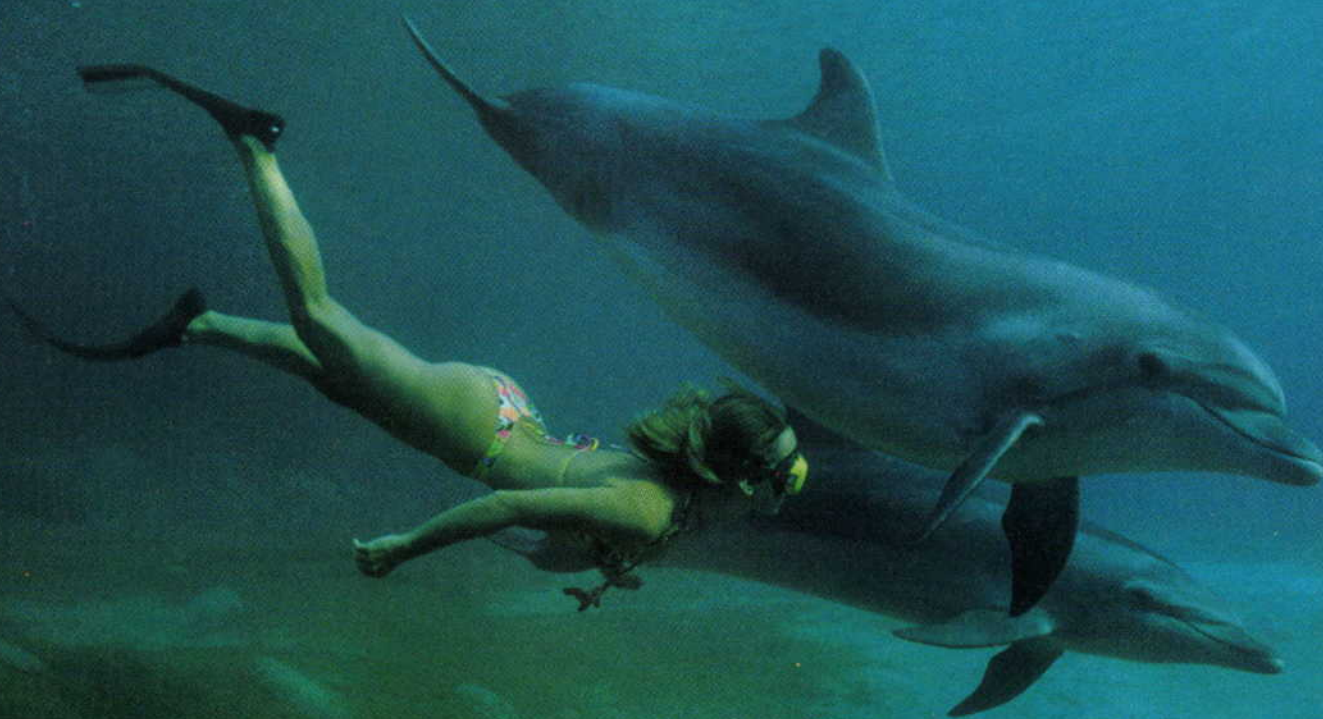


Dancing with dolphins



**WE FASCINATE
EACH OTHER,
IT SEEMS - AND
THAT'S PART
OF THE MAGIC**

It's a fool's romance, I know – periodic escapism for an adult saddled with too many responsibilities. I don't care. Whenever and wherever possible, I run away from home to swim with dolphins. Part of it is the pleasure of pure play. But more than anything, it's because I am hopelessly besotted by the

unabashed, natural charm of dolphin personality.

I'm far from alone; dolphins trigger in humans a peculiar, raging anthropomorphism. Their ability to use sound-wave “echolocation” to talk with each other and to “see” inside objects fascinates us. Their curiosity and playfulness

raise speculation, even among scientists, that they possess some level of conscious, thinking intelligence.

And dolphins, it seems, are almost as interested in us. Stories as far back as early Greece recount episodes where dolphins saved humans from drowning or spent time with people. Documented lone dolphins have shown up off the coasts of England, Australia, New Zealand, Africa and in the Bahamas. They've visited the same places regularly, sometimes for years. No one knows why they're alone, why they gravitate to people or why they eventually stop coming.

These days, dolphin encounters are packaged and sold. Along coastlines in the Pacific and Atlantic Oceans, the Caribbean, the North Sea and in the Mediterranean, sailing tours promise possible wild dolphin encounters. There are penned dolphin encounters, too – regimented swims with captive dolphins, where the joy of meeting the creatures is tainted with the shameful knowledge that they are prisoners.

New Agers believe that dolphins are



beyond sentience, that they live on a higher plane and possess mystical powers to mend troubled minds or hurt bodies. I don't know about arcane metaphysical powers, but I do know there's some kind of magic in my annual dances with a dolphin or two. And I know exactly when the magic began. It was the moment I met Herbie...

HARBOUR ISLAND, BAHAMAS

Incidental encounters with wild dolphins cannot be planned. You can improve your odds by joining a sailing trip that follows pods of wild dolphins, or you can get lucky.

