



# DAY WITH THE DOLPHIN

*Getting up close and personal with the dolphins of Sea World*

by Deborah Markus

“**T**eam two, let’s go,” our lead trainer said, and the four of us followed him to the edge of the shallow pool. Entering the water in a wetsuit that felt like a full set of clothes, including shoes, was more difficult than I remembered from the last time I’d been here, but the sudden wet cold was just the same. That sunshine that had been beating down with uncomfortable persistence might as well have packed its bags and moved to Florida for all the good it was doing me now that I was waist-deep in salt water. The low temperature was maintained for the comfort of the dolphins who lived and played here, not the people whose pleasure it was to join them.

“Okay,” our trainer said when we were all standing on the wide ledge and had stopped squawking about our discomfort. He was very young, and had only been at

his job a few months — not long enough to quench any of the enthusiasm that had originally brought him into the field, in spite of the drudge work, the cleaning and feeding, and the cold, cold water. He was, after all, living the dream. His eyes and voice were filled with first-day excitement as he called to the other trainers, “We’re ready. Bring them in.”

“Oh, my goodness,” murmured the nice British lady next to me as the water rippled with new presences. She sounded delighted and not a little nervous, which I could understand completely. Dolphins at a distance look small and sleek. I knew from the brief informational class we had taken before being brought to the pool that the dolphins we would see were almost twice as long as I was and weighed easily three times as much, just as I already knew that

in spite of being mammals every bit as much as humans are, dolphins are at home in the water in a way the finest human swimmer can never dream of; they breathe air to live, but water is their element.

Knowing all this and experiencing it were turning out to be two different things. As “our” dolphin approached, I realized how ridiculous human pretensions to across-the-board superiority were. All of us, trainers and tourists alike, were here not as a dominant species but as graciously accepted, perhaps amusing, guests. Just as a family who imagines it owns a dog is in fact merely part of the pack, so were we, for the moment, the smallest and most fragile members of a dolphin pod.

**W**hen sharing the news that I was going to swim with dolphins, the



most common response I got (other than “You’re kidding, right?” and “Aren’t you bringing *me*?”) was, “Which beach do you go to to do that?” Which is admittedly a neat idea — just throw on your suit, pop over to Point Hueneme or wherever, and hang with the bottlenoses. And in fact I’ve often seen dolphins on their way to or from warmer waters, stopping to frolic for a day close to the shore near my home. Circumstances have prevented me from jumping in and joining them, as I always long to, and it was only very recently that I learned that circumstances have in fact been very kind to me, because as easy as that I would have been breaking a federal law.

I thought that was pretty ghastly the first time I heard it. In fact, I was morally indignant. Next, I supposed, I was going to hear that it was illegal to go mountain climbing, or look at the stars, or kiss my baby good night. How can we be forcibly compelled to keep our distance from winning charm and breathtaking beauty?

Dolphins are easily the most irresistible animals on the planet — right up there with horses when it comes to engaging

adolescent affections — prompting the occasional lifelong passion. The idea of being admitted into their company even briefly is such a magical one it caught the early Greeks themselves, who passed along so much of their culture to us and who weren’t exactly known for being easily impressed by unretouched nature. They told of winged horses and nine-headed snakes and lions with serpents for tails and goat’s heads erupting from their backs, yet when it came to naming their most sacred temple, they turned to the elegant, fusiform animals that populated the oceans surrounding their island home. The oracles of Apollo lived and labored in Delphi, named for the form the god chose when appearing to those he selected as his first priests.

Dolphins swim through less sacred stories as well. They rescued Arion, a musician second only to Orpheus, and let him ride one of their number safely home when he would have drowned. And Dionysus transformed some sailors into dolphins with which they had attempted to kidnap him, not knowing his divine state. Their

fate is described as a punishment for their evil deed, but anyone who has seen a dolphin’s smile knows that the god was feeling merciful that day.

**H**uman love of dolphins is almost as mystical now as it was those thousands of years ago. Because they have grace, we grant dolphins intelligence, language, even telepathic powers. We treat them almost as kin, and feel a threat to them as sharply as we would the chance of harm to a child. Show of hands, please: How many out there know or care that sharks are endangered by humans far more often than the other way around. Now, how many of you stopped eating tuna in the nineties until it became “dolphin-safe”?

