

Nights are brighter at SeaWorld Orlando with new AfterDark shows

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'Shamu Rocks,' which premiered last summer, is back for an AfterDark encore, and it's still a winner with the crowds. (SEAWORLD ORLANDO)

[SeaWorld](#) Orlando has this extended summertime hours thing figured out. Naturally, theme-park guests will linger longer and later when given good reason, so the SeaWorld AfterDark promotion offers up fresh reasons -- entertainment not available during the day.

Granted, you could ride Journey to Atlantis again and again until closing, but why not try offerings you can't see at high noon? In effect, they are exclusive material at no extra cost. The AfterDark features are included in regular admission to SeaWorld.

Completely new this summer is the Bayside Ski Jam, a mix of somewhat extreme sports and song-and-dance routines. It involves four singers and numerous water skiers, but the musical aspects may just be filler while the next trick sets up. Sometimes the theme is thin. Why are wakeboarders performing to "Black Cat"?

Still, it's fun to watch the watery acrobatics. One favorite -- an old standby -- is whenever the skiers glide right up onto shore. That's a kid-pleaser, too. A great feat is completed by a performer who climbs 70 feet to a perch on a pole, ring of fire blazing below. With a spotlight and all Bayside Stadium eyes upon him, he dives into the lake, followed by impressive skiing.

In between there's the forced musical merriment in the "Who's ready to party?" vein. Really, must the audience partake in a freaky-dance contest set to "Boogie Shoes"?

Although there's an after-dark emphasis, I recommend catching the earlier of the two Ski Jam sessions. The skiers look very small on the lake and are more difficult to see after sunset.

I'd really, really like to like the Bayside Ski Jam. The performances, both on land and sea, are fine and the view of the park from the Bayside Stadium at night is nice. But so far I'm going with a dissatisfying "mixed bag," although I'm not sure how I'd fix it. I hear there's been tweaking to the program, so results may vary.

Actually, a good first step would be to add comedy, something there's no shortage of across the park at "Sea Lions Tonite," a production that skewers sister attractions, from "Pets Ahoy" to Kraken. Kudos to SeaWorld for ribbing at its own expense, and doing it well. I snorted like a sea lion a few times.

The "Tonite" show is pretty ruthless, mocking SeaWorld's safety announcements, Shamu's patented splashes, the sex appeal of its trainers (with bleached hair and bleached teeth) and even the commercials of corporate parent [Anheuser-Busch](#). The Bud Light "real men of genius" campaign salutes "Mr. Otter Poop Picker-Upper."

This show is best for those in the know, for people who secretly smirk at the oh-so-earnest "Blue Horizons" show and its costuming. It's loaded with inside jokes and visual gags such as a sea lion doing an imitation of a frolicking dolphin.

Back for an AfterDark encore is the "Shamu Rocks" show, which debuted here last summer. It's still a winner, one that genuinely generates excitement in the stands. It's not exactly hard rockin', but the presence of an electric-guitar player gives an unusual edge to the production.

Last year, I felt there was one questionable bit of Shamu Rocks. Actually, a fellow spectator nearby had a question, too: "Are they dating?" The trainer and the whale did seem a little too intimate during a particular ballad. Somewhere along the way, that has been adjusted into a more playful monkey-see/monkey-do routine. The vibe is more like "a girl and her puppy," and it's way less icky.

Other AfterDark activities include the night-ending Mistify fireworks/prancing fountains show, and a slew of special dinner options. Plus there's a VIP Night Tour, which lasts five hours, grants front-of-line status to Kraken and Journey to Atlantis, reserves seats for two nighttime shows and includes dinner and a visit to the Brewmaster's Club for beer. It's an in-park, walking tour for \$75 plus regular park admission.