

[About Hana Hou!](#)  
[Hawaiian Airlines](#)  
[Contact Us](#)

subscribe to **Hana Hou!** ▶



Vol. 16, no. 4  
 August/September 2013

[Hana Hou! Home](#)  
[Media Kit](#)  
[Marketplace](#)  
[Current Issue](#)  
[>Orchid Wonderland](#)  
[>Try Local](#)  
[>Ink-o-rama](#)  
[>Paddling Pilgrimage](#)  
[>Lock, Stock and Barrel](#)  
[>California Reds](#)  
[>Two Masters](#)  
[>The Outpost](#)  
[>Prawntastic!](#)  
[>Getting Deep](#)  
[>Girls on Fire](#)  
[>Cub Reporters](#)  
[>Empire of the Sun](#)  
[>The Movie Makers](#)  
[>Fortunato's Garden](#)  
[>Holding the High Note](#)  
[>Calling All Curlews](#)  
[Back Issues](#)  
[Events](#)  
[Privacy Policy](#)  
[Site Archive](#)  
[Crossword](#)

# Hana Hou!

THE MAGAZINE OF HAWAIIAN AIRLINES



## Balancing Act

Story by Ashley Yeager  
 Photos by Elyse Butler

**On a balmy December morning**, a Minnesota couple on their honeymoon steps from the dock at Wai'anae harbor onto *The Spirit of Aloha*. They're giddy, and not just because they're newlyweds. "We're excited ... wild dolphins!" the husband says to captain Doug Ewalt while he and three more honeymooning couples file aboard the catamaran. Their anticipation's palpable, as if they're about to see in real life some mythical creature they'd only read about. *The Spirit of Aloha* is the flagship of Hawaii Nautical, a family-owned company that takes visitors to sea for a glimpse of wild dolphins, whales and other marine life—one of many such tour operators in Hawai'i. On this trip Ewalt doesn't disappoint. Only moments after motoring the catamaran into the bay, his crew spots a pod of spinner dolphins off to port.



Ewalt cuts the engine and drifts. The spinners glide toward the boat, then ride ahead of its bow. "They're familiar with me now. They know the sound of our boat and know we're not going to get in the water with them," Ewalt says. In that respect Ewalt is unlike most other tour operators. About half a football field away, another boat also sits idling, surrounded by about thirty people in the water. Swimmers dive, kick and thrash in a circus of fins, snorkels and fluorescent pool noodles. Some whistle to get the animals' attention while others reach out to touch them.

For Ewalt scenes like these are both normal and disconcerting. His company is one of only five O'ahu dolphin- and whale-watching tour operators that don't allow guests to hop off the boat and swim with spinners. With a business model like that, Ewalt admits he and the other "watch-only" businesses face an uphill climb—obviously, people are hoping for that quintessential Hawai'i experience: in-the-water close encounters with wild dolphins. Still, the dolphin-watching excursions are Hawaii Nautical's best-selling tour. Ewalt estimates he takes about 8,500 people out on his spinner-watching cruise annually, and his operation is only one of twelve working off West O'ahu. Twenty or so more operate off the Kona coast of Hawai'i Island, where more than 75,000 people got in the water to swim with wild dolphins last year. "These encounters can be life-changing," Ewalt says. But for whom?

Over the past forty years, scientists and tour operators like Ewalt have noted changes in the dolphins' behavior, leading them to wonder how all the attention might be affecting them. "We used to see dolphins every day," Ewalt says, "but now we're lucky if we do."

Page: [1](#) | [2](#) | [3](#)

[\[back\]](#)

[About Hana Hou!](#)  
[Hawaiian Airlines](#)  
[Contact Us](#)

subscribe to **Hana Hou!** ▶



Vol. 16, no. 4  
 August/September 2013

[Hana Hou! Home](#)  
[Media Kit](#)  
[Marketplace](#)  
[Current Issue](#)  
 >[Orchid Wonderland](#)  
 >[Try Local](#)  
 >[Ink-o-rama](#)  
 >[Paddling Pilgrimage](#)  
 >[Lock, Stock and Barrel](#)  
 >[California Reds](#)  
 >[Two Masters](#)  
 >[The Outpost](#)  
 >[Prawntastic!](#)  
 >[Getting Deep](#)  
 >[Girls on Fire](#)  
 >[Cub Reporters](#)  
 >[Empire of the Sun](#)  
 >[The Movie Makers](#)  
 >[Fortunato's Garden](#)  
 >[Holding the High Note](#)  
 >[Calling All Curlews](#)  
[Back Issues](#)  
[Events](#)  
[Privacy Policy](#)  
[Site Archive](#)  
[Crossword](#)

