

Daily News

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OUTDOORS

Flip service in Honduras

Spend a day with the dolphins of Roatan Island



At Anthony's Key Resort in Honduras, guests can command dolphins using hand signals, above, and then get a closer look at the mammals on a scuba dive, right.

Story and photos by Bill Becher
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ROATAN ISLAND, Honduras
I slap my hands on the water and two bottlenose dolphins swim toward me, propelled by a few flicks of their tails. The 400-pound creatures push hard on my feet with their noses and skim me across the surface of the warm Caribbean lagoon.

My two-dolphin-power E-ticket ride is taking place at Anthony's Key Resort on the island of Roatan off the coast of Honduras.

This tropical playground, well known to scuba divers, is also home to the Roatan Institute of Marine Science. Here visitors can touch, swim, snorkel and scuba dive with dolphins and even be a "dolphin trainer for a day."

A dolphin trainer's day starts with preparing food. You help sort the restaurant-grade frozen fish, picking out damaged fish that might harbor bacteria.

Trainers carry small coolers of fish marked with each dolphin's name out to the large pens in the lagoon rimmed with wooden catwalks. It's a pretty setting with no concrete in sight. We sit on a floating platform and get acquainted with the dolphins.

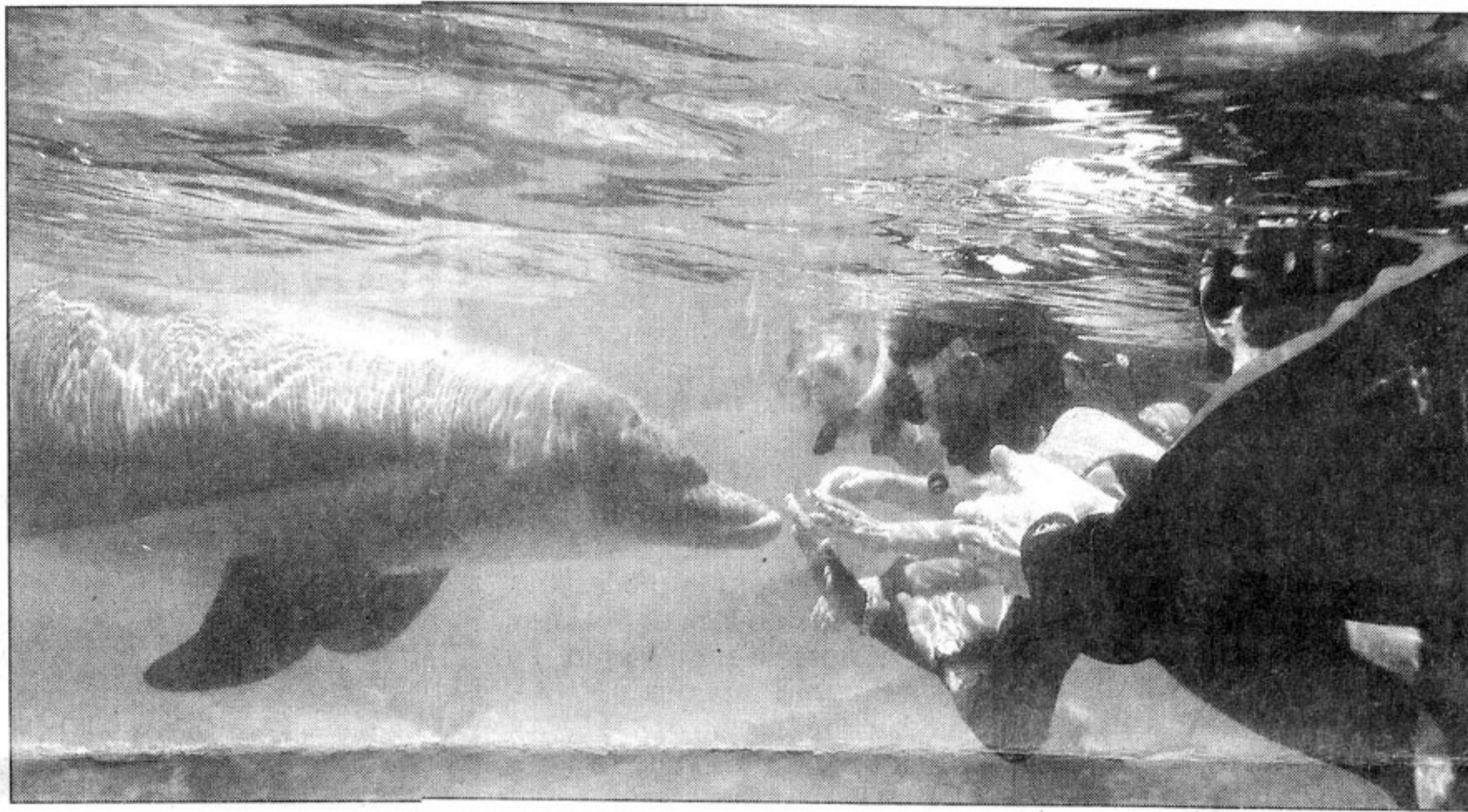
Biologist Teri Bolton and her husband run the dolphin program. She invites us to pet a dolphin — they like strokes. Their skin is smooth and tight, like an inflated inner tube.

