

In search of dolphins

by Dr. Jason Cressey



Dr Jason Cressey is a writer, lecturer and therapist now working in Vancouver, Canada. He organises dolphin trips, and gives talks about his work internationally.

To some, dolphins are little more than amusing performers who jump through plastic hoops in the presence of cheering crowds. To others, dolphins are highly intelligent, emotionally sensitive beings who deserve our respect and attention. Some people would even claim to have been cured of depression, anorexia and panic attacks through swimming with dolphins. So what, if

anything, is so special about these air-breathing ocean dwellers? In an attempt to find an answer, I set out on a six month voyage around the Pacific Ocean...

February '96 - Japan

Japan may seem like a strange place to begin a tour of dolphin hot-spots. It remains one of the few countries to defiantly ignore a global moratorium on whale hunting, and until recently was the nation responsible for thousands of dolphin deaths. Yet Japan is a country of paradoxes, for here live some of the most dedicated and single-minded supporters of whale and dolphin conservation, and it was the first country in the world to establish a 'Dolphin Healing Centre.' I spent five days at the Centre, preparing

myself for the journeys that lay ahead of me. There are, in fact, two or three places in the waters of Japan where people can - and increasingly do - pay thousands of yen to enjoy the privilege of swimming with friendly wild dolphins. Being there in the icy cold month of February denied me the chance to meet the dolphins personally; to do that, I would have to head south...

March '96 - Australia

Travelling from the northern hemisphere to the southern hemisphere meant flying from winter to summer overnight.

Working my way up the coast of New South Wales, I soon realised that the dolphins were playing a game with me. Wherever I turned up the dolphins had, apparently, been spotted in copious numbers only the day before. Resignation set in, and for a week I saw not a



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single flipper, dorsal fin or tail fluke.

Eventually, in a quiet river estuary in southern Queensland the time was finally right. Far from the madding crowd, there I was, swimming with a mother dolphin, her year-old baby, and a huge dog. Apparently, the dog's owner had initially been concerned when his rather fierce looking Rottweiler started showing such an interest in the friendly dolphins, and so decided it would be prudent to keep the dog locked indoors. For the three days that the dog could not go down to the water, the dolphins failed to appear. On the day that the owner decided to let his dog go down to the water again, the dolphins returned, and the trio of friends have been inseparable ever since. This was the scene that dreams (and legends) are made of: the baby dolphin giving two local children rides with its dorsal fin, the dog

playing chase games with the mother dolphin, the handful of adults screaming and laughing like children. I had touched the magic of the dolphins, and the wait had been worth every second.

April '96 - New Zealand

A stop in New Zealand en route to the Islands of the Pacific gave me the opportunity to see the mighty sperm whales of Kaikoura, an increasingly popular but terribly commercialised whale-watching spot on the east coast of the South Island. A few days later I was in the beautiful little town of Akaroa, New Zealand's only French settlement, to see the world's smallest dolphins - unique to this area - the Hector's dolphin. I was taken out by a friendly and

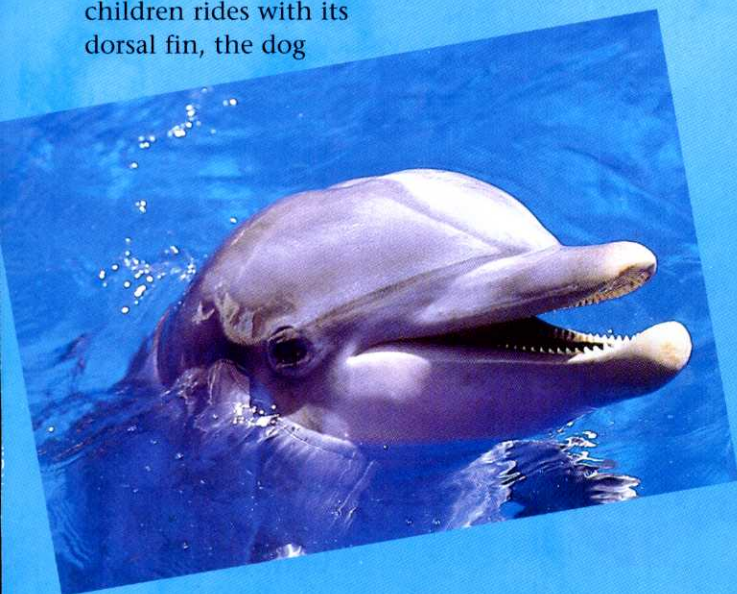
knowledgeable skipper with just three other people to see the Hector's dolphins. Like silver bullets in the water, they gleefully jumped

