

# MidWeek

## The Wild Side of Dolphins

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By Kerry Miller



Nathalie Walker photos nwalker@midweek.com

A boat from the Dolphin Institute does research off the Waianae Coast

It's worth it to wake up before dawn if you know you'll have a chance to swim with dolphins and sea turtles - not to mention take in the natural beauty of the Waianae Coast.

Under the leadership of Wild Side Specialty Tours, photographer Nathalie Walker and I joined an early morning dolphin tour last Wednesday aboard the 40-foot *Island Spirit*, which left Waianae Boat Harbor at 7 a.m. - after a 6:30 a.m. check-in time. With Captains Ann Ford and Kara Benson at the helm, warm rays of the sun streaming down upon us, mountains to the left and ocean stretching for miles, we set sail for a four-hour tour ... a four-hour tour ... a four-hour tour ...

Wild Side Specialty Tours offers daily, year-round dolphin excursions, whale watches, sea turtle encounters and sunset cruises. They also hosted a tour for people to view the recent lunar eclipse from the water. They have two boats, the newer *Alakai* and the *Island Spirit*, the 35-year-old catamaran, which is due for a complete makeover in a few weeks.

Benson, who's also the *Spirit's* on-board marine biologist, gets everybody set up with snorkeling gear so we can jump in and swim with the dolphins (except for me, I'm the dork who forgot her bathing suit). Once we're moving, she briefs us eight passengers on what to do while in the water and also tells us a bit about the dolphins we're about to see.

Spinner dolphins, she says, "are the only dolphin in the wild that will jump and spin around vertically. They're the most acrobatic ocean dolphin. They're a smaller species, the same size as we are," says Benson. "(There's) a population of 330 spinner dolphins that live in this area. The population stays pretty stable, which is a good thing. The average pod size is 30-40.

Benson says the boat slows and stops when dolphins are resting - they never actually stop moving - and that's when it's safest for people to swim with them.

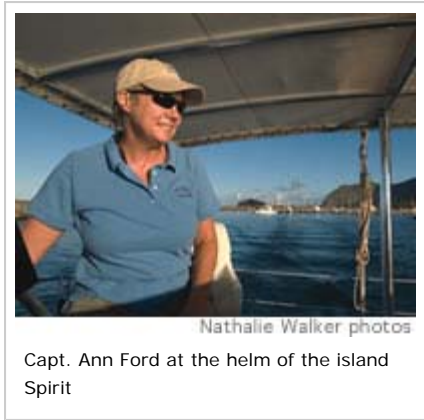
We eventually come upon a small pod of spinner dolphins, who are cute and curious and swim right along side the boat. They are gray and black in color, weigh about 150-200 pounds and are 5-6 feet long.

Benson explains that these particular dolphins feed at night- they're nocturnal, so a good time to see them is early in the morning before they head into deeper waters to find shrimp, squid and lantern fish to eat, which she says, makes them susceptible to getting bitten by cookie cutter sharks. She points to a dolphin swimming alongside the port side of the boat that has a small circular bite on its back, explaining that this is a bite from cookie cutter shark. Benson adds, however, that cookie cutter sharks are only 1-2 feet long in size, so their bites don't do a lot



Spinner dolphins off the Waianae Coast

of damage and tend to heal fairly quickly.



Nathalie Walker photos

Capt. Ann Ford at the helm of the island Spirit

Now it's time to swim, and Ford anchors the boat, stopping it so the passengers can head into the water. Benson jumps in as well, to lead everybody in the right direction and make sure no one is splashing with their arms and legs, because as she explains, spinners communicate by splashing their fins, using different splashes to talk to each other, and we don't want to be interfering with their communications.

Once swimming time is over, my fellow passengers reboard with stories of three spinners swimming on top of each other, a mother showing her baby how to swim, and some said they could hear the spinners chattering to each other.

Ford starts up the boat again and we move to another dolphin resting area for another chance to swim, and this time we spot some sea turtles. The turtles are huge and when they come up for air, appear to just float along peacefully, popping their heads up a couple of times, and then under water they go. Along the way we also see flying fish zip-ping along the top of the water.

"The first time I saw them, I thought they were dragonflies," Benson says of the fish.



Nathalie Walker photos

Spinner dolphins frolic off the Leeward Coast

Occasionally on Wild Side tours, bottlenose dolphins are spotted, but mostly it's the spinners, adds Benson, a Buffalo, N.Y., native who graduated from Florida Tech and the University of Florida.

The Waipahu resident started as a volunteer/intern for W/S in January 2006 before being a full-time crew member in January of this year.

"I got my captain's license (and) sometimes I get to drive the new boat (the *Alakai*). It's great.

"I always wanted to move here. My husband is in the Navy and got stationed here."

Capt. Ford says sailing is in her blood and that she's "been sailing since I was little." About 20 years ago, the Seattle native got her captain's license and proceeded to work for the Coast Guard for five years. Ford made her way to Oahu because her daughter decided to attend college here. For the past year a half, Mom has been navigating the *Island Spirit*.

"Every day is different. No two days are the same," says the Makaha resident.

Wild Side owners Tori and Armin Cullins say their goal is to make sure their passengers have a fun trip, while being environmentally friendly. For example, the *Island Spirit's* maximum capacity is 32 people, but they only take up to 16 on any given tour so that they're not putting too many people in the water at one time with the dolphins. They also participate in conservation and resource management of local marine habitats, as well as cooperate with the Dolphin Institute in studying behavior, ecology and the natural history of whales, dolphins, turtles, coral reefs and other marine life in Hawaii.

More recently, the Cullins are trying to get a Makai Watch in effect for West Oahu waters. A Makai Watch, one of which is already in place at Maunalua Bay in Hawaii Kai, is like a neighborhood watch program for marine life. It's a partnership program of The Nature Conservancy, Malama Hawaii, Malama Maunalua, Community Conservation Network, Hawaii Wildlife Fun, Sea Grant and the state Department of Land and Natural Resources (Aquatic Division). The program allows communities concerned with the health of our marine resources to be

involved in efforts to protect them.

“It involves educating the community about how to record information if you see people doing illegal activities or see injured whales,” explains Ford.

*To take a Wild Side tour, visit their website [www.sailhawaii.com](http://www.sailhawaii.com) or call 306-7273.*

*For more information on Makai Watch, head to The Nature Conservancy’s website, [www.nature.org](http://www.nature.org) and search “Makai Watch” - the first search result is for the Nature Conservancy Hawaii.*

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