

Don't Get Too Comfortable

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The phrase “don't get too comfortable” comes across as having an unnecessarily foreboding tone, as though there is some form of impending doom on the horizon. Yet, this phrase is something that I have repeatedly returned to over the course of the past week while thinking about my first experience moving away from home.

I would tell my past self not to become too comfortable while in Florida. Not because something bad could happen, but because comfort can lead to a lack of appreciation over time. The drive to Clearwater Marine Aquarium (CMA) is beautiful, especially being from a state without oceans. In order to get to CMA, I would drive over a bridge that spans across the bay with a median made of palm trees. By the end of my internship, I realized that I was no longer glancing towards the bay or the palm trees while driving across the bridge, but instead focused simply on the road, like it was just another monotonous drive.

The same advice could be given for working in the Aquarium. During my first few weeks at CMA, I was sure to take time to visit the stingray touch tank on my way out. Eventually, though, I stopped spending a few extra minutes to see the cownose rays. As I walked past the Dolphin Complex, I no longer paused to watch our Atlantic bottlenose dolphins swimming in their habitat. Now, I am about to walk out of the Aquarium for the last time this summer and I wish that I had taken those few extra minutes everyday after work to say goodbye to our resident animals.

The first week or two at CMA was spent trying to learn the names of people, resident and rehab animals, and places. I immediately started a bucket list of the places that I wanted to visit over the course of the summer and sent it to a few of the people that I had met during the intern orientation. A few days into the internship, I asked some of my managers and the other employees about places that they would recommend I visit, adding each one to the list. I then made plans and expanded my circle of friends, all the while checking off the boxes of my bucket list.

I quickly realized the importance of maintaining contact with my friends at home - not constant contact, but the occasional phone call. In my free time, I would FaceTime my parents to catch up, eventually asking them to put my dog on the phone so that I could see him tilt his head in reaction to hearing my voice.

I started off the summer working in media and public relations. I learned to write press releases, give tours of the Aquarium to reporters and other VIPs, and answer questions about CMA. In order to be able to fully answer guests' questions, I went on both of CMA's boat tours and was able to feed the capybaras, which were visiting from Amazing Animals Inc. for a few months. These experiences were all so exciting, from seeing dolphins and stingrays to interacting with a baby capybara while it eats lettuce. I also had the opportunity to visit a few other attractions near Clearwater, such as the Florida Aquarium and Zoo Tampa, which provided me with insight into the marketing strategies of other attractions, not to mention being an extremely fun work day.

The middle of the summer was spent working in social media, during which I created social media posts and captions. One of my favorite parts of social media was being able to enter the Dolphin Complex to get video footage of the resident dolphins to use for Instagram reels and TikToks. I learned a lot about video editing and making infographics, so it was extremely rewarding to see my work go up on our social media pages.

At this point in the summer the sea turtle nests that span across the beaches of Clearwater began to hatch. For the first time on record Pinellas County had a leatherback sea turtle nest on one of the beaches, and I was fortunate enough to be there the night that it hatched. I had become friends with two of the sea turtle nesting interns and they were heading out to release a few turtles that had hatched around noon that day and therefore were taken to CMA for a check up. I was able to join them for the release with the intention of getting footage for social media that would be used later in the week. It was around 9:00 at night and, when we got to the beach, we saw that a crowd had formed around the nest. As we got closer, we realized that the leatherback nest was fully hatching. It was incredible to watch as the hatchlings made their way towards the water and disappeared under the waves.

The final month of my time at CMA was spent learning about graphic design. I had come into the internship relatively unfamiliar with Adobe Illustrator and was determined to leave the summer with a general understanding of the platform. Although I was completing projects at a much slower pace than I would have liked, I am proud of what I accomplished and feel that I achieved what I initially intended.

There are not many workplaces where you can see sea turtle hatchlings and epaulette sharks as you walk to your office. Over the course of my three months at CMA, I never failed to smile at the sight of these creatures, but I did stop considering how amazing it was to see them. I knew that I could see them later, or

tomorrow, or next week. Until suddenly I would be leaving in a week, and then yesterday I realized I was leaving tomorrow, and now I leave today.

So I would tell my past self to avoid completely settling into Clearwater. You will only be here for three months and should always appreciate the drive to and from work. Restrain yourself from becoming too comfortable. Go to the beach and embrace the feeling of being covered in sand and salt water. This guarantees that your Clearwater Bucket List will be completely checked off by the time that mid-August hits.