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EL DIA DEL DELFIN

A Mother and Daughter Share a Dolphin Encounter in Ixtapa, Mexico*

By E.R. Nathe & Kelly McGonigle



Years ago I traveled to Zihuatanejo with my younger sister to visit my father, an aging hippie who'd decided to "get off the grid" by relocating to a then-remote part of Mexico. There wasn't much there in those days: no high-rise hotels, no Carlos n' Charlie's, and certainly no Delfiniti - where you can climb into an over-sized pool and have a face-to-face encounter with those perennially-smiling aquatic mammals known in Mexico as "delfines."

Flash forward a quarter-century and I'm back in Zihuatanejo, only this time with my daughter, Kelly. For the most part, we're interested in the same things; which is why she makes such a great travel companion. Except when it comes to animal encounters in the water. This is, after all, the same child who refused to learn how to waterski at the Colorado River when she was ten because she was afraid she'd be eaten by catfish. So imagine my hesitation when the concierge at Club Med Ixtapa suggested we try swimming with dolphins.

It's said that understanding breeds admiration. I know I was hoping that would be the case with Kelly, but I still harbored some trepidation as I signed us up for the Dolphin Encounter. Upon our arrival at Delfiniti, I watched as she tumbled over in her mind exactly how she was going to tackle her fear of getting into a big tank of water with creatures who swim. But as you'll discover, she 'took the plunge' (literally and figuratively) and as a result gained some new insights into what it feels like to interact with one of the animal kingdom's most intelligent beings...

You know that feeling you get when you're headed up the incline of what feels like

the world's highest/scariest/steepest roller coaster? That "I'm so excited, but at the same time I'm so scared" feeling? (*Sunglass off my head? Check. Strap and harness as tight as it can be? Check. Sweating slightly? Check.*) And just as you look at the person sitting next to you and flash that nervous, energized smile, you crest over the edge of the coaster and the rush of excitement and adventure can hardly be contained...

Now take that sense of exhilaration and multiply it and you'll have a good idea how it feels to swim with dolphins. On a recent trip with my mom to Ixtapa, Mexico, I was afforded the opportunity to interact with these amazingly beautiful, slippery, "smiling," yet powerful creatures.

I hadn't come down to Mexico expecting to swim with dolphins, but when the concierge at Club Med offered up our choices of "Mexico Adventures," it was the only one that really got my heart pounding. We arrived at Delfiniti, located in Ixtapa's Zona Hotelera on the Pacific coast, and were greeted by a trainer who led us down to the lower level of the state-of-the-art facility so we could get an underwater view of the dolphins. They were swimming around and interacting with each other, playing lightheartedly while getting ready for their next group of visitors. As we watched, he told us a bit about them and explained that these dolphins had either been rescued, or were bred in captivity. After finishing our mini-tour of the facilities and receiving some brief instructions, we were ready to dive in.

As my mom and I prepared for our dolphin experience, I found myself going through the same sort of roller coaster checklist in my head: *All jewelry off? Check. Life vest on and as tight as it can be? Check. Sweating slightly? Check.* And the quintessential crest over the edge of the roller coaster? Finally jumping into the water. I looked over at my mom with an anxious, eager grin and knew I was ready for my adventure.



Our first activity with the dolphins was to hold on to their front flippers while they swam upside down across the width of the pool. After grabbing onto them, you immediately realize just how strong these animals actually are; the dolphin felt as if it was composed of pure muscle, encased by a layer of slick rubber. It was great being able to glide effortlessly through the water, all the while feeling the dolphin using its powerful strength to carry the two of us across the pool with graceful ease.

My heart trembling with excitement from the 30-second ride I'd just had, I was geared up for more. The trainer had us move out into the center of the pool and wade in the water in a large circle, whereupon he instructed the dolphins to weave slowly in and out of the circle, allowing us to glide our hands over their backs so we could get a good feel of their slippery outer layer. By far, this was the most amazing part of the whole experience because we were allowed to interact with them on what felt like the purest level possible. There were no tricks being preformed, no expectations to uphold, they were merely allowing us to relate to them in the most peaceful way

possible.

Then it was time for the cameras to come out and boy, did the dolphins know it! We were able to give them hugs and kisses as the staff at Delfiniti took pictures of us that we could then purchase later. It was fun to have our own little dolphin “photo shoot,” and it seemed that the dolphins were having a good time with it as well. After lots of kissing and hugging we finished off the experience with what the trainer called the “foot push”: while you float horizontally in the water, a pair of dolphins swim up from behind you, then push you up and out of the water by their noses. I mean, how many people can claim they’ve done tricks with a pair of trained dolphins?

Our group experience was slowly coming to an end, but all I knew was that I didn’t want to stop; I wanted to do it all over again. And again. And while I do love a good old fashion roller coaster, I was already realizing that my dolphin experience had put those mechanical rides to shame. So if you ever have the chance to interact with these stunning and awe-inspiring creatures, take it from me: it will be an experience you’ll never forget.



FAST FACTS

Delfiniti

Lote Anexo 6B, Zona Hotelera # 1

Ixtapa - Zihuatanejo

52-755-553-2736

www.delfiniti.com

Club Med Ixtapa Pacific

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**Editor’s note: I recently viewed the documentary film “The Cove,” reviewed on this site in February. As a result of the practice of capturing wild dolphins in Taiji, Japan that’s brought to light in the film, and the stress and trauma that’s created for the dolphins who are bought and sold for captive-use facilities, I’ve decided I personally*

want to do some additional research into the benefits of these types of interactive experiences (namely, dolphin swims) to see if they are something worth supporting.

Nevertheless, the other purpose of capturing the wild dolphins in Taiji - that is, to use them as a source of food, even though the meat is highly toxic and laden with mercury - is something that in all good conscience I cannot support. It is therefore our position that the practice of capturing and slaughtering the wild dolphins that frequent the waters surrounding Japan is a practice that needs to end.



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