As it happens, the American law against swimming with dolphins is in keeping with that very same protective urge. Dolphins, for all I know, may be as intelligent as New Ager have posited, but humans are, as all existing evidence bears up, incredibly stupid. People may long to swim with dolphins in their natural habitat for reasons romantic and lovely, but once they (the



humans) get into the water, they often act like what they are, which is well-intentioned idiots.

For example, though dolphins swim in oceans full of food perfectly suited to them, people have been known to be foolish enough to try and feed one of these divine creatures a sandwich. Really. And I mean the sandwich part quite literally, by the way. And even when humans do bother to pass along appropriate marine fare instead of candy, chips, and other picnic items, they can make dolphins ill with fish that isn't fresh enough. And even when the fish *is*, by some miracle, healthy for the dolphins, hand feeding teaches them bad habits. Dolphins fed by humans can learn to steal fish off human lines, which might sound cute if it weren't for the fact that those fish were caught by hooks, which the dolphins may end up with in their bellies.

Dolphins can also learn laziness from being fed by humans. Being laid-back sounds somehow more benign than breaking one of the Ten Commandments, but is in fact potentially far more harmful — both to the animals and to people. First, lazy dolphins become less able and willing to search for food themselves when fed with

anything like regularity by humans. Then the next generation pays a price. Almost three-quarters of the offspring of dolphins fed in the wild have died, and those who survive don't have terrific prospects, except as malnutrition casualties or shark dinners. And as with lazy humans, lazy dolphins may become prey to more serious temptations.

Dolphins who are fed by humans come to see people as meal tickets, and can get quite aggressive when they don't receive what they see as their due. And if you don't think dolphins can be much of a threat to human swimmers, you didn't read those vital statistics I mentioned earlier, and haven't seen the beautiful, sharp, ziplocking teeth they hide behind their smiles. Trust me, you don't want to mess with a cranky dolphin.

So much for the dream of sharing the sea. But the wonderful thing about dreams is that, if enough people have the same one, someone will see an opportunity to make a lot of money by figuring out a way to fulfill it. I do not, by the way, wish to imply (and I'm serious here) that the good people of SeaWorld San Diego, where I bathed (it wasn't exactly swimming) with dolphins,

are only or even primarily interested in the filthy lucre aspect of things. They seem genuinely sincere in their wish to educate as well as entertain the public. Every trainer, docent, souvenir stand clerk, and phone operator was kind, helpful, and seemed genuinely in love with his or her job.

**B**ut I was talking about dreams. Mine came true a few years ago, and again this very summer, when special, reservations-only, wear-a-swimsuit-and-no-jewelry-and-the-wetsuit- we - will - happily - provide-provided-you-tell-us-your-height-and-weight-and - we - mean - your - *real* - height-and-weight-and-don't - blame- us-if - the - damned - thing - doesn't - fit - because-you-somehow-magically - gained - forty-seven-pounds-right-after-talking-to-us, hundred-and-twenty-dollar tickets fell into my lap and I was able to spend just under half an hour in a shallow pool with real live dolphins.

I was disappointed, the first time I went, that I was required to first spend a half hour or so listening to a brief lecture about dolphin physiology, training, and husbandry (which sounded rather naughty to me). I was a little like someone who claims to be in love but can't be bothered with that whole getting-to-know-you period and wants to skip enthusiastically to the main event. Anyway, I knew about dolphins. They had a nose at one end and a tail at the other, and I just wanted to be in there hugging one. At the same time, I was so keyed up with nerves that it was something of a relief to have a little quiet simmering-down period.

The talk turned out to be quite lively, and felt if anything too short. There were a few particulars of dolphin anatomy that took me by surprise, such as the fact that all those wonderful chirps and eh-eh-eh-eh noises, as well as the unique signature whistle with which a dolphin can identify itself to others almost from birth, come not from their mouths but from their blowholes. As it happens, there is no direct connection between a dolphin's lungs and his throat. Anything he opens wide for goes right into his stomach. Which is why it was a mistake for me to refer to rostrums earlier as noses. They breathe with their blowholes and they have, so far as scientists can tell, no sense of smell at all.

I knew already that dolphins use echolocation, just as bats do — you know, bouncing high-frequency sound waves off the stuff around them to get a kind of sound-

picture of their watery world. But I didn't know that the clicking sounds they use emanate from a region just inside their foreheads poetically called the *melon*. Or that older, more savvy dolphins can sometimes perfect this superpower to the point of being able to figure out not merely that there's something over there, but that it is in fact a fish, and even what kind of fish — a preferred snack, or just another herring.