I got lucky 15 years ago, on tiny Harbour Island in the Bahamas. There were a half-dozen small resorts there; you could walk every inch of sand road in the village in a morning, stopping to admire bougainvillea or hibiscus clumps or to chuckle at the antics of goats tied up in the yards of gabled, porched cottages.

As it turned out, the sweet, slow pace of the place was not its sole

THE MAGIC OF A SNORKEL-TO-FACE ENCOUNTER WITH A SMILING DOLPHIN

advantage for a frazzled journalist chasing some precious solitude. An amiable bottlenose dolphin had decided to hang out in the sheltered cove off Valentine's Yacht Club. Diveshop staff dubbed him Herbie. He usually caught up to the club's diveboat returning from its regular afternoon diving expedition and followed it into harbour, looking for a recreational romp.

Snorkelling in the cove one afternoon, watching fish swarm around bits of coral on the sand below, I turned lazily in the water and came abruptly snorkel-to-face with him. He tilted his head, issued what I later learned was an exploratory burst of sonar that vaguely tingled my bones but my ears couldn't hear, and then gazed at me expectantly. I screamed – a startled yowl of pure joy. I thought his frozen dolphin smile widened for a second before he abruptly up-ended in the

water and flapped his tail flukes at me. Frantically stuffing snorkel back into gaping mouth, I dove after him. We played together – chasing, dipping and diving – until the boatload of divers tumbled into the water to join us.

After that, I waited daily, snorkel gear in hand, to meet the boat and its cetacean companion. I came home permanently smitten. After a few more seasons at Valentine's dock, Herbie disappeared. I firmly believe he's visiting other island harbours somewhere, and that we may encounter each other again someday.

Meanwhile, I confess, I have been seeing other dolphins.

ISLA MUJERES, MEXICO

Weeks afterward, I still felt a slight, sweet ache in the sole of my left foot where Racquel had pressed her snout, perfectly synchronized with Danielle, at my right foot, the pair propelling me forward in the water while I balanced precariously upright, arms outstretched.

Racquel and Danielle were two of a half-dozen dolphins living in one of three commercial, open-water dolphinariums operated by Dolphin Discovery along the Mexican Riviera. Their pens are patches of ocean surrounded by underwater wide-mesh fences. I have been angered by dolphinariums where the water is murky and dirty. I have torn my heart seeing dolphins in cramped concrete pools that cause "hearing" loss when the dolphins' echolocation bounces back too hard at them. Some say those places drive dolphins mad.

But open-ocean pens are kinder environments. Dolphins there seem contented. So I willingly paid around \$175 for a one-hour encounter, half of it spent watching a video about how to interact with dolphins. Don't pet them like dogs, the recorded announcer's voice cautioned; they hate that.

Then came the half-hour romp with two bottlenose dolphins and a handful of other tourists. Bobbing like clumsy corks in supplied life vests, we went through trained "behaviours" with Racquel and Danielle. The two bottlenose dolphins pulled or pushed us through the water, leapt over bars we held up for them, jumped over our heads and finally swam around among the excited humans during the 15-minute "free swim."

The intense emotional flare I had felt on first sight of Herbie was not there,

but the magic remained – cool currents of pleasure laced with excitement when I was lucky enough to make eye contact with Racquel or Danielle or to stroke a sleek, hard-muscled flank that felt like cold wet velvet under my palm.

The pleasure was marred by guilt. I could leave the pen; Racquel and Danielle could not. The sweet ache in the sole of my foot eventually faded. The heartache did not.

DOLPHIN REEF EILAT, ISRAEL

There is one place I know where you can grab a guaranteed handful of the pure joy of swimming with wild dolphins, knowing they're coming of their own free will, as Herbie did, to see people. It's a dolphin centre called Dolphin Reef, located at the very northern tip of the Red Sea, in the Israeli resort city of Eilat. Eilat is home to 11 dolphins,



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four originally brought from the Black Sea and seven born at the centre. Happy dolphins have babies; ergo, these must be happy dolphins because they have formed a “pod” – a cetacean extended family. They are not penned; they live in a mesh-fenced area of the lagoon by choice.

Wide underwater gates, always open, enable them to return to the ocean whenever they want, to hunt for food or to play. They decide how much contact

they want with guided groups of snorkellers or divers, showing up for “interaction sessions” when they feel like it – and they usually do, because, by all accounts, they enjoy the contact.

The reef hosts a research facility studying dolphin behaviour and communication, using observational and non-invasive procedures. “No experiments which could possibly harm or harass the animals are carried out here,” says a researchers’ informa-

tion handout. Dolphin-dancing without guilt. Perfect. I want to swim with the Eilat dolphins one day. I want to play again with a wild dolphin who chooses to play with me. But if you’re out there, Herbie, I’ll always love you most. You were my first. ■

Winnipeg-based writer and journalist Judy Waytiuk abandons her keyboard and runs away to the Caribbean for a few weeks every year – just long enough, she says, to store enough warmth in her bones to see her through the remainder of the Prairie winter.