

# Dolphins

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I visited my friend Däg Bjarvin in Santa Barbara this weekend. We took a 60-foot (or so) boat, the Liberty, from it's port in Ventura to the Channel Islands to dive. There were about 40 SCUBA divers and no other passengers on board.

Our first dive was at Anacapa Island. Your first dive of the day is supposed to be your deepest to reduce the chance of getting bent, so we took the opportunity to dive to 98 FSW (Feet of Sea Water). As a Monterey diver, I'm used to seeing it get so dark by 80 FSW that I can see only greys, but it was bright and colorful. Also, I usually can't see the surface when I'm more than 35 or 40 feet down, but from 98 FSW, I could see the ripples on the top. The horizontal visibility was about 60 feet, the best I've ever seen.

Our second dive, also at Anacapa, was in and around a fresh, young kelp forest. The forest was about 40 feet down on a 20-foot-high rough rocky plateau, and it was surrounded by an almost endless bed of sea urchins. The jet black urchins were huge; about 6 to 9 inches in diameter (spine-tip to spine-tip). The purple ones were what I'm used to seeing; they were about 3 to 6 inches in diameter. The neon-blue ones were entirely new to me; they were only an inch or two in diameter.

Our third dive, a night dive, was at Santa Cruz Island. We mostly saw rocks and gravel, but we did see the "skeleton" of a big black urchin, and Däg saw it's black spines in a ring next to it. (Sadly, I missed the spines.) We also saw a black sea-gull in a lobster cage 35 feet under. It wasn't stiff, so I presume it hadn't been dead very long. This upset me for a while after the dive until someone pointed out that it had probably died a natural death and whoever set the trap had decided to use the carcass for bait.

Now, every night diver knows about the ocean's bioluminescence. If you move your hands quickly, you see glowing green sparks. You can play patty-cake or snap your fingers to get this effect. During some seasons, the bioluminescence

is really strong; a swimming diver will be followed by the glowing green sparks. It's bright enough to see by if you turn off your flashlights and let your eyes adjust to the darkness. I believe the bioluminescence is caused by plankton or other microcritters; I don't know if they are sensitive to temperature or kinetic energy or what, and I'm not even sure it's from plankton. In any case, remember that the ocean glows ghostly green at night.

Däg and I were talking on deck after the third dive. Over the loud-speaker, the captain announced that some dolphins were approaching the bow. Every diver immediately stopped what he was doing—talking, cleaning gear, eating, or watching the movie in the galley—and stared for half a second. In unison, everyone jumped to his feet and ran to the front of the boat.

We all crowded along the bow and leaned over the railing. On the port side, I hoped that if we hit a swell, someone would grab my feet before I took a dunking.

The captain extinguished the lights on the front half of the boat. After my eyes adjusted, I saw the frothy bow-wave. It was glowing bright green from the bioluminescence. I looked at the water just in front of the bow and saw a brightly glowing green cloud just under the surface start at the bow and quickly spread out in front of us before disappearing; it must have been a school of very small fish or microcritters scattering when we approached them. I watched for a minute or so; no dolphins. They must have done their thing and left in the seconds between the captain's announcement and when we made it to the railing to look.

About fifty yards in front of the boat, two glowing green torpedos nearly surfaced. They were moving in the same direction as us, but we caught up with them in half a second or less. Just before we hit them, they caught up to our speed. They were moving so fast that they were surrounded by glowing green bioluminescent auras. Here were the dolphins.

Their green auras were the brightest lights I could see. All the details of their shapes were lit up; I could see their dorsal fins and their beaks.

They swam in front of the boat less than a minute, then sped off to port. I could see their green glow for the half a second it took for them to get fifty yards from the boat, then the glow went out. Maybe they submerged.

"What a cool post-dive treat", I thought. I kept watching for the occasional glowing green cloud of microcritters that expanded in front of the boat. They weren't nearly as cool as the dolphins, but they were worth watching.

Four more glowing green torpedos appeared 100 yards in front of the boat. We caught up to them in less than a second, and they took up our speed. They were just under the surface, and like the previous two, they were the brightest things I could see. Rather than swimming, they appeared to be burrowing furiously into the water. They spiralled around each other, never bumping or stumbling. One of them sped off to port, but two more joined the group by letting the boat catch up with them as the others had.

Now there were five glowing dolphins tunneling through the water in the front of the boat. Everyone whooped and whistled.

These dolphins didn't move with the slow, gentle grace that paintings and

photographs imply. They darted back and forth almost faster than I could see. Again, they looked more like they were borrowing through the water just under the surface than like they were swimming. They spiralled around each other. It's beyond me that they could avoid the boat, much less move so quickly around each other. You could see their muscles moving, but they looked more like twitches than the huge motions you would think they'd need to swim that fast. They would jump entirely out of the water, and when one did, the glow around him would stop, and he'd be a shiny black shadow back-lit by the glows around the others. You could hear the splash when he hit the water, and he'd be a glowing green dolphin again.

Occasionally, the five glowing dolphins would be back-lit by an expanding glowing green cloud of microcritters. Even better, we'd scatter schools of larger fish, and it would look like a bunch of bright green shooting stars exploded outward from just under the dolphins.

These five glowing green dolphins tunneled through the water and the air just above it and danced around each other, back-lit by glowing green shooting stars that were really fish, for minutes, with every diver grinning or cheering the whole time. One by one, the glowing green torpedos sped to port or starboard and went out.

When they were all gone, every smiling diver went back to what he had suddenly stopped doing.

It's impossible to describe just how great the experience was. It's not enough to say that it was worth the \$65 the trip cost, that it was better than the 60-foot visibility in the beautiful kelp forest, or the view of the ripples on the surface from 98 feet down. I'm at a total loss to describe its intensity. If I could, everyone would spend all his time on boats at night, looking for the dolphins.

End.