We also learned more basic anatomy — flukes and flippers and something called a *peduncle* (long e) that none of the trainers could talk about without giggling. More interesting, though, was when the talk

me — well, it would get pretty old pretty quick.” Dolphins are smart enough to get bored, especially in a controlled environment where it isn't necessary to forage for food or otherwise struggle for survival, so trainers have learned to be creative gift givers.

“One dolphin I work with a lot could care less about the fish,” another trainer told me. “She knows she's going to get fed, after all. So when she's done something right, she kind of cozies up to me for a rub-down. She just loves having a massage.”

Don't we all. But he went on to make the point that every dolphin has its own per-

But a trainer can't stop right in the middle of a show and give a dolphin a full-body massage, or spritz him with the hose, or even goof off with some other trainers at the side of the pool in full view of the dolphins, which is apparently a treat in some delphinean circles. And when the dolphin is first learning what's desirable behavior (and what's undesirable, which is pretty important when you're in the water with a creature who's bigger than you are and has a hell of a lot more teeth), you don't want any delay between act and reaction. That's where those keen little whistles the trainers wear around their necks come in handy. A

toot on one of these is a bridge signal — that is, it bridges the gap between performance and reward. In time, it can become a reinforcer in and of itself.

All of this is of course assuming a great amount of goodwill and proficiency on both sides. Naturally there are going to be times — while the dolphin is young and inexperienced, for instance, or if he's momentarily confused or just not digging the program — when a trainer gives a signal that is ignored or disobeyed.

“So then what do we do?” the trainer at my second session, who was so young and excited about her job that I felt haggard and bored in comparison, asked mischievously. “Do we spank them? Smack them on the head and tell them to cut it out or else?”

We all half giggled, half cringed. “Of course not,” she said. “And do you know why?”

Why?

“Because we're nice,” she said. “And because we have to get into the pool with these guys, and we really, really don't want them to not like us. Because this is their element, and frankly, if it came right down to it, they could give us a much harder time than we could ever give them.”

Which I found reassuring, actually. If goodwill runs out, it's nice to know you can fall back on just plain pragmatism to achieve the same effect.

So, what *do* you do with unruly dolphins?

“All we can do, if they do something we don't like, is try like mad not to reinforce it,” the trainer explained. “And since we



turned to training. The process sounded far more mutual than I'd expected. All those breathtaking jumps and leaps, all the splashing and super-quick spurts of swimming are natural behavior for dolphins, and so a trainer's job is to teach not so much *what* as *where* and *when*.

Dolphins are never punished for not doing what's asked of them. Instead, they're given loads of positive reinforcers when they perform as the trainers wish. Food is a frequent reward, but by no means the only one.

“I mean, look,” the trainer at my second session explained. “I love pizza, but if that was the only nice thing anybody ever gave

sonality, and a trainer has to be sensitive to what one dolphin adores and what will leave another cold. The trainer can also help a dolphin with an acquired taste. A young dolphin, for instance, who is used to fish and a “good boy!” when he makes that perfect leap may not be thrilled at being given something to play with instead. So the toy can be given along with the food and gain a certain positive association, until the dolphin thinks that having a ball is actually pretty nifty all by itself. Which led me, since I was taking mental notes at this point, to wonder if there's any dolphin equivalent of tugging at Mommy's hand and whining, “I want that, can I have that? Can I? Can I? Can I can I can I?”

never know what's going to be a reinforcer, we just have to basically not do anything. Just stand there and not say anything or do anything" — she demonstrated — "for three seconds. Be calm and motionless and don't react at all. Then it's like we've hit the reset button, and we start all over again like nothing happened. Works much better than getting mad, for everybody. I mean, we all just want to have fun, right?" She clapped her hands once, briskly. "Speaking of which — let's get wet!"

We all tromped down to the locker rooms, where I was obscurely touched to find a wetsuit with my very own name on it waiting for me. I'd paid for it and all, and it wasn't for forever, but still.

