

# A dolphin dilemma

Every freediver's dream is to swim with dolphins across an open seascape, tumbling and cavorting in three dimensions. They've recently been proven the most intelligent animals after man (surpassing the chimpanzee), and when you interact with them, and witness the way they study you with their gentle eyes, or their rascally antics during play then you know why. It's difficult not to feel the bond of one conscious soul reaching out to greet another.



*swimming with wild Atlantic Spotted dolphins in Bimini, Bahamas*

So when a resort in Roatan offered me a chance to freedive with trained dolphins on the open reef my heart jumped. Unlike most wild dolphins, who normally show only occasional interest humans, these were dolphins bred in captivity and accustomed to constructing their play with and around humans. In pairs, they are allowed out of their two-acre lagoon holding pen to swim in the open water, and always return at the end of the day. Even when a hurricane destroyed the entire pen most of the pod returned to await its reconstruction. Of all dolphin facilities in the world I would bet that this one has the happiest flippers. It also conducts a lot of non-invasive research into their behavior and communication.



*Most 'dolphin dives' like this one use dolphins kept in semi-captivity*

However they are still dolphins that don't live normal dolphin lives, and at the end of the day it was for this reason that I felt compelled to decline.

Most of the dolphins were raised in captivity, and it is mainly the males who are let out, so it's normal that they return to their mates in the pens after excursions. Ultimately these captive dolphins might just be a little agoraphobic, and that is sad in such a free-spirited species. It has been proven possible to research dolphins effectively in the wild, so research itself cannot justify dolphin captivity. Interactions are a blessing to those lucky enough to experience them, but I feel these should happen at the dolphins' convenience, not ours.

There are tours which offer the chance to swim with wild dolphins, and if this is done respectfully then it is a more genuine and magical experience.

Dolphins communicate constantly and a lot of this is through touch. In the same way that we would recoil from the touch of a prickly hedgehog, smooth-skinned dolphins find our spindly and sharp-ended fingers creepy, and are suspicious of the explosive and haphazard movements of our gangly limbs. So in the wild they approach and observe, and if they feel safe then they will spin and turn bit by bit closer.



*New Zealand's Hector's Dolphin, currently threatened with extinction*

I've been lucky enough to experience this kind of encounter, with Bottlenose dolphins in Utila, Honduras, Atlantic Spotted Dolphins in the Bahamas and even with the threatened Hector's Dolphins of New Zealand (more on this soon).

It is a life-affirming experience, and having been blessed with these encounters I cannot in good conscience endorse any kind of dolphin captivity, even one where the dolphins seem completely happy with the arrangement.

- William Trubridge