

Close encounters of the dolphin kind

Roatan's Dolphins

Text and photos: Bill Becher

I slap my hands on the water and two bottlenose dolphins swim toward me, propelled by a few flicks of their tails. The 400-pound creatures push hard on my feet with their noses and skim me across the surface of the warm Caribbean lagoon.

My two-dolphin-power E-ticket ride is at Anthony's Key Resort on the island of Roatan off the coast of Honduras.

This tropical playground, well known to scuba divers, is also home to the Roatan Institute of Marine Science. Here you can touch, swim, snorkel and scuba dive with dolphins and even be a "dolphin trainer for a day."

A dolphin trainer's day starts with preparing food. You help sort the restaurant-grade frozen fish, picking out damaged fish that might harbor bacteria.

Snorkelers get a close-up encounter with a dolphin at Anthony's Key Resort.



Roatan's Dolphins

Trainers carry small coolers of fish marked with each dolphin's name out to the large pens in the lagoon rimmed with wooden catwalks. It's a pretty setting with no concrete in sight. We sit on a floating platform and get acquainted with the dolphins.

Biologist Teri Bolton and her husband run the dolphin program. She invites us to pet a dolphin --- they like strokes. Their skin is smooth and tight, like an inflated inner tube.

Dolphins aren't fish, they are air-breathing sea mammals. They are also curious, playful and intelligent. If humans lived in the ocean dolphins would be our golden retrievers, except smarter --- you wouldn't find a dolphin drinking out of a toilet.



Some dolphin trainers take their work very seriously.

Finding your inner dolphin

After watching the trainers interact with the dolphins and learning about their habits and likes and dislikes



LEFT & RIGHT BOTTOM: Swimmers get a close-up encounter with a dolphin at Anthony's Key Resort.





Dolphin trainer for a day gets a kiss from a dolphin.

Roatan's Dolphins



Dolphin trainer for a day commands a dolphin to jump by raising her right arm.

you head back to the fish house to prepare another meal. Then it's time to learn the hand signals trainers use to communicate with the dolphins.

We sit with feet dangling in the water. Two male dolphins swim up --- Esteban and Paya. They're out of their pens in the open ocean. They seem to enjoy what they do. If they didn't they could just keep swimming to Jamaica.

The dolphins pop their heads out of the water. Bolton tells us to raise one arm quickly. The dolphins swim away and then leap into the air repeatedly until you lower your arm. Then they come back for a fishy reward that they swallow whole.

Hold your hand in the water and the dolphin places his nose on it. Tap on his side with your other hand and the dolphin takes off in a circular speed run. Lift both

Did you know that dolphins are so intelligent that within only a few weeks of captivity, they can train Americans to stand at the very edge of the pool and throw them fish? -- Unknown

hands and push and the dolphin tail-walks. Wag your fingers and the dolphin talks in clicks. Rotate the fingers and they pirouette in the water. By this time I confuse the signals and Paya spins when he's supposed to talk. I spin my fingers.

"No, the dolphin's training you," says Bolton, laughing. Apparently one of the qualities a trainer needs is to be smarter than the

dolphin. Enthusiasm and curiosity helps too.

"Anyone can walk out there with a bucket," says Bolton. "But the interesting part is wanting to see what tickles that animal and forming a relationship."

After the hand-signal session we don wet suits and masks and get in the water. The dolphins swim out, we grab their dorsal fins, and they tow us back to the dock. Then it's time for the dolphin-powered body





Scuba divers get a close-up encounter with a free-swimming dolphin at Anthony's Key Resort.

Roatan's Dolphins

surfing grand finale.

If training a dolphin isn't enough you can also scuba dive with them.

Kneeling on the sandy bottom the dolphins materialize, swooping around the divers then scratching their backs on a sponge. A dolphin swims by, streaming bubbles from his blowhole. Then they do a series of jumps, seen from underwater it's like a mirror image of the above water show.

Anthony's Key

For scuba divers at Anthony's Key there are also reef dives, wall dives, wreck dives, shark dives, night dives and beach dives. Visibility is good, averaging from 50 to 100 feet in 80-degree (F) water. Most dives are a short boat ride away,

and nitrox 32 is available for nitrox certified divers.

