

Life • Travel

Nose to nose with a bottlenose dolphin

Hawks Cay Resort in Florida offers guests hands-on encounters with Atlantic bottlenose dolphins while highlighting the protection of their natural habitat.



Kelsey Marcus shares a “handshake” with one of five dolphins at Hawks Cay Resort’s Dolphin Connection. (HAWKS CAY RESORT/THE DOLPHIN CONNECTION)



Elise Jette shares a “handshake” with one of five dolphins at Hawks Cay Resort’s Dolphin Connection. (HAWKS CAY RESORT/THE DOLPHIN CONNECTION)

By **LINDA BARNARD** Special to the Star
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DUCK KEY, FLA.-When meeting a dolphin, it’s polite to shake hands. It’s the least you can do after having coffee with them in the morning.

The [Dolphin Connection](#) at [Hawks Cay Resort](#) has a trainer-guided dockside program for guests to get to know its five resident male Atlantic bottlenose dolphins.

Ranging in age, from 12-year-old Tatum to 43-year-old Lucky, they were born there or are rescue animals.

With the dolphin pens and docks just behind the resort's Ocean Restaurant, guests can watch the animals any time from brightly coloured raised wooden chairs set up around the lagoon. There are signs that explain dolphin behaviour and habitat.

Some make it a regular morning coffee date.

The lesson in how to shake hands dolphin-style — put your arms out straight in front so the animal can slide his flippers across your palms — comes after a 20-minute classroom orientation about dolphins and environmental protection.

Facility manager Sylvia Rickett-Halama has been working with dolphins for 30 years and says the program combines “education and inspiration.”

I'm fascinated by these intelligent animals but I've never been interested in swimming with them and couldn't bear seeing them in stressful situations. This seemed like a different way to get close.

“We try to empower our guests to make a change,” said Rickett-Halama. That includes education before they meet the animals about ocean pollution and the danger plastic bags pose to marine life.

On the dock, we're teamed with trainers. Since the dolphins respond to hand signals, they explain, we need to keep ours in our laps to avoid confusing them.

One at a time, the sleek, grey dolphins glide along the dock so we can take turns stroking their sides, remembering our classroom lesson to use a flat hand and not to pat them. They feel smooth and muscular.

While they seem to enjoy being touched, we all have a joyous, emotional reaction. It's a powerful moment to be so near the animals.

That's not unusual, Rickett-Halama said. Occasionally guests tear up.

“Smiles tend to abound,” she said, observing there is a “quiet appreciation when touching, wowed when feeling the heartbeat, happiness and laughter, too.”

After each dolphin does a “behaviour,” we take turns flipping a small fish into his mouth. They like the cool blocks of plain gelatin we have for them, too.

Rickett-Halama explains the dolphins’ actions during our encounter, like jumping, tail slaps or bobbing upright in the water, is something they already do in the wild. Other actions are learned behaviours that have a purpose for routine medical care, such as rolling over sideways for an ultrasound.

Everything is voluntary for the dolphins, said Rickett-Halama. So when 41-year-old Hastings was too busy watching passing manatees to participate recently, he was left to do just that.

Seems like a fine way to spend an afternoon, for a dolphin or human.

Linda Barnard was hosted by Hawks Cay Resort, which did not review or approve this story.

When you go

The Dockside Dolphins program is \$69 (U.S.) for 30 minutes; 15 minutes with the dolphins. There is also a Dolphin Discovery program (\$179), where guests stand on a submerged platform in the lagoon and interact with the dolphins, including swimming with them. The dolphins do not tow or push guests.

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