The hardest part of suiting up wasn't squeezing into something that has to be both bulky and skin-tight in order to do its job, or even doing so on a slippery floor in front of several other bathing-suit clad strugglers. It was taking off my wedding and engagement rings. If it had been one of those we-won't-be-responsible-if-you-lose-this-in-the-pool deals, or if the trainers had been the ones at risk, I would have said too damned bad. But I thought of that trusting pearly-gray skin waiting for my touch, and gritted my teeth and put my rings into the locker, safe in the pocket of my jeans. (Much too late to do me any good, I realized I could have simply hung the gold loops on the same cord as my locker key and worn them hippie-style around my neck under my wetsuit, where I'd risk scratching only myself. Next time.)

The locker room was a strange social situation. I've changed in and out of my swimsuit in front of strangers and semi-strangers at the gym, but this was different, and not just for me. Maybe because, unlike at the gym, we were all headed to the same place, or maybe because we were all rather jumpy and jittery exactly because of where we were headed; at any rate, not one woman there, young or old, was willing to uncover an inch she wouldn't want her least favorite grandmother to see. There were only a few changing stalls, so while we waited for privacy, we chatted, like Chaucer's pilgrims, about what had brought us there.

"We didn't even know we were going to do this," a girl of perhaps twelve said, while her companion nodded vigorous agreement. "We pulled into the parking lot, and all of a sudden our mom and dad give us these, like, papers and tickets and stuff."

"You better read these," our dad says," the other girl chimed in. "And you'd better do everything they tell you to —"

"— and you'd *better have fun!*," the first sister finished, and they both started giggling hysterically. At the idea that they could do anything else, I suppose.

Eventually, in a great deal more time than it takes to write about it, we were all suited up and ready to hit the pool. By now I was fairly humming with impatience. This was like having to eat cake and play games and say hello and goodbye to everyone before I could open my birthday presents. I wanted dolphins, damn it, and instead here I was standing around feeling like a polar bear on the veldt — hot, heavy, and just plain not where I ought to be — while we waited for the trainers *in* the pool to give the okay to the ones waiting with us. You'd think they could have worked it all out with the dolphins or the dead fish or whatever while we were in there squelching into those weird little booties they give you with the suits, but apparently these things take time.

We'd been divided into four groups of four. My group included a father and his teenage daughter, the latter of whom had apparently taken charge of the family supply of enthusiasm, and the lady who'd sat next to me in class. Her accent was pure Rule Britannia but she lived, she said, in Ohio or Oklahoma — or one of those O places — somewhere in the Midwest. She was here with her family, fulfilling a cherished dream while her husband and children ate cotton candy and looked at the penguins.

"I'm sure you're all wondering why we're keeping you out here in the hot sun for so long," our trainer finally said, interrupting the rebellious murmurs that had begun to break out here and there. He was deeply tanned, and looked almost too thin to be in the kind of phenomenally good shape his job required. (The test for becoming a trainer includes swimming the length of that big-old show tank underwater — generally only in a swimsuit, as wearing a wetsuit to this exam is thought on the part of the other would-be trainers to show a lamentable lack of spunk — then jumping out of the water and doing push-ups, then speaking clearly into a microphone. I had to go lie down just hearing about it.) "We have a really good reason for this," he went on. "It's so that when we finally get you into the pool, the water feels extra, extra cold."

We all laughed dutifully, and then, final-

ly, were led to the tank. It was large enough to hold us and the dolphins comfortably, and not so big as to be overwhelming. Spectators were kept well back, but could easily watch the goings-on. I spotted my husband and son and waved, but couldn't watch for their reply. Here was the tank, and I was stepping in.

We all got through our gasping and shuddering, and then four dolphins were guided out — one for each group, trading off at intervals so we could get acquainted with several individuals.

The skin of a bottlenose dolphin is like the platonic ideal of marble. Those luscious swirls — gray on the top half of its body, white beneath, fine hunting camouflage in an oceanic environment — look like something straight out of Michelangelo's studio. As does the dolphin itself, except that no statue, even one by the master himself, could possibly express the joyful energy that is a dolphin's birthright.

There is some debate over whether dolphins sleep. It's questionable because they have to keep swimming to the surface to breathe. I'm on the side of those who say that they doze only in part, half a brain at a time. I can't imagine shutting down that wild curious strength altogether any more than I can believe a hurricane can doze.

I was dolphin dazzled. There's just no other way of putting it. When our dolphin approached, close enough to touch, I thought I'd do anything for it. I'd marry it. I'd freeze to death in the cold in which it had evolved to perfection. I felt like I had when I'd just given birth — that I could just hold and admire this creature for a couple of years easy and never feel I'd wasted a moment of my time.