around the boat, at times only millimetres from each other. As the skipper announced to the small crew that it was time to return to the harbour, two of the enchanting dolphins jumped two metres out of the water with the kind of synchronised timing that Olympic gymnasts yearn for. Seconds later they were gone, having quite clearly (even telepathically?)

understood that this human-dolphin meeting of minds, of hearts, was over for the day. For me, the South Seas now beckoned...

May '96 - Kiribati, Central Pacific

Kiribati, pronounced "kir-ee-bas", is a tiny atoll republic (formerly known as the Gilbert Islands) in the Central Pacific. Snippets of stories heard over the years led me to the northern island of Butaritari - close to where the equator and dateline meet. Yet this unspoilt paradise harbours a dark tradition in the village of Kuma at its northern tip, and the locals explained to me the story of the village 'dolphin callers'...



For centuries, two families practised their magical art of 'calling' dolphins (and small whales) to the beach. This was achieved by the head of the family entering a state of trance, sometimes for as long as three days, during which his or her 'astral' body would travel to *Mona* (the underworld beneath the ocean) and greet an assembled group of dolphin spirits, all in human form. He or she

their guests to the beach and, once all the dolphins were out of the water, they would be ceremoniously slaughtered and eaten.

The villagers assured me that the tradition, which had all but disappeared over recent years anyway, would probably pass into history with the knowledge and understanding that dolphins and whales had important work to do in helping the *I-Matang*, or

first time on my dolphin journey, I was left with more questions than answers after the experience: why do they sometimes choose to come close, and at other times swim away? Why did this pod swim so close to shore and interact with people, when almost every other pod of spinner dolphins prefers the open ocean? One thing was becoming very clear: that my 'rational', left-brain approach to life, which had steered me through

the world's smallest dolphins in New Zealand, I was now treated to the mesmerising grace of the world's largest dolphins - the orcas (sometimes unfairly, and inaccurately, called 'killer whales'). The tall, black dorsal fins silently cutting the water's surface and the huge 'ppwwffff' as the blowholes ejected salty, condensed air at three hundred kilometres per hour was quite spell-binding, and had the

would eventually wake from the trance and announce to the village that the dolphins were on their way. The exact time of arrival later that day, or the next was predicted with great accuracy, and the villagers prepared themselves for the arrival of their 'guests'. Exotic garlands of flowers were worn, as well as fine perfumes and the most beautiful traditional costumes. When the dolphins appeared (invariably right on cue) the villagers would each choose an individual dolphin and spend the next few hours stroking, playing and even flirting with their 'guest'. On a given signal by the dolphin caller, the villagers would then lead

white people, treat the Earth, and each other, with more respect. ☺

June '96 - Hawai'i

I next ventured to Big Island, Hawai'i, at the north end of the Polynesian triangle. Here I spent three days kayaking with Spinner Dolphins in the dramatic setting of Kealahou Bay. As they

leapt out of the water like giant, playful corkscrews it was obvious to us why they had been given their name. Not for the

eight years of academic study in psychology, had little to offer in understanding the oceanic world of dolphins and whales.

July '96 - Canada

The final encounter of my journey was in the waters of British Columbia, Canada, close to my new home of Vancouver. Having seen

small group of us on board the cosy sailboat entranced in their company. The orcas also welcomed me home, back to the land where lessons and experiences from my dolphin journey would touch every part of my life, both personally and professionally, as they became integrated. Everywhere I had visited, the dolphins held up a mirror and showed me myself - my ability to be happy, sad, angry, tranquil. They live life to the full, they express their feelings, and no matter who you are - big or tall, fat or thin, young or old, they accept you unconditionally - and they want to play! This, I feel, is both a gift and an example to us all. If you haven't ever swam with a wild dolphin, maybe it's time to dive in.