

Man and his machines wiped away, I was to learn on my last trip, every vestige of the old harbor at Baltimore. Somewhere in H. L. Mencken's writing, rich descriptions tell of handsome clippers once anchored in the bay, rocking in the wash of overloaded whalers in from the spoils of the sea to share the lanes of fishing boats bringing in the late catch of soft shell crabs so famous on those eastern shores.

Today, the harbor is the finished product of all the successful attractions of any tourist development at any coastal city. My interest was twofold; first, to see the city's famous aquarium. Next, to test if I had the stamina to withstand 44 school bus loads of children celebrating the last week of school on a field trip in a state of anarchy that'd make Attila the Hun's rampages seem like an episode from Little Bo Peep.

I was able to enter the aquarium by being on hand, ticketed and ready to go at the opening gate. In long strides, swinging my elbows to hold off an attack from the rear, I ascended to the featured rain forest exhibit on the fourth level before the raucous juvenile voices and the bubble gum breaths of 44 grades drove the birds and small mammals deep into the jungle. (I estimated the four rows of yellow buses parked 11 to the row equaled 44 loads of kids at 60 to the bus to be 2640 students plus approximately 132 school teachers and an unknown number of room mothers.)

Outside the rain forest, I paused in a dark hall at the glassed cage of an Amazon bushmaster and a couple of green vine snakes. The bushmaster languished up in the front of the glass; the two vine snakes draped over live branches held in reptilian trance.

Rapid fire the memory returned of walking in the Amazon jungle along that enormous river, scanning the muddy ground for a deadly bushmaster or a bone-crushing boa constrictor, but the deepest shock was to read the information card real slowly: "The green vine snakes ... are a venomous Amazon valley reptile ... having the unusual trait of having ... fangs in the ends of their tails!

I moved back in the dark hall. My friend Harry Pearson and I never stepped off the rusty riverboat the time we bought passage on the Amazon without looking under the gangplank for snakes and caimans. In the jungle, Harry led the way on the dense trails in knee-high rubber boots. I tailed along in 12-inch top Wellington boots that felt as low cut as a pair of ankle socks in the tall grass. But, we never thought of a vine snake whipping his tail from above to hook his deadly fangs in our cheeks.

I wouldn't know which direction to run from a snake with tail fangs. In the simulated rain forest, every time a parrot or a monkey moved, I watched to keep from backing into a flock of kids. On the way out, I skipped the snakes and avoided the eels.

The Little Italy neighborhood lies within walking distance of the Inner Harbor. Compared to the vigorous Italian neighborhood in Boston, Baltimore's district is a quiet few blocks of fine ethnic food. Lunch specials posted in front of the restaurants offered a number of courses high priced enough to melt the imprint on a Diner's Club card.

I took a window table to be sure to keep in touch with the reflection of the bulge over my belt line and the thin line of my right hip pocket. I decided 19 bucks worth of the house salad and a \$6 order of garlic bread should make a nice lunch. The waiter took his time. While I waited, the kitchen staff accepted delivery on a large order of take-out food from a Chinese restaurant. Seems at least they could have had the deliveryman come to the back door.

After lunch, I rode the water taxi across the harbor to Fells Point. Training on salad and bread, I knew not to exert myself and walk from the Italian district on a salad and bread training table. Immediately upon landing, however, I needed reserve strength. Fells Point turned out to be the hangout of the next generation older than the aquarium mob.

Fells Point is a historic district. The surrounding bay may well be the scene Mr. Mencken set so many years ago of clippers and whalers. It's a shame he didn't see the colorful tattooed and bejeweled crowd I waded through. Luck led me to a matinee performance of an excellent play. Secure in the theater, the sidewalk throngs were forgotten.

Late of evening, the sidewalks took on the music of a dozen troubadours using their hats to pay for the engagements. Baltimore keeps plenty of music at hand. I thought on the way back to my room, "Schoolteachers must need the whole summer vacation to recover from the last week of school."