

to swim with dolphins

If money weren't an issue, as a Valentine gift I'd like to receive a boat cruise plus participation on a dolphin and whale research vessel studying the various pods around the world ... with a bit of luxury thrown in!

Although Michelle Sachs lives hundreds of kilometres away from the ocean, dolphins play a huge role in her life. She organises trips to Mozambique to swim and communicate with these special creatures and encourages others to share her experiences. Linda Aucamp visited her at her Highlands North home and found a woman who is passionate about these mammals of the deep.

Although Michelle's involvement with dolphins started about eight years ago, wading into the water didn't exactly come naturally. 'I was quite a water baby as a child, but a swimming accident at school made me terrified of the water. However, when a friend suggested we swim with dolphins to reward ourselves for completing a hectic reflexology course, I was game. We booked our trip to Mozambique amid great excitement ... the only problem was, I was still so scared of the water!' Michelle decided to use the gym pool to try and overcome her fear, but it was very traumatic. She had to stop swimming after every length to catch her breath because she was crying so much! But she was getting into the water.

The trip to Mozambique in itself was an adventure but once there, Michelle met two people who would play an important role in her future ... Angie, a dolphin researcher, swim facilitator and owner of the camp in Ponta D'Ouro, and Harry, skipper of the boat. 'Harry was great ... we had to go on a snorkelling course with him before attempting to swim with the wild dolphins and he eventually got me to put my face into the water. Going out on the boat was another story. When I had eventually been persuaded to get off the boat into the ocean, I would only do so with my husband, Arnold, holding my hand. Then something amazing happened. Two dolphins swam past me and I just took off after them. Arnold couldn't keep up with me ... I had totally lost my fear of water. The dolphins had shown me I could overcome my fear ... that it was just in my mind. It was the turning point in my life!'

32 Get It Sandton • Rosebank February 07

Although Michelle and Arnold returned to Mozambique annually after that amazing experience, Michelle knew she wanted to learn more about dolphins. Her biggest dream was to kiss one. She found a company overseas - Dolphin Quest - which offered internships and Michelle applied and was accepted at the Bermuda facility. 'The whole thing was self-funded, so I had to save money to cover my travelling costs, food and accommodation. The internship lasted for just under three months and we learned about dolphin psychology and physiology, as well as husbandry. The dolphins were checked from top to tail each day and the pregnant ones were given ultrasounds. We were involved in all this and it was amazing. We spent a lot of time cutting up fish, giving educational talks and answering people's questions, but it was a small price to pay.'

Dolphin Quest also runs a wild dolphin research programme, but unfortunately Michelle didn't experience it. However, her dream of kissing a dolphin did come true. 'Bermuda was great ... I learned so much and even got to kiss a dolphin! What really appealed to me about Dolphin Quest was that although the dolphins were kept in captivity, they were never forced to do anything they didn't want to. The uncooperative ones were simply moved to another pool and were never punished or denied food. We can learn a lot from dolphins in captivity, and that information can be used to ensure the survival of the wild ones.'

Once back home, Michelle started making regular trips to Mozambique, as the marine protection act makes it illegal to swim with wild dolphins in South Africa. Soon people were asking her how they could also swim with the dolphins and that's how her company, Ocean's Essence, was born. 'A lot of people want to swim with dolphins but don't know how to go about it. I provide the link between them and Mozambique by organising group trips four times a year.'

In Mozambique Angie has been researching the wild dolphins for years and has established a special bond with them. There is a superpod in a specific area in Ponta D'Ouro and Michelle says the same dolphins can be seen regularly. Sometimes a swim lasts only 15 minutes but when the dolphins are feeling sociable, it can last for up to 35 minutes.

'The dolphins come closer to us now than ever before. Angie and the University of Maputo are putting together a project to research the impact of human contact on the dolphins. We

believe the way we do it has a negligible effect on them. We have a very strict code of conduct when it comes to contact with wild dolphins ... no-one is allowed into the water before we've taken pics and established whether the dolphins are feeling sociable. No one is ever allowed to touch the dolphins and coming between a mother and her baby is an absolute no-no. Sometimes they touch you, but you can't try to touch them. No one is ever allowed to try and ride a dolphin. We also don't scuba because it's very noisy and you can't interact properly with the dolphins. Snorkelling is a lot freer and allows for interaction on their level ... it's a much deeper interaction. Everything is done in their territory and on their terms.'

Michelle says the biggest lessons she's learned from her interaction with dolphins is to be less judgemental and more accepting. 'I want to be a better person and my contact with the dolphins helps me a lot. I've always been quite spiritual and my experiences have enriched my life even more. I think my interaction with the dolphins has posed more questions than answers ... it's given me a lot of food for thought.'

Why not, then, become a beach bum and swim with the dolphins every day? 'Maybe one day I'll do it permanently but for now I need to live right here. Besides, Joburg's great, I've lived here all my life and I need the money. Without it there'd be no swimming with dolphins!'

A case in point is Michelle and her husband's recent self-funded trip to the Wild

Dolphin Project in the Bahamas. There they met Dr Denise Herzing, founder of the project, and spent five days aboard a catamaran working with the research team. 'They were all incredible and Dr Herzing is the epitome of the dolphins in human form.'

One of Michelle's dreams is to set up a programme for people to swim with dolphins in South Africa. 'I fully understand why it's been banned here ... some operators are unscrupulous and have no respect for the dolphins. However, if very strict rules are put into place, it can be done. More people need to interact with dolphins because once you've experienced close contact, you automatically want to protect them. It's such an important environmental protection message and the dolphins are the best agents to motivate for their conservation and that of the planet.'



A dream come true ... kissing Khyber, while in Bermuda.

Two dolphins swam past me and I just took off after them. I had totally lost my fear of water. The dolphins had shown me I could overcome my fear ... that it was just in my mind. It was the turning point in my life!

want to swim with dolphins?

When: March 14 to 18, June 20 to 24, September 5 to 9 or November 28 to December 2.

Cost: Between R1 999 and R4 220 a person depending on age and accommodation.

Costs include: accommodation; three dinners and four breakfasts; four boat launches and facilitated swims with dolphins (weather permitting); border transfers to and from the Kosi Bay border; snorkelling workshop in the bay with an experienced professional; swim and boat

safety briefing and code of conduct; dolphin breathing technique, meditation and foot massage with Michelle; presentations by Michelle and Angie; unlimited tea and coffee in camp.

Excluded from the tour: transport to the border and back; visas for non South African passport holders; R12 border tax; drinks; snorkels, masks and fins.

Bookings: Space is very limited and booking is essential. Phone Michelle on 011-786-1268 or 082-458-1302, email her on michelle@oceansessence.com or visit her website at www.oceansessence.com

websites to visit: www.dolphinquest.org; www.wilddolphinproject.org