Live the life of a dolphin trainer, at least for a day

[by Tom Roebuck]

LAS VEGAS - Next to the pool area at the Mirage Hotel is a dolphin habitat, where visitors can escape the traditional Vegas atmosphere - blinking lights, noisy slots - for a leisurely day watching the trainers interact with the majestic Atlantic bottlenose dolphins. The habitat’s interlocking pools, with shimmering blue water and the ever-smiling dolphins, are as inviting as the adjacent swimming pool teeming with humans downing daiquiris.

The Mirage’s dolphins do not jump through flaming hoops nor give piggyback rides. However, they are naturally playful, pleasing the crowd with arcing jumps, spins, flips and tail walks, which are part of their natural behavior.

The focus here is on education and interaction. Most of the dolphins at the Mirage were born on-site, and many of the research projects undertaken by the habitat have studied the reproduction process of the dolphins.

For many participants, it is the first time they have seen a dolphin, or at least at such close range. The first thing many notice is how big the dolphins are.

“When they first get started, some people aren’t aware of how big they are and are a little intimidated. But as the day goes on, they come out of their shell and really start to interact with the dolphins,” said Jimmie Hudson, assistant curator of animal care.

With only four Trainer for a Day slots available for each day, participants are able to work very closely with the trainers and get to know them on a first-name basis quickly. The trainers lead the group from pool to pool (there are four) teaching training methods, and participants reward positive behavior with a fish or a toot on a whistle.

As the trainers and participants work with the dolphins, visitors to the habitat watch from the pool deck, often only inches away, while a narrator describes what is going on, frequently mentioning the Trainer for a Day program. For some day-trainers, this could be quite unnerving, being the center of attention all day in front of dozens of strangers while clad in a wet suit. But one of the pools is out of the public’s view, so there is some time alone with the dolphins and trainers.

It’s in the secluded area where day-trainers can observe aspects of dolphin care that the public rarely sees, including veterinary care procedures such as ultrasounds and recording the animals’ heart rates and temperatures. This area of shallow water also gives day-trainers their closest encounter with the dolphins, where they can literally hold the dolphins on the water’s surface for the photographer, who is present throughout the day snapping dozens of digital pictures.

The program is aptly named. While participants get into the water with the dolphins and interact closely with them, this isn’t a swim-with-the-dolphins arrangement.

After a few hours in the water, day-trainers are fed a private lunch poolside and are able to dry off and enjoy a shady break from the desert sun.

By the time the afternoon session begins, day-trainers generally feel more at ease with their new friends. A frequent comment is that interacting with the dolphins is like playing with a puppy. Hudson said the mammals thrive on interacting with humans, even different ones every day.
The trainers have a fun, easygoing demeanor, and their dedication to the dolphins is infectious. A future generation of marine biologists could be inspired by just one dolphin interaction. But Hudson said it’s not just the younger visitors that are drawn in.

“It’s really people of all ages that are fascinated with the dolphins, from infants to senior citizens,” he said.

IF YOU GO

Such personal attention does not come cheap. The Trainer for a Day program costs $500 per person, including breakfast and lunch, and comes with an 8-by-10 photo and a gift [T-shirt, hat, etc.]. A photo CD of pictures taken throughout the day is an extra $75. Each day-trainer can bring along an observer for $150, who can shadow the group all day taking pictures and join in on the private lunch.

The Trainer for a Day program is open to the public, not just guests staying at the Mirage.


Tom Roebuck is travel editor for Copley News Service.

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