

Drop a line to a dolphin

Arja Salafranca chats to Michelle Sachs, a woman with a special connection to dolphins

Michelle Sachs was afraid of water. This presented a problem as she desperately wanted to swim with the dolphins, and had dreamed about experiencing these animals since first seeing them at the age of five or six.

"My friends wanted to be ballerinas or firemen: I wanted to be a dolphin," says Michelle. "I was so impressed by them, in love with them."

We're sitting at a coffee shop in one of Jozi's northern centre malls. Drinking ice cappuccinos we're hoping to beat the heat on a scorching summer day on the highveld.

We're far away from the ocean at Ponto D'Ouro in Mozambique, far away from any sea and any dolphins. Yet, as we speak, and Michelle describes the dolphins encounters trips she runs, the dolphins are very much there, with us. Forget antiseptic malls that look like one another: all you need is a little conversation to conjure up other worlds.

Despite her fear of water, Michelle undertook a journey to swim with dolphins. The first day consisted of training and Michelle managed to snorkel a bit. The next day on the launch they saw the dolphins. Finding the courage to get into the sea, Michelle grasped her husband's hand tightly and told him not to let her go.

But, amazingly, she soon let go of his hand and swam after the dolphins. Her husband couldn't believe it.

"Suddenly I wasn't afraid of the ocean," says Michelle. "I was with these big grey dolphins, looking in their eyes and the acceptance I felt was amazing. I was a different person. I've now done a scuba diving course. My fear is gone."

Michelle has continued swimming with the dolphins, experiencing her own kind of healing.

"Personally I don't know how dolphins heal. Perhaps they accelerate your own healing by accepting you. This can be incredibly healing, especially for Downs Syndrome kids or those with cerebral palsy - and this experience changes them. They feel better about themselves, people can lift out of depression. This emotional healing can also lead to physical healing."

"I have seen people change after swimming with the dolphins, they have a better ability to cope with life, to change."

After her experience Michelle returned to Mozambique to swim with the dolphins, but felt a need to touch a dolphin. In Mozambique there's a strict no-touching rule in force.

At Dolphin Quest Centre in Bermuda, Michelle found a place that offered an interactive experience where she was free to kiss and touch these animals. The centre also offers an internship where people learn how to care for dolphins, with much of the profit going towards wild dolphin projects.

Michelle spent three months in Bermuda, feeding the dolphins, learning about husbandry, taking blood samples, even learning to brush their teeth.

It's hard work, Michelle admits, but the reward of interaction was what she had come for: Hoping to introduce others to the experience, Michelle started up Oceans Essence, and began taking people on trips to swim with the bottlenose dolphins at Ponto d'Ouro in Mozambique.

Swimming with these animals is a spiritual experience. Michelle takes this further.



Michelle Sachs, above, overcame her fear of water by swimming with dolphins



Dolphins are renowned for their intuition and healing qualities

Having studied animal communication with South African animal communicator Wynter Worsthorne, Michelle's trips are about connecting with these animals, and allowing others to do so.

"You have to show them respect," says Michelle. "I wouldn't like it if someone just popped into my house. A couple of weeks before I go I tell them I'm coming down, would love to see and play with them."

Michelle describes not having gone up to Mozambique for a while and when she went swimming one of the dolphin matriarchs approached, and the sense Michelle

got was that the dolphin was wondering where she had been.

Another time Michelle was swimming and a baby dolphin kept coming up to her, then going back to its mother, then returning to see Michelle.

Michelle also describes how dolphins can "read" moods. She writes in her pamphlets about her experience in Bermuda: "Nearly every time I started thinking about the groceries I needed to pick up or that I musn't forget to phone my mom, the dolphin I was with would simply turn his back on me and swim away. It was uncan-

DOLPHIN ENCOUNTERS IN 2007:

Wednesday 14th March to Sunday 18th March, Wednesday 20th June to Sunday 24th June 2007, Wednesday 6th September to Sunday 9th September 2007 and Wednesday 28th November to Sunday 2nd December 2007

The cost is R3 780. It's self-drive to the Mozambique border. The cost includes border transfers, four nights accommodation in wooden chalets, four boat launches to swim with the dolphins, a snorkelling course, educational slideshow, some meals, meditations, and a guide to giving a foot massage.

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ny how many times I would catch myself not thinking about him, and his behaviour alerted me to the fact that he was now not thinking about me. One of the female dolphins would simply roll over and urinate on you when your attention wavered."

Michelle's enthusiasm is infectious and it's clear that the experience of swimming with these animals is a little indescribable. These encounters may seem ordinary, mundane even - but as anyone who has interacted with a wild animal can attest, there is something special, and yes, indescribable, about the experience.

Yet, it's not all pleasure and fun. Michelle cautions that you have to learn to read the body language: if a dolphin is slapping its tail on the surface that's a sign of annoyance, and a signal to stay away.

Michelle describes swimming with her husband when they encountered a family group: mother, father and a baby dolphin. As a male her husband was clearly a threat to the other male and he experienced intense nausea, almost as a form of attack from the alpha male.

Michelle's trips emphasise spirituality, meditation and participants are also taught to give a foot massage (Michelle is also a trained reflexologist).

Glancing through one of her pamphlets I read through meditations, tips on breathing techniques - how to breathe deeply and fully, like a dolphin, for instance. There are numerous other stories about connecting with and learning from dolphins, as well as stories of how they sense distress in humans and attempt their own methods of helping us.

Other ways of connecting with dolphins include asking the dolphins for assistance. Michelle suggests if you have a question that needs answering write a letter to the dolphins outlining your fears, hopes and dreams.

In the letter ask that the answer to your question, or assistance, be provided via a trusted source, a family member or a friend. Burn the letter and toss the ashes into a body of water: ocean, river or lake, or leave the ashes in a bowl of water overnight and toss them out the next morning.

As we leave, Michelle sums up: "You can only really understand wild animals in the wild, that's when you really experience them."