

ParentsCanada

Duck Key, Florida

By Janice Biehn on August 30, 2017

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The collection of docks in Duck Key, Florida, looks like a summer camp in Northern Ontario, with floating wooden pathways creating two distinct swimming areas. But the US #1 highway with its iconic supporting arches stretches across the horizon in the backdrop dividing the Atlantic Ocean from the Gulf of Mexico. And that sun blazes down like nothing felt in Ontario. Another key difference – it's not little kids frolicking in the water, but a pod of five dolphins.

This is Dolphin Connection, about 170 km south of Miami. The facility holds multiple accreditations in marine animal care and offers an intimate, hands-on educational experience not available at marine amusement parks.

Swimming with dolphins is a dream for lots of kids, but with recent documentaries about the plight of captive water mammals at amusement parks, eco-minded parents are steering away from these sorts of facilities.

So there's no swimming with dolphins here. Nor is there a theatre for watching any kind of uber-choreographed show. Instead, visitors lie tummy-down on the dock and meet the dolphins, pretty much nose-to-nose. Some of its programs allow you to get even closer by standing on a platform in the water. But actually swimming with them goes against the goals of the program, says dolphin trainer Natalie Thompson. "We want to give our participants more time with the dolphins and swimming with them takes away from the interaction. Our program really allows for a lot of up close and personal time."

In fact almost all of the training the dolphins have received – and are quite willing to show off – has been done for the ability to study and research the dolphins. For example, when the dolphin rests his tail in your lap, it's so the trainer can draw blood for testing. They are routinely monitored and information is shared with other marine facilities and universities.

Dolphin Connection is a unique way to introduce or reinforce ocean conservation with your kids. The trainers are passionate about using the dolphin experience as a way to spark interest in ocean conservation and pollution. Guests are encouraged to make a simple pledge to stop using plastic bags, which are known to have long-lasting negative impacts on marine life.

This 45-minute Dolphin Discovery program includes 20 minutes of instruction in the outdoor classroom, then 25 minutes to hug, kiss and play with the dolphins. Guests can stand on submerged, deep-water platforms to interact with the dolphins but you can also swim into the lagoon for some special interaction with our dolphins. Staff are quick to point out this will NOT mean holding on to the dolphin's dorsal fin and being pulled in the water, the typical image of swimming with dolphins. Must be 4'6" minimum to participate. (\$179 plus tax per person.)

If that sounds a bit too rich or interactive, the Dockside Dolphin program is a 15-minute classroom session followed by 15 minutes with the dolphins from the dry comfort of the docks. No height or age restrictions. (\$69 plus tax per person.)

For folks who really want to get up close and personal with the dolphins, be a Trainer for a Day. This three-hour session gets you behind the scenes with the Dolphin Connection training team. Participants have one-on-one time with the trainer and are involved in various hands-on activities in the care and training of our dolphins. Must be at least 10 years old and 4'6" to participate. (\$329 plus tax per person.)

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