

Mammoth Discovery!

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BIG MAMU: A mammoth model arrives at the museum. *Photograph by*

Felipe Buitrago

IT WAS a strange sight outside the Children's Discovery Museum on a showery Wednesday morning: the nearly 1-ton Colombian mammoth replica lying on its right side as workers attached its four 100-pound legs. Mamu, as she's affectionately called, had just completed her journey from Blue Rhino Studio in Minnesota. Once the legs were attached, a crane lifted her off her side and lowered her 15-foot body into place on the museum's north side. Dozens of kids inside—and some parents—pressed up against the windows to watch. Mamu will look after Lupe, the juvenile mammoth whose fossil remains are now displayed inside the museum.

Mamu is the final touch to the museum's new "Mammoth Discovery!" exhibit, which officially opens Saturday. But the story starts some 14,000 years ago when Lupe bit the dust next to what we now call the Guadalupe River. In 2005, area resident Roger Castillo was walking his dog near the airport when he spotted whitish bones poking out of the ground. Crews eventually unearthed parts of Lupe's skull, pelvis

and femur. Scientists then created a life-size replica of the young mammal, which now stands inside the museum next to more than 20 mammoth-themed exhibits, including the actual fossil remains.

The fossils didn't reveal the animal's sex, but Lupe's name was chosen not only for the river where she was found but also to inject some gender equality into the scientific dialogue. "Children tend to automatically refer to large animals as male," explained museum spokeswoman Autumn Young. "By calling her 'Lupe,' we hope to engage more girls in the scientific process."

While Mamu was being lowered into place, children inside were practicing their paleontology skills digging up faux-fossils in two sand pits. It might look like child's play, but the exhibits have been carefully designed to get kids to use critical thinking skills and learn basic scientific concepts. Steve Tornallyay, director of exhibits and facilities, said that the museum partnered with UC-Santa Cruz psychologists to test several exhibit prototypes to see if kids were picking up on the ideas being presented. Using video cameras and microphones, the researchers checked if kids were saying words like "teeth" or "mouth" while looking at sets of animal jaws. If the kids didn't pick up on the concept, the exhibit went back for redesign.

Overall, though, the mammoth exhibit is designed to get kids excited about the scientific discoveries waiting literally in their own backyards. After all, Lupe and her family probably wandered up and down along our own Highway 87.

As Mamu was bolted into place, one mother crouched next to her young son and pointed to the Guadalupe River just a few feet from where he stood. "You see those bones?" she said to him. "They found her at that river right over there."

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Opens June 11

Children's Discovery Museum, San Jose