Anthony's Key is a PADI Gold Palm 5-Star Instructor Development Center and is ranked as one of the top dive resorts in the world. The ten dive boats are all modern 42 and 48-foot craft.

There is an on-site recompression chamber and staff physician, photo shop, dive equipment rentals, and a PADI continuing educational program that offers resort courses.

If three daily dives and two-a-week night dives aren't enough and your residual nitrogen allows, there is extensive shore diving available.

Two wrecks invite exploration: the El Aquila, a 230-foot double-deck cargo vessel sunk in 1997. This intermediate to advanced dive is a two-minute boat ride from the resort. The "El Aquila"

join in the passion

Photograph



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or "The Eagle" ran cargo between Puerto Cortes, Honduras and San Andres Island. This freighter originally sank 8 years ago around the Utila Keys, Bay Islands, Honduras. It was recently salvaged and brought to Roatan by Anthony's Key Resort. The ship is intact and is resting perfectly upright on a sandy bottom in approximately 100' of water.

The Odyssey is a 300-foot multi-level ship sunk in 2002. Dive depths are from 40 to 120 feet on the north coast of Roatan, a 12-minute boat ride away.

For divers and non-divers there is snorkeling, kayaking, jungle canopy tours, horseback riding, and my favorite, swinging in a hammock in the gentle ocean breeze and listening to the sound of the surf pounding on the reef.

Picture Perfect

The setting here could have been designed by a post-card photographer. The majority of rooms are on the beach at Anthony's Key, a 30-second boat ride away. The Key is also the site of the Monday night crab races, limbo contest and beach barbeque.

Most of the resort is built out of wood, giving it a simple, rustic feel. The dining room and bar are located up a flight of wooden steps like a giant tree house in the jungle overlooking the lagoon.

It is of interest to note that while some dolphins are reported to have learned English - up to fifty words used in correct context - no human being has been reported to have learned dolphinese.

-- Carl Sagan

Brent Howell from Seattle has been coming here for 15 years and is conflicted. "I'd like to tell people about Roatan and I'm afraid to tell people about it. It's a secret I don't want to share."

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IF YOU GO

Several US carriers and Sol Air offer flights to Roatan via Miami or Houston.

Anthony's Key Resort offers dive and non-dive packages including seven nights accommodations, three meals a day, air tanks, weight belts and weights, three single tank boat dives per day and two single tank night boat dives starting at \$599. Scuba instruction and certification is available, as is try scuba resort course. Dolphin trainer for a day costs \$160 for guests.

For more information about Anthony's Key, go to www.anthonyskey.com or call (800) 227-3483. ■



Scuba divers get a close-up encounter with a free-swimming dolphin at Anthony's Key Resort.



feature

Roatan's Dolphins



Beautiful sunsets at Anthony's Key, a scuba dive and adventure travel resort on Roatan Island in Honduras.



fact file



Honduras



History: Honduras became independent of Spain's vast empire in 1821. A freely elected civilian government came to power in 1982, after 25 years of military rule. However, Honduras became a haven for anti-Sandinista contras fighting the Marxist Nicaraguan Government and an ally to Salvadoran Government forces fighting against leftist guerrillas during the 1980s. In 1998, the country was devastated by Hurricane Mitch, which killed 5,600 people and caused \$2 billion in damage.

Government: democratic constitutional republic
Capital: Tegucigalpa
Currency: lempira (HNL) Exchange rates: lempiras per US dollar - 17.3453
Languages: Spanish, Amerindian dialects
Climate: subtropical in lowlands, temperate in mountains

Geography: Central America, bordering the Caribbean Sea, between Guatemala and Nicaragua and bordering the Gulf of Fonseca (North Pacific Ocean), between El Salvador and Nicaragua; Terrain: mountains in the interior, narrow coastal plains, has a short Pacific coast but a long Caribbean shoreline, including the uninhabited eastern Mosquito Coast, Elevation extremes: lowest point:

Caribbean Sea 0 m; highest point: Cerro Las Minas 2,870 m; Coastline: 820 km, Natural hazards: frequent but mild earthquakes; hurricanes and floods along the Caribbean coast; Agriculture: bananas, coffee, citrus; beef; timber; shrimp; Industries: sugar, coffee, textiles, clothing, wood products

Environment issues: urban sprawl; deforestation from logging and clearing; land degradation, soil erosion, farming of marginal lands; mining activities cause heavy metal polluting of fresh water sources.

