

Swimming with Dolphins

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Every year I spend a week swimming with dolphins. Often it's in Hawaii, taking a boat to seek out pods of spinner dolphins, so named because when they jump out of the water they often spin around. Unlike their larger cousins, the bottlenose dolphins, spinners aren't very interested in humans and don't seek opportunities to interact with us, though I found that when I swim with an undulating dolphin-like motion, spinners approach me much more closely than when I flail about with my arms and legs the way most humans swim.

My most recent week was spent at a dolphin area near the city of Cancun, Mexico, called Dolphin Discovery. It's one of the oldest dolphinariums in the world, first set up in 1994.

A large sign on the side of the building proclaims: "Home of the World's Most Loved Dolphins." When you get to know the owners and staff of Dolphin Discovery, you realize that this is more than a slogan. They are passionate about dolphins and dolphin well-being. Their veterinarians check on the health of the dolphins every day. Each animal is fed its own customized diet, tailored to ensure its optimal health. The staff train other human beings to interact respectfully and safely with the dolphins.

On my previous visit, they had just rescued a wild dolphin who had become stranded on the rocks a few miles away. It was emaciated, riddled with parasites, starving, and so near death that it had not had the strength to avoid being swept onto the rocks. They painstakingly nursed it back to health before releasing it to the wild.

They repeat this whole intensive and expensive operation to nurture and save dolphins whenever they can. Their love of the animals shines through their behavior and their eyes. Louis, one of their trainers, said to me, "Dolphins are like people, only nicer."

My guide for the week was Helen, a tall, athletic, and articulate woman from the town of San Luis Potosí in central Mexico. Each day she made suggestions on how I might best approach and interact with the dolphins. "Try this, but don't

do that." "Avoid this, because it will overstimulate them." "Do what you did yesterday, and connect with them before introducing any new behavior."

Helen's affinity for the dolphins, her powers of observation, and her attunement to the animals were astounding. Under her guidance, I was able to bond with them much more quickly than would have been the case had I not had her expert tutoring.

Among the 33 dolphins currently at the facility are three males aged three to four years old. Nicknamed Edison, Gandalf, and Hermes, they were born at the facility. The owner has taken my energy healing workshop and this personal relationship provided me with the priceless opportunity to swim with the dolphins there.

The three "boys" are highly interactive. On my first day with them, the priority was just getting to know each other. I stood on a platform chest deep in the water and went into heart coherence. I ran energy through my hands. After swimming past me, over and over, to check me out, eventually Edison put his chin in my hand, and then swam away. Later that day Hermes did the same. By the next day, they were letting me stroke them on their backs or bellies as they swam slowly by.

I left the platform and, with goggles on, swam out into the lagoon. This allowed me to view the dolphins underwater. They seemed intensely curious about the strange behavior of this interesting new human and swam around me, examining my behavior from every angle.

Looking into the wise and inquisitive eyes of another sentient being, such as an elephant, dog, whale, or dolphin is a powerful experience. Feeling the sense of kinship between species is an experience people never forget. As I dove down to the bottom of the lagoon and swam around before coming up for air, the three sets of eyeballs studied me intently.

By the third day, Gandalf also decided to put his chin into my hand, while Edison had become an enthusiast for being touched. He would swim by me slowly as I stroked his back, and sometimes

he'd flip over exposing his pink belly to be rubbed and petted.

Hermes was more reticent, not going as far as flipping over but enjoying touch on his back. We spontaneously invented games in the lagoon. They would swim around me, looking at me intently, while I swiveled to maintain eye contact. Then they swam faster, taking the game to its limit. Eventually, the game ended when it was clear that I was beaten. They could circle me faster than I could turn.

Another game was played at the bottom of the lagoon, which was about 10 feet deep. I'd take a big gulp of air through my snorkel and swim down there, and they would try and swim under me before I got to the bottom.

The third game was a race. I put on short swim fins and swam along the side of the pen as fast as I could. They found this intensely interesting, because they had never seen fins before and they had no idea a human being could swim that fast. Of course, they were still much faster than I was.

Another game we played had me out of the water. I would run along the platform at the end of the pen as fast as I could, while they swam next to me, leaping high out of the water and playing. Then I'd stop abruptly and sprint in the opposite direction. They would immediately change direction and race me to the other end of the pen.

By the third day, I found myself becoming increasingly attached to the three dolphins. When they would see me arriving at the dolphin area, they could distinguish me from the other visitors from a hundred yards or meters away. They would start jumping high out of the water. They are so graceful that they can reenter the water without a splash, unless they want to; sometimes they'd do a big belly flop and splash me all over. When I got to the edge of their pen, they would click and chirp in their wonderful language, flippers held out of the water as I knelt down to touch their chins and stroke their backs. They were impatient for the play to begin.

When the end of my week approached, I couldn't bear to leave them. I extended my stay so that I could visit them for an extra day. When it came time to leave, I was sad. Helen and I were close to tears as we said goodbye. We had bonded more closely as human beings as a result of bonding with the dolphins. Time with the dolphins had made us better humans.

When I got home the next day, I missed the dolphins terribly. Around the time I would

normally have shown up at the dolphin area, I could feel them calling me energetically, even though I was now 3,000 miles away.

Keeping dolphins in captivity is controversial. Several activist groups are strongly opposed to the practice, insisting that dolphins should not be confined and are suffering prisoners in dolphinariums.

The truth is not quite so black and white. Studies have compared wild dolphin populations to those in captivity. They find that in well-run facilities like Dolphin Discovery, dolphins are much healthier than those in the wild. They have lower levels of stress hormones, fewer parasites, high quality veterinary care, improved immune function, and better diets. As a result, they are healthier and live longer than their cousins in the wild.

Nonetheless, there are ethical questions around human confinement of intelligent species. Should we be confining horses in corrals and then riding them for our own pleasure? Should we be keeping dogs confined in our backyards rather than letting them run wild in nature?

Dolphins, horses, and dogs can't tell us in human language what their preferences are. Perhaps they'd like to take their chances in the wild, and perhaps they would not.

Dolphins are certainly highly interactive and actively seek out human contact. Edison, Hermes, and Gandalf have known no life outside the dolphinarium and became as bonded to me as I was to them. They became excited the moment I appeared and clearly enjoyed our time playing together. They didn't want it to end and would cluster around me when I moved toward the stairs to get out of the water.

Contact with other sentient species makes us more human. It reminds us that nature's intelligence is not the exclusive domain of human beings. Most of us have looked into the eyes of a cat, dog, or another pet and felt a kinship there. Studies show that pets confer health and longevity benefits to humans. Connecting with aquatic species like whales and dolphins can be even more profound because of the gulf that normally separates us.

All species are invested in the survival of life on earth. But we human beings are in a unique position. Our collective actions determine whether or not life continues for many other species. This is a profound responsibility and interspecies contact like dolphin swims is a powerful way to remind us of our responsibility for the stewardship of the planet.