

Bimini Magic

A Frolic with Wild Dolphins

by Tim Rock and Yoko Higashide

I was hanging in the Bimini blue. I could see the sandy bottom and I could hear the calls of the wild ocean. I turned and there they were. Oblivious to my mere floating presence, they were calling, swimming and slapping one another in a wild frenzy. It was a group of spotted dolphins. And they were going crazy in a mad ball of pre-sexual foreplay. I had never seen anything like this in the sea and I may never see it again.

It's a little place with a big name. Made famous in the '30s by rum swilling fishermen and angler-author Ernest Hemingway, it was the place where facts became fables. But that was then and this is now.

Fishing and revelry now share the stage with skin diving and dolphins. Ringed in sandy shorelines of snow-white powder fine beaches, its blue and gin clear waters are just eye-popping. Its quintessential Bahamas. Just a half hour flight from Florida's Fort Lauderdale, it's a world away in terms of lifestyle.

The yards are flush with flora,

dotted in chartreuse bougainvillea and other tropical flowers. People ride bikes, roll by in golf carts and there's even a car or two. Many people just walk.

If you're lucky, a junkanoo band will parade down the street playing music that makes everyone want to dance. Restaurants boast fare like conch salad and lobster fritters. Liquor stores still have cheap rum and Bahamian beer.

Al Sweeting Jr. has lived amidst this tropical splendor all of his life. His heritage in these islands dates back more than seven generations He grew up here and learned to love the Bimini seas and to free dive its many reefs. He's explored the infamous Bimini Road, fought giant marlin and learned as his ocean-loving father and uncle passed on the secrets of the sea. He was raised on a beach and cut his teeth on boats~ all sorts of boats. He left Bimini to become a banker but that didn't last long. He returned to his true passion of free diving and started an adventure company that now specializes in finding wild dolphins in



Camera data: I used Nikon D200 cameras in Aquatica housings with 8" dome and Ikelite DS125 strobes at 1/8 power for fill when the sun was starting to set. All underwater images were made with the Tokina 10-17mm lens. Land images were mainly made with the Sigma 10-200MM OS lens and circular polarizer.





the Northwest Providence Channel.

Bimini actually has lots to offer in terms of marine life. Sitting at the edge of the shallow Bahamas Banks on one side and the very deep Straits of Florida on the other, the entire area is a fertile breeding and nursery area for much of the Caribbean. At horseshoe-shaped Honeymoon Harbour Bay, you can snorkel with southern stingrays a la Grand Cayman's famed Stingray

City. You can also have a frolic with Caribbean reef sharks just south of Bimini over a shallow, sandy trench at Triangle Rocks. At The Concrete Ship, whose name says it all, you can wander over the watery inner holds of a 1929 shipwreck whose fate was sealed by a hurricane.

But with all that Bimini has to offer, Al's passion can be found ten or more miles out to sea in the shallow northern banks that run through much of the Bahamas. About the time Bimini starts to get pretty small on the horizon, Al's pals show up. He likes to find, swim with and photograph wild spotted dolphins (*Stenella frontalis*). He works closely with Kelly Melillo of the Dolphin Communication Project (DCP). She's a dedicated marine scientist who specializes in nothing but observing this Bimini family of perhaps 100 dolphins that live in the banks north of the island.

Al spots them from four stories up in a high tower that sways above his comfy Hatteras cruiser. He watches to see their demeanor. If they look

curious or inquisitive, he will tell folks to don their fins and mask. The boat slows to a stop and people slide into the water.

Then all Hell breaks loose.

Crazed and seemingly frenzied, the dolphins will swim among the snorkelers, sating their curiosity. A domed camera housing seems to always attract attention. Sometimes the younger ones swim right up to the front port. They also like to play so good free divers dip down and mimic the dolphins. This sometimes drives them nuts and even more play ensues. This diver to dolphin interaction is totally up to the dolphins. It can last 30 seconds or it can go on for hours. If the dolphins are curious and engaged, it's never-ending fun. Usually it's the snorkelers who surrender first, elated and exhausted.

On one of our last days at sea, we encountered something that Al says is pretty rare. It was a mating congregation. Actually, it was more of a huge group foreplay gathering and it was wild. Dolphins apparently like it rough. They were swimming in a large group of maybe 30 dolphins. The older ones were really getting into it. We could look down and see them swimming single file almost like a

bracelet. Then they would group together in a big ball near the surface. They would start slapping, biting, chirping and chattering. Al told me to not get into the middle of this as a powerful “love slap” from a dolphin can knock your mask off. And if you’re in the middle of this, you’re fair game.

So we would dive down on the periphery and watch in amazement. Once they had enough the dolphins would dive down and swim off again only to surface perhaps 100 yards later and do the same thing. They was no pattern to this. At times they would swim far away from us. Other times they would come back and be right in our midst.

The younger ones would play with my lens or follow my snorkel model Yoko as she dipped down and twirled around. But the older ones were totally enthralled with this foreplay.

Actual dolphin mating takes less than a minute on the average. But the foreplay goes on for a long time. We left this unpredictable but fascinating group to look for some others. But they had been doing the mating dance for over an hour that we saw and showed no sign of stopping.

Bimini is a fascinating little place for the ocean lover. Aside from dolphins, sharks, wrecks and rays there is a marine lab there that

specializes in sharks and the extensive mangroves hold an amazing array of Caribbean juveniles. Free diving in the open ocean with curious dolphins is a dream for many. On Bimini, the dream can come true.

Tim Rock

Tim is a professional marine photojournalist based in Micronesia.

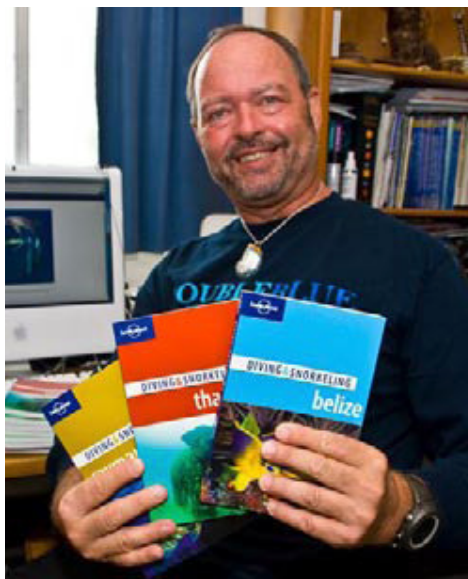
He is a Lonely Planet author and correspondent for many ocean-oriented magazines.

Tim’s website:

www.doubleblue.com

Al Sweeting’s website:

www.biminiadventures.com



Play with Wild DOLPHINS in the Bahamas

Join Photojournalist Tim Rock
in Bimini May 10-17 for
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- 1 Day Three Sisters & Dolphins
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