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Home

Articles Index

Travel Articles

World Beat

Helping Hands

Pet Projects

Field Notes

Trips & Tours

Reader's Corner

Newsletter

About Us

DOLPHIN DELIGHT

Swimming in the Open Ocean with New Zealand's Hector's Dolphins

By Kelly McGonigle



It's been said that New Zealand can boast the highest per-capita population of sheep. But did you know it's also home to the world's only population of Hector's dolphins?

Hector's are among the world's smallest and rarest marine dolphins, and they're found only off the coast of New Zealand. Located mainly around the coast of the South Island, they live - like many other dolphins - in pods that include males and females. Like the orca, they have white and black markings, and a short snout. But their tiny, compact bodies bear a distinctive gray coloring.

A couple of years ago, I'd had the chance to swim with captive bottlenose dolphins in an oversized tank off the Mexican coastline. But that experience had been controlled by trainers, in a confined space, and the dolphins I "swam with" had no choice but to interact with me.

So after booking a trip to Kiwi-land, I decided that if given the chance, I'd have to make it out to Akaroa - a tiny town on the South Island known for its resident pod of wild Hector's dolphins, and see if I could recreate the experience. Only this time, it wouldn't be on my terms - it would be on the dolphins'.



Normally, I can be kind of a...well, 'water-wuss' some would say. My family could share many a story about my fear of water: how I refused to learn to waterski because of the catfish in the Colorado River (*Hello! Have you seen those whiskers?!*), or how on a recent trip to Ixtapa I didn't want to snorkel in the clear blue water for fear that the fish would 'touch' me. But this? This was different. Dolphins show emotion, they're adorable, they're the only other species besides humans that have sex for fun, and they've been known to save surfers from shark attacks. What's not to love about them?

The morning of our scheduled dolphin excursion, I got dressed quietly in the dark so as not to wake our host family, and headed out into the frigid New Zealand morning

with my travel companion Aimee for the two-hour drive to the coastal town of Akaroa. Our car ride was filled with twists and turns and many many sheep, as well as the most gorgeous scenery you could ask for.



We arrived at the quaint French-influenced settlement of Akaroa, where we hoped to have a chance to swim with wild dolphins out in the open ocean. Walking down the rickety pier in Akaroa, Aimee and I checked in with Black Cat Cruises and were suited up in 5mm thick wet suits, and given hoodies, gloves, booties and a snorkel. We were all set for the 48-degree water and the rainy weather. I had butterflies in my stomach, but the shaky nerves weren't from the thought of being out in the Pacific Ocean with wild animals, or even being eaten by a shark. Instead, it was the anticipation of the pure spiritual experience I knew I was about to embark on.

You see, a few months before I'd seen a film that left me heartbroken. *The Cove* is a documentary about the merciless dolphin slaughter in Taiji, Japan. It made me angry, frustrated and depressed, but mostly, it changed the way I feel about these magnificent creatures - our emotional and playful friends in the ocean. While I have always enjoyed dolphins as most people do, I never realized until seeing the film that there's a misguided perception of their intelligence and understanding of the world around them. Thus, this journey to Akaroa had turned into a spiritual expedition for me much more so than a fun-filled adventure.

Eight swimmers (including Aimee and me) loaded onto our mid-sized boat, along with the captain and another crew member. We quickly headed out of the harbor, and our captain explained that this experience would be what we made of it. He also said he'd need our help to spot the Hector's dolphins, otherwise we'd end up dolphin-less and completely bummed out. "Once we spot them," he explained, "we'll need a 'positive response' from them in order for you to get in the water."

The cold air chapped my face as I stood out on the bow, searching with squinted eyes out over the open water. And then...SPOTTED! A small pod of three dolphins.



The captain slowly drove the boat over to where we'd last seen them, and once they resurfaced they instantly showed signs of interest in us - circling around the boat and not swimming away.

"Everyone in the water NOW!," yelled the captain, and before I knew it I was plunging into the glacial water off the back of the boat.

Instantly, I felt paralyzed and motionless. It seemed that ever possible point-of-entry in my wet suit was inundated with the freezing cold water. Yelling over the side of the boat, the captain told us to flip our snorkels upside down in the water and start making noises into them (dolphins are naturally curious and have highly sensitive hearing, so they've attracted to noises unfamiliar to them). After a minute or two of making every silly baby-sound I could think of into my snorkel and getting no response, I thought our blubbery companions had left. Disappointment seeped into my wet suit like the icy water that surrounded me.

Without warning, three dorsal fins popped out of the water just a few feet away from me, then disappeared down underneath my feet just as quickly as they'd come. This routine continued for several minutes: the dolphins jumping up to surprise us, followed by us squealing with glee into our snorkels as we realized the louder and more high-pitched we made our sounds, the more often they surfaced.

From the boat, I could hear the captain yell, "Kelly, twirl with them, twirl with them!" and it was then that I realized I had all three dolphin swimming simultaneously around me. I began to twirl and spin in the water and they followed suit, whirling and twirling around as I made joyful noises into the snorkel. And before I knew it, they were gone - just as suddenly as they'd appeared.

As we climbed the ladder back onto the boat, my face felt numb but for the permanent smile etched onto it. Resting aboard the boat and sipping hot chocolate to reinvigorate our insides, I still couldn't wrap my mind around what had just happened to me; I was literally speechless.

Our boat pulled back up to its rickety pier, and I looked over at Aimee. In a not-exactly quotable moment, I managed to mumble out, "Oh my God, Aimee - what just happened?"

Yes, it was a spiritual experience. And yes, I was tongue-tied to explain how I felt on that icy-cold morning in Akaroa. But I can tell you now that it was truly one of the most amazing experiences of my life, and I remain grateful to those gentle sea creatures for allowing me into their world, even if only for the briefest of moments.

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Photo credits: iStockphoto.com; Jon Deinzer

Posted April 2010



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