Population: 6,823,568
High mortality due to AIDS cause lower life expectancy, higher infant mortality, higher death rates, lower population and growth rates; Below pov-

erty line: 53%; Ethnic groups: Mestizo 90%, Amerindian 7%, Black 2%, White 1%; Religions: Roman Catholic 97%, Protestant minority

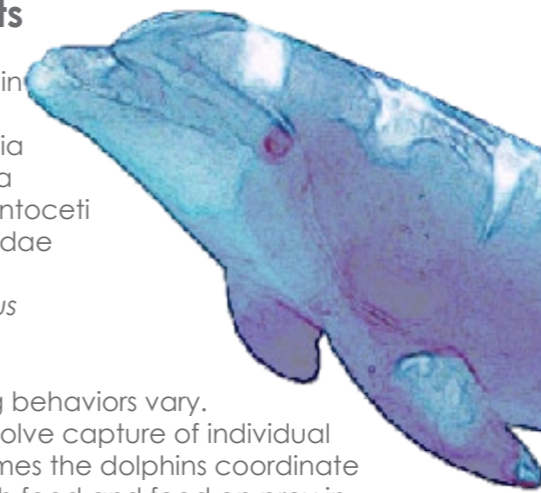
Medical/Deco chambers: Cornerstone Decompression Chambers and Clinic at Anthony's Key Resort in Sandy Bay tel. 455 1049 / 445 1003. Fantasy Island at French Key. Woods Medical Center 24 hour service Tel. (504) 445-1080.

Dive Travel: Anthony's Key Resort www.anthonyskey.com Bahia Tours
Email: akr@anthonyskey.com 800-227-3483 or 954-929-0090

Dolphin Facts

Bottlenose Dolphin

CLASS: Mammalia
ORDER: Cetacea
SUBORDER: Odontoceti
FAMILY: Delphinidae
GENUS: Tursiops
SPECIES: *truncatus*



FEEDING
Dolphins' feeding behaviors vary. They primarily involve capture of individual prey, but sometimes the dolphins coordinate together to catch food and feed on prey in association with human fishing as well as chasing fish onto mudbanks. Dolphins eat several pounds of fishes, squid and crustaceans per day.

MATING & BREEDING
Calving takes place year-round. Nursing continues until calves reach 12-18 months. The calves stay with their mothers for 3-6 years to learn how to catch prey and other tasks important to dolphin survival and society. Male dolphins reach maturity at 10 years old and female dolphins reach maturity between 5 and 10 years of age. Gestation for dolphins one year.

Did you know that:
There is a dark side to dolphins? They can become aggressive, sometimes brutal. Dominant members in a pod of dolphins are known to push around weaker dolphins.

A dolphin can see as well underwater as above it thanks to a very sensitive retina that gathers light very efficiently.

In relation to the size of the body, the dolphin's brain is larger than the brains of great apes and chimpanzees.

In a single day, an adult dolphin can consume as much as 30 pounds of fish or more.

Even though the dolphin has 100 teeth in its mouth, the dolphin swallows fish whole. Dolphins use their teeth to catch and grasp their prey.

Dolphins can jump out of the water as high as 20 feet.

The killer whale is the largest member of the dolphin family. It can grow up to 30 feet long.

Like human skin, a dolphin's skin is very delicate and can be easily injured by rough surfaces.

The boto is the largest of the freshwater dolphins. It lives in the Amazon and can grow up to 10 feet long.

SOURCE: www.acsonline.org; www.animalplanet.com

Dolphins Diving Dining & Dancing...

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