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From the scenic to the sacred in Oahu, Hawaii

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By Vera Vida
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Page 3 of 3 -- In the past, in many parts of the world, we had been on so-called dolphin swims, always with disappointing results. Everytime, no sooner had we jumped into the water, as our tour leaders had instructed us to do when the boat came upon dolphins, than the enchanting creatures fled at top dolphin speed.

"Go ahead and sing," the tour leader advised in the Azores, which has more species of cetaceans (dolphins and whales) than any place on earth. The dolphins, perhaps not finding my voice melodious, took off like a shot.

"You need a spiritual connection with them," counseled a tour leader on yet another dolphin swim. "They can feel your psychic energy." "I love you dolphins, I love you dolphins," I said over and over, hoping they would stay. They didn't.

But we finally did swim with dolphins on Oahu, and the marine biologists who run the Wild Side Specialty Tours deserve the credit. Their rules were different: No, you didn't sing or make any other loud noises as you got into the water, which you were to do as quietly and unobtrusively as possible.

"You swim with the dolphins gently; you don't chase or pursue them. You swim parallel to them, never swim at them," we were told by Tori Cullins, co-owner of Wild Side with her husband, Armin. Both are marine biologists, as is Laurent Pool, who that day was captain of the 42-foot catamaran Island Spirit, which took us to the dolphins' world.

"There are about 250-300 spinner dolphins in the resident pod here on the Waianae Coast," said Cullins, who is studying the behavior of the spinners. "We see 40 to 60 at a time, on the average."

The spinner dolphins -- named for the fantastic spins they make as they leap out of the water -- were delighting us with their acrobatics before we joined them in the sea.

Cullins further cautioned: "Spinner dolphins are small, about half the size of bottlenose dolphins, and anything that would frighten them would make them move away. You want to blend with them in the water, and you don't want to do anything that would change their behavior."

Without so much as a splash, we slid into the water with our masks and snorkels and a feeling of ecstasy. And this time, the dolphins didn't leave.

We swam with them and above them for about 45 minutes, counting perhaps 40 spinners, including a good many mothers with babies -- a few of them, we later learned, only a few days old, not even old enough to keep their dorsal fin up; the tiny fins were flopping around in the water.

Later, back on the boat, Cullins told us: "I started doing research on humpback whales; I wanted to work with intelligent animals in their natural environment." She has studied spinner dolphins for about seven years. On the catamaran, which can take four to 15 passengers, "we always have at least one marine biologist, usually two," Cullins said. "We see the dolphins here year round, and go on the trips seven days a week."

Do the dolphin swims bother the spinners? Cullins said she sees no negative effect on the dolphins, but added: "If we weren't here, I don't think they'd miss us. They're curious about us, but not the way we're fascinated by them."

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