Dolphins aren't fish; they are air-breathing sea mammals. They are also curious, playful and intelligent. If humans lived in the ocean, dolphins would be our golden retrievers, except smarter — you wouldn't find a dolphin drinking from a toilet.

After watching the trainers interact with the dolphins and learning about their habits and likes and dislikes, you head back to the fish house to prepare another meal. Then it's time to learn the hand signals trainers use to communicate with the dolphins.

We sit with feet dangling in the water. Two male dolphins swim up — Esteban and Paya. They're out of their pens, in the open ocean, and seem to enjoy their frolic with us. If they didn't they could just keep swimming to Jamaica.

The dolphins pop their heads out of the water. Bolton tells us to raise one arm quickly. The dolphins swim away and then



leap into the air repeatedly until we lower our arms. Then they come back for a fishy reward that they swallow whole.

Hold your hand in the water and the dolphin places his nose on it. Tap on his side with your other hand and the dolphin takes off in a circular speed run. Lift both hands and push and the dolphin tail-walks. Wag your fingers and the dolphin talks in clicks. Rotate the fingers and they pirouette in the water.

By this time, I confuse the signals, and Paya spins when he's supposed to talk. I spin my fingers.

"No, the dolphin's training you," Bolton says with a laugh. Apparently, one of the qualities a trainer needs is to be smarter than the dolphin. Enthusiasm and curiosity help, too.

"Anyone can walk out there with a bucket," says Bolton.

"But the interesting part is wanting to see what tickles that animal, and forming a relationship."

After the hand-signal session, we don wet suits and masks and get in the water. The dolphins swim out, we grab their dorsal

fins, and they tow us back to the dock. Then it's time for the dolphin-powered body surfing grand finale.

If training a dolphin isn't enough, you can also scuba dive with them in the ocean.

As we kneel on the sandy bottom, the dolphins materialize, swooping around the divers then scratching their backs on a sponge. A dolphin swims by, streaming bubbles from his blowhole. Then they do a series of jumps. Seen from underwater, it's like a mirror image of the above-water show.

For scuba divers at Anthony's Key there are also reef dives, wall dives, wreck dives, shark dives, night dives and beach dives. For divers and non-divers there are snorkeling, kayaking, jungle canopy tours, horseback riding and my favorite: swinging in a hammock in the gentle ocean breeze and listening to the sound of the surf pounding on the reef.

The setting here could have been designed by a post-card photographer. The majority of rooms are on the beach at Anthony's Key, a 30-second boat ride away. The Key is also the site of the Monday-night crab races, limbo contests and beach barbecues.

Most of the resort is built out of wood, lending it a simple, rustic feel. The dining room and bar are located up a flight of wooden steps, like a giant tree house in the jungle overlooking the lagoon.

Brent Howell from Seattle has been coming here for 15 years and is conflicted. "I'd like to tell people about Roatan and I'm afraid to tell people about it," he said. "It's a secret I don't want to share."

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Extreme Escapes

IF YOU GO

GETTING THERE:

Several U.S. airlines and Sol Air offer flights to Roatan via Miami or Houston.

DIVING: Anthony's Key Resort offers dive and nondive packages including seven nights' accommodations, three meals a day, air tanks, weight belts and weights, three single-tank boat dives per day and two single-tank night boat dives starting at \$599. Scuba instruction and certification is available. Dolphin trainer for a day costs \$160 for guests.

INFORMATION:

(800) 227-3483;
www.anthonyskey.com.