

Dolphin Safari

Dolphins, dolphins, dolphins. Why the fascination?

My heart echoed the skip of my step as I neared the nursery pool. I was eager. I knew exactly what would happen when I caught a glance of my first dolphin. The friendly, chattering mammal would meet my gaze with its deep keen black eyes. Our mutual gaze would be followed by a flash of knowledge, a career idea perfect for my strengths, encouragement, insights into a new improved me. I knew dolphins inspired people.

The nursery pool was crowded, the crush smelled strongly of tourist sweat and fish. Squeezing between stalls selling plush sea anemones alongside ice drinks, around bulging rucksacks stuffed full of squashed sandwiches and juice cartons and through gaps left where a slimy milkshake spewed across the wet ground, I resurfaced at the poolside. The screaming children, coupled inharmoniously with coaxing parents and pre-recorded wave music blaring over the park speakers, did not aid me in my search for inspiration.

Framed by hideous plastic scenery, Dolphin Cove disappointed. Desperately I scanned the deeper waters for a dolphin, a dorsal fin, a ripple — anything to allay the shock of Dolphin Cove's tacky tourist taste.

The fat, tame dolphins floated lazily in the shallows around the edge of their pond. Their small, dull eyes searched greedily for the sweaty palms handing out fishy pellets. Once those were finished the dolphins simply manoeuvred their undignified bulk to the next offering hand.

I didn't cry but disappointment held my heart in a vicelike grip. I felt numb, angry and cheated.

Two years later and far from Florida's Dolphin Cove a small signpost caught my attention. Dolphins. I smiled a little sadly. Even here in Gibraltar, I thought it's dolphins, dolphins, dolphins. Why the fascination?

In spite of these bitter feelings, within twenty minutes I slipped off my flip flops and swung my feet under the railings. Perched precariously with my heels drumming on the side of the damp hull, the water was just inches from my toes. The speaker beside me crackled to life.

'Welcome! Today our dolphin safari will take us deep into the straits of Gibraltar...'

Looking around, I believe I was the only passenger relaxed enough to enjoy the sea breeze, a welcome relief from the stifling heat on land. Every single passenger peered out to sea, shielding their eyes from the harsh sunlight, alert.

Arrogantly, I pitied the eager tourists as they desperately searched the horizon only for a solitary glance of the elusive and over rated dolphin. I wondered angrily why there appeared to be a worldwide fascination with the dull creatures.

Looking back I wonder now if my bitterness was really directed at the dolphins. I believe now it was in fact directed at myself for missing the magic associated with dolphins.

Picking up speed now, our vessel ploughed through the choppy waters. Unnoticed, I was drenched in salty spray, but my eyes remained locked on a shimmering white shape just under the surface of the water. Hanging dangerously now through the railings my excitement grew. The white patch, I could now see, was striped with fine grey and black lines and much closer to the surface. My eyes stung from the salty dew. A small wave peaked and toppled sending a cascading froth across the water which consumed the area I watched. The froth swirled and disappeared, replaced by clear blue sea.

A sudden shout from starboard sent the boat swaying as every eager person clambered to the rail. Expectant silence took hold. The horizon was empty.

A strange sucking sound followed by a whistle was heard by all. Five striped bullets punctured the water surface from below. Glistening shards of crystal flew from their shining skin sprinkling us as we looked on in stunned admiration. Reaching the peak of their flight the acrobats twisted with amazing dexterity. In one magnificent moment they were silhouetted against the sun and harsh African peaks. Rotted to the spot in awe I watched where, as one, they dived dramatically back into their subterranean kingdom.

The ripples shaped themselves once again into small chopping waves.

As though the breach was a sign, the sea became alive with chattering and whistling. Each wave became a fin, a tail, a bottlenose. Upon closer observation, each shimmering patch of froth revealed itself as the underbelly of a pirouetting dolphin, The pod was hundreds strong, in and out, up of down, back to front, from side to side! No manoeuvre was too difficult.

A strange feeling gripped me as I watched each perfectly executed, effortless roll and each amazingly complex formation. I was stunned, bewildered, amused, smiling, laughing until I realised I was in fact scrambling from port to starboard yelling in delight.

I felt an odd sort of inferiority in the dolphin's presence. My clumsy movements felt exaggerated as I became more aware of just how graceful the dolphins were. The pod co-ordinated so fluently, I felt it was easy to acknowledge their superiority over our clumsy race. Humans may dip a toe in the waters at the beach but it is the dolphins who are masters of the oceans.

Suddenly and all too soon the dolphins were gone. They weren't swimming away and our powerful craft wasn't fast enough to leave them behind. They simply left.

I dared not sigh. I dared not disturb the peaceful thoughts and expressions around me. I didn't want to. All I really wanted to do was lay my sleepy head on the cold damp railing, hang my tired feet over the hull and so I did, watching the deep sunset's reflection in the flickering water.

Disembarking I caught the gaze of a fellow passenger. Simultaneously we smiled to one another. We had something in common. We both shared a bond, a dramatic secret.

We shared a fascination. Dolphins.