

Up close and personal

There is something about dolphins that lifts the spirit and soothes the soul. **Sue Wallace** travelled to Western Australia's Monkey Mia, where dolphins view the tourists three times a day and keep coming back.

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STANDING in the shallows of the turquoise waters of Monkey Mia, watching dolphins swim along the beach-front is one of those special moments.

As soon as you hear the call, "They're here", there's a rush to the beach for the first of three morning feeds.

Day after day, Nicky, the most photographed dolphin in Shark Bay, and a group of 10 dolphins, including Piccolo, Puck and Surprise, head close to shore for a feed.

Feeds are supervised by Conservation and Land Management rangers and offered to the dolphins by a chosen few, selected at random from the line-up of dolphin watchers.

They are fed in a manner which allows human contact while ensuring the dolphins do not become stressed or dependent on hand feeding.

Day after day tourists arrive at the Monkey Mia Dolphin Resort from all over the world to learn more about bottle-nosed dolphins.

They leave with a far greater respect for these incredible ani-

mals which have held humans spellbound for decades.

Regardless of nationality or background, the reaction to the dolphins is the same, with loud oohs and ahhs heard as the dolphins swim past.

"Talk to them," urge the rangers and you soon find yourself saying, "Hello Nicky, aren't you gorgeous," as waves lap the shore in the dolphin-only feeding area.

I'd heard concerns about Monkey Mia's commercialism and the crowds, but each day, I left the beach feeling privileged to have had such a close encounter with these animals.

I lined up three times a day for three days for the feedings and was chosen to put a smelly dead fish in a dolphin's mouth.

And what a thrill it was.

Some who visit Monkey Mia can only spare an hour or so and then rush off on their travels, others apply to become volunteers and spend days helping the rangers.

Whatever you do, make sure you have at least three days in the area to appreciate its beauty and natural attractions.

Retired Italian pharmacist Piero Checconi and his wife, Simonetta from Rome, who have travelled the world, return to Monkey Mia every year.

"This is paradise and there is no place like it in Europe, this is just unique," Piero said.

He first stopped at Monkey Mia in 1990.

It was back in the 1960s that pods of dolphins started what has become a daily ritual of swimming into the clear shallows to delight visitors.

The Monkey Mia and Shark Bay dolphins have been studied extensively since 1984.

Long-term research findings have contributed to the understanding of dolphins worldwide.

Dolphin behaviour, ecology, genetics, development, communication, social structure, predators and prey are all being researched making it one of the most important dolphin research sites in the world.

The dolphins are fed only up to 1pm and are given only one-third of their daily intake. Requirements to ensure they spend their after-



Clockwise from above: Pods of dolphins started the daily ritual of swimming into the clear shallows to delight visitors from throughout the world since the 1960s.

The Monkey Mia Resort has stunning views of the coastline from its manicured lawns. It also offers a full range of activities to enjoy during your stay.

Fishermen clean the catch of the day at Monkey Mia. It draws a large crowd of pelicans.

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A patron dines at Bough Shed Restaurant at Monkey Mia Dolphin Resort at Shark Bay.

Sailing is a popular attraction at Shark Bay at Monkey Mia. Many cruises are available to tourists.



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noons off shore, socialising and foraging for wild food.

Wander down to the beach for a swim and don't be surprised if a pod of dolphins swims past, but be warned, a nasty smack with their tail can leave you with broken ribs.

The secret of an up close and personal encounter with a dolphin is not to approach it, but let the dolphin come to you, then keep still.

They are wild animals and free to come and go at Monkey Mia as they like.

It is rare for dolphins not to appear, but there is no guarantee.

Theories of why they like Dolphin Beach are linked with fishermen

who cleaned their catch and threw back what they didn't want.

Skippers Airways operates five flights a week from Perth to Shark Bay Airport and then it is a short bus ride to the Monkey Mia Dolphin Resort.

Located 27km from Denham, on a perfect section of the World Heritage coastline, the resort caters for all budgets from camping, backpackers lodge, family park homes, beachside units to luxury accommodation in beach-front villas.

The resort has a pool, hot tub, beach volleyball, tennis court, kayak and glass-bottomed boats, snorkelling, power scuba diving hire and fishing.

The Bough Shed Restaurant is open daily for breakfast, lunch and dinner and the Peron cafe offers casual dining.

There's a well-stocked mini mart, one-hour photo laboratory, internet cafe and massage.

The resort is environmentally friendly and has spectacular views of the coastline.

Monkey Mia Wildsights offers a variety of tours and cruises that show there's more to the area than dolphins.

The Shark Bay Marine Park is home to a profusion of marine life including turtles, dugongs and whales.

My lasting memories are a golden sunset with dolphins jumping over the waves.

the low-down

Getting there: Monkey Mia is 850km from Perth. Skippers Aviation flies five times a week from Perth to Shark Bay Airport. Phone 1300 729 924 or book online at www.skippers.com.au Monkey Mia Dolphin Resort: Accommodation ranges from camping sites to backpacker units, beachside units, beachfront villas and family homes.

For bookings phone 1800 653 63 visit www.monkeymia.com.au Conservation and Land Management charges a small fee to enter Moni National Park but dolphin viewing, feeding are free. Monkey Mia Wildsights offers guides and tours in the area, for book Freecall 1800 241 481 or visit www.monkeymiawildsights.com.au

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