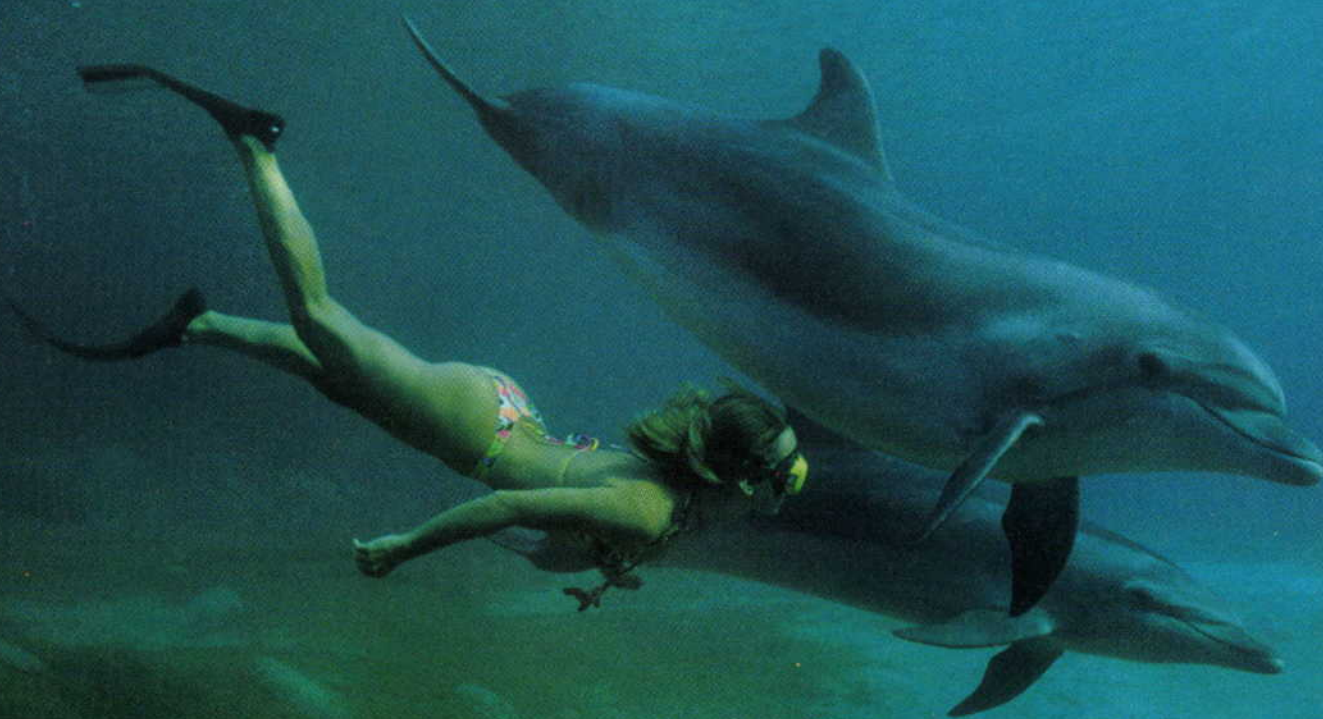


Dancing with dolphins



**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

