tourism really began to capture the public's imagination. By then, the invention of scuba sets had opened to the public a world that has previously only been seen by sponge divers, sharks and Aquaman. It was when the major powers were engaged in a contest to colonise the oceans that was as serious as the race to the Moon between the United States and the Soviet Union. Before you could say “Jacques Cousteau” a dozen nations were building underwater habitats and laboratories all over the place and fleets of manned submersibles were built in such numbers that they swamped the market for decades. It was a time when anything seemed possible. Pundits confidently predicted that by the year 2000 sea farms would be able to feed the world a dozen times over while brightly lit cities under huge glass domes would spread across the sea bed connected by monorails running in giant acrylic tubes and supplied by submarine freighters and tankers. With this sort of future ahead, the General Motors Futurama underwater hotel model at the 1964 New York World's Fair seemed almost prosaic.

Sited at a depth of 10,000 feet and with the guest capacity of a the largest resorts, the Futurama hotel was a series of giant tear drops suspended into an undersea canyon with two-storey tall windows covering each tear drop to provide the guests with an unobstructed panoramic view of the local scenery—which would be fantastic if it wasn't as dark as a coal mine 10,000 feet down. But at least there was a fleet of “aquacoasters” to scoot around in.

Unfortunately, colonising the sea turned out to be far more difficult than was originally thought and the 70 sea habitats of thirty years previous had dwindled to two. Even though by the year 2000 we were mining the oceans, farming them, and performing all sorts of underwater work, it was still a place where people went for a day visit rather than a prolonged stay. The sea may be a place to go scuba diving or snorkelling or spend an hour in a tourist submarine, but definitely not for spending the weekend.

At least, not until now.

Today we're seeing a reverse of the '60s vision of underwater colonisation. Where the old idea was that we'd see undersea cities that would have hotels, 2009 sees underwater hotels that may one day have cities around them.



Not surprisingly, the most ambitious of these underwater hotels is being built in Dubai. Scheduled to open this year, the Hydropolis is a quantum leap in hotel design. That may seem like hype until you consider that the previous generation of underwater hotels consists solely of the Jules Lodge in Florida, which is an old science habitat built in the '70s that now serves as a four-person inn that must hold the record for the dampest lobby in history because the Jules Lodge is completely submerged and the only way for guests to get to their accommodations is by scuba diving. Room service can only be described as “heroic”.

The Hydropolis, on the other hand, is a £380 million development off Jumeirah Beach in Dubai is slightly larger—as in 220 £3384 per night suites in an underwater hotel complex with, as the developers

themselves like to say, “ten-star service”.

Hydropolis is designed in two parts. The first that the visitor's see is the wave-shaped “land station”, which acts as the departure point for the hotel itself. That departure may take some time, however, because the land station has quite a few distractions of its own. Aside from the usual restaurants and viewing platforms, conference facilities, a cinema showing films about the evolution of sea life and underwater architecture, a marine biological laboratory, and, in a way that doesn't quite fit with the nautical theme, a cosmetic surgery clinic. If you can get by all these distractions, the land station is also the portal for the cable-drawn train that runs silently underwater through a 1700 foot long transparent tunnel to the hotel proper.

Covering an area the size of London's Hyde park, "Hydropolis is not a project; it's a passion," according to designer Joachim Hauser. During the day, the hotel looks like a palm-strewn tropical atoll with a tented amphitheatre towering over one end. Fully lit at night, it has a closer resemblance to a gigantic jellyfish on its way to eat Tokyo. Sixty six feet below water are the suites, which are decorated in what might be called “early Star Trek” with all sorts of right angles and slabs making up the décor; but what really sets Hydropolis apart is the view. All of the suites have long windows like the portals on a futuristic starship that provide an unobstructed view of the sea that would make Captain Nemo green with envy. Even the bath enjoys this view, so guests will have to put up with the odd curious dolphin peering in while washing. Along with restaurants and bars, Hydropolis also boasts a ballroom and concert hall with retractable domes that rise above the surface, which is a good thing considering the “retractable” bit. Meanwhile, the kiddies can enjoy their own Children's Seaworld.

For that extra touch, the entire facility is protected by a state-of-the-art missile defence system, which is probably where the ten-star service comes in.



Hydropolis is the first in what is projected as a chain of nine underwater hotels, but isn't the only game in town. The Poseidon Hotel in Fiji isn't as elaborate as Hydropolis. Instead, it tries for a more intimate setting intending to capture the romantic atmosphere of the South Pacific—at least, as much as a high-tech underwater resort can. Designed by American submarine engineer Bruce Jones, the Poseidon consists of a chain of twenty suites built inside of acrylic pods attached to a central corridor at the end of which are a restaurant/bar and a service centre/submarine dock and all connected to a surface station by lifts. At a depth of 40 feet, the suites themselves are largely transparent, allowing guests to see overhead as well as around in a way that accentuates the question of who is watching whom. Also, each suite as a mechanism that periodically discharges food into the water to attract the local reef-dwelling wildlife.

If watching fish gets a bit dull, guests at the Poseidon can visit the specially constructed Poseidon Mystery Island. They also have at their disposal a Triton personal submarine and there's a larger 16-passenger luxury sub for tours further afield. Service is five-star with a night's stay costing \$1500, though you can rent the entire Mystery Island for \$3 million a week.

If all this seems a bit pricey, it is possible to enjoy underwater luxury at a more modest (“modest” being a relative term) price by visiting the Ithaa Restaurant at the Hilton Maldives Resort and Spa on Rangali Island. It's a resort famous for its suites set on stilts over the lagoon, so an underwater restaurant seems a logical extension of the theme. The Ithaa (which means “pearl”) is basically one of Poseidon's suite

Pods connecting the shore to its 15 foot depth by a slanted walkway and is billed as “exclusive dining”. That means it only seats 14 people at one time. Intimate it certainly is—and not only with other diners. Since stingrays that inhabit the coral reef have a habit of fluttering over the plastic shell.

With a set dinner price of \$250 per person, the Ithaa's menu boasts dishes like pan-fried Maldivian white fish and Char-grilled Wagyu beef, but it's probable that the seafood dishes are somewhat less than popular given the judgemental eyes on damper side of the plastic.

For those of a more educational frame of mind, Alexandria, Egypt proposes building the world's first underwater museum. In recent years, the part of the bay of Alexandria that was once the home to the Pharos Lighthouse (one of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World) and the Library of Alexandria before sinking into the sea due to earthquakes 1900 years ago has revealed thousands of archaeological artefacts including 26 sphinxes, statues, giant building blocks and Greek and Roman shipwrecks. All this is very exciting, but, unfortunately, the 2001 UNESCO convention for the preservation of underwater heritage requires that underwater artefacts be left where they are in order to help their preservation. To get around this, the Alexandria Museum has decided that if the artefacts can't come to the exhibit hall, then the exhibit hall must come to the artefacts. Now the plan is to build an underwater gallery that will allow visitors and walk out into the bay and see ancient Egyptian and Greek artefacts where they've lain for over two millennia. The only difference will be that the enclosing gallery will allow the museum caretakers to filter the silt out of the water so that visitors can actually see more than ten inches in front of themselves.

Hotels, restaurants, museums; these are all just the wading pool of undersea tourism. Today, you can go to sea resorts and hire underwater scooters complete with built-in breathing helmets and scuba gear. New breeds of superyachts are being built where if you don't have a minisub aboard, you're settling for second best. And minisub makers are replacing the old, plodding bubbles with sleek racers that skip through the waves like dolphins. It may not be long before the oceans will be so teeming with tourists that Captain Nemo will have to take up mountaineering to get a bit of solitude.