My state of idiot infatuation led to the one let down of the Dolphin Interaction Program for me — the fun and games part of it. I really didn't care about waving my hand and having a dolphin do a trick in response, as we all were instructed to do, as a group and then singly. I was only allowed to hug (and kiss, but that was my own idea) a dolphin when the official SeaWorld photographers were ready to record the event for posterity and souvenir purchases. I wanted to bond with dolphins, and instead I felt at times more touristy than ever.

But nothing could cast much of a shadow over that precious twenty-odd minutes in the pool. I got, after decades of guessing at it, to find out how a dolphin's skin really feels. (A wet inner tube is a good



approximation.) I snuck in all the caresses I could, and shrieked every time a bottlenose “talked” to me. I saw up close the tiny, mischievous-looking eyes, the almost invisible ears (streamlining is all in this environment) and the rows of perfect, cone-shaped teeth. (Ironically, with all those gorgeous chompers at their disposal, dolphins don’t chew their food, which is why it’s a nice favor if you can feed them their fish headfirst so the scales don’t scrape their throats.) Proximity alone guaranteed a certain magic, but there were also unexpected sparkles, such as when the trainer handed me a tall plastic cup and told me to pour water from it into a dolphin’s mouth as a reward/reinforcer.

“Splash a little over your hand first,” he directed. I did so. It was warm, almost hot, and I shivered gratefully. “See how good that feels on your fingers? That’s just how it is for them when you pour it on their tongues.”

Simple but fascinating. All the trainers had a fund of new, non-intuitive information, and they didn’t keep it to themselves. All were willing, even eager, to go beyond set patten and routines and share the quirks and nuances of the job and the creatures they were lucky enough to work with. Not one of them didn’t think he or she had the coolest career on the planet, and not one could talk about dolphins for five minutes without naming names and relating anecdotes. This wasn’t just some generic species for them, however beautiful. Each dolphin was an individual, a personality.

And not always a sweet adorable one. I was surprised by the long score marks I saw on my first dolphin. “What happened?” I asked.

“Oh, she’s always having run-ins with the dominant female,” the trainer said off-handedly.

“Run-ins?”

“You know.” He chomped the air demonstratively.

“You mean they *bite* each other?”

“Oh, sure. Well, it’s not like they have hands. They have to do *something* to tell each other what they like and don’t like.” Sometimes they also use their teeth in affection or as part of courtship, the trainer hastened to assure me. But the mere fact of a hierarchy among dolphins was a trifle unnerving. As was the idea of their being coolly aware that those sharp teeth made perfectly good weapons, and not just against fish or predators.

Most of the dolphins we met were Atlantic bottlenoses, but one little charmer named Bullet was a common dolphin. He was much smaller than the others, though full-grown, and very quick. At the trainer’s urging, he swam several dizzying circles around our group, tight and fast, until between trying to watch him in action and feeling as if we were in the middle of a whirlpool we had a hard time staying on our feet. The trainer laughed as we swayed. Well, it didn’t matter if *he* fell off, after all. This was his element almost as much as it was the dolphins’. I didn’t know how deep the tank was past our ledge, but somehow the idea of slipping wasn’t too troubling even for a nonswimmer like me. I bet Bullet would have given me a ride back, or at least a push.

“Last chance to pet!” our trainer said as Bullet slowed to a halt in front of us, and we all, one at a time, gave that strong, smooth skin a rubbing. I touched his flippers fondly. They had once been hands, far, far back on the ancestral tree — the bones were still there under muscle and skin to prove it, even if the shape was long gone. When, earlier, I had held those of a bottlenose in a sort of water dance, I thought I could feel them tighten and flex, as if straining to grasp back. The Greeks weren’t so far off the mark when they imagined that dolphins had once been people, or people dolphins. We are not so very unrelated, after all.

Much, much too soon, the dolphins were ushered into another tank, and we were left alone with only our human selves for company.

“What was the best part?” a friend asked me later, and I answered, of course, “All of it.” But maybe the finest moment wasn’t even mine. It was when one of the trainers said to another, regarding a dolphin, “She’s been really good. You’d better get in there and swim with her for a while.” Because getting to play with people is a prime reward for a dolphin, right up there with a choice piece of squid or a nice warm glass of water. It was good to know that the pleasure didn’t all run one way. ~