# Hana Hou!

THE MAGAZINE OF HAWAIIAN AIRLINES



## Balancing Act (Page 2)

### Spinner dolphins (*Stenella longirostris*)

are among the most common, or at least commonly seen, cetaceans in Hawai'i. No one knows how many there are, but scientists estimate a little more than three thousand. And they put on a great show, often riding the bow wave of tour boats and performing their signature twirling jumps—hence the moniker, “spinner” dolphin. But they spend most of their waking hours far beyond the reach of human eyes. They work the night shift, hunting in the Pacific's deep, dark waters. They swim into shallow, sandy bays like those at Wai'anae on O'ahu and Honaunau on Hawai'i Island, to socialize and rest. There, protected (relatively speaking) from open-ocean predators, the dolphins gather together, synchronize their breathing and sleep.



During sleep, spinners swim to and from the surface, safe inside a circle of friends. This period of rest, however, isn't like sleep as we know it, says Marc Lammers, a marine biologist at the University of Hawai'i at Manoa. “The dolphins are not actually unconscious. Only parts of their brains are asleep at any one time. They have, however, turned off their sonar, so without sound they rely heavily on sight.” Their reliance on sight, he says, is why clear water and white-bottomed sand bays are so important to them. But this preference has its disadvantages: Other ocean-loving mammals—humans—also favor Hawai'i's calm bays and are understandably thrilled by the opportunity to see wild dolphins up close.

“They're very curious and charismatic,” says Julian Tyne, a graduate student at Murdoch University in Australia who studies the effects of human interaction on Hawai'i's spinner dolphins. “As a consequence, swimming with wild dolphins is at the top of most people's bucket list.” Some dolphin tour PR goes so far as to claim that swimming with wild spinner dolphins may lead to emotional healing and spiritual awakening. And because they come close to shore and appear to smile, people assume they want to play, Tyne says. But, he cautions, spinner dolphins are wild animals. They might not bite, but they aren't domesticated and predictable, either. What might be interpreted as playfulness could be curiosity or even defensiveness. And their “smile” is an artifact of their skull structure, not an expression of emotion.

To better understand the impact of dolphin-human interaction, scientists have been studying it worldwide. In 2007 Swedish researchers found that the presence of one to two tour boats without swimmers didn't change the movement patterns of bottlenose dolphins off Zanzibar. But as tourism increased, the pods moved erratically, and more animals performed tail-out dives, a sign of distress. The study also showed that with more human interaction, female dolphins traveled more frequently, which the scientists suggested could decrease the time they spend nursing their calves.

The impact of human interaction might be even greater on Hawai'i's spinner dolphins because, unlike bottlenose dolphins, spinners follow a more rigid daily pattern, foraging at night and resting in sheltered bays during the day, Tyne says. Also, spinner pods found throughout Hawai'i do not all connect and interbreed—the Hawai'i Island group, for example, is distinct. Such isolation, says Tyne, makes each group more vulnerable to human impact.

The work to measure long-term effects is ongoing, and to do it, Tyne and his colleagues are tracking the Hawai'i Island spinners in four bays

along the Kona coast: Kauhako, Honaunau, Kealakekua and Makako. They've been following the behavior of individual dolphins and dropping hydrophones to hear whether the spinners' conversation changes when humans are around. "Trying to understand human-dolphin interactions is like solving a mystery. Each cetacean species and population is different," Tyne says, explaining that the biggest challenge is teasing apart which changes are due to natural pressures and which could be the result of human interaction.

Page: [1](#) | **2** | [3](#)

[\[back\]](#)

[About Hana Hou!](#)  
[Hawaiian Airlines](#)  
[Contact Us](#)

subscribe to **Hana Hou!** ▶



Vol. 16, no. 4  
 August/September 2013

[Hana Hou! Home](#)  
[Media Kit](#)  
[Marketplace](#)  
[Current Issue](#)  
[>Orchid Wonderland](#)  
[>Try Local](#)  
[>Ink-o-rama](#)  
[>Paddling Pilgrimage](#)  
[>Lock, Stock and Barrel](#)  
[>California Reds](#)  
[>Two Masters](#)  
[>The Outpost](#)  
[>Prawntastic!](#)  
[>Getting Deep](#)  
[>Girls on Fire](#)  
[>Cub Reporters](#)  
[>Empire of the Sun](#)  
[>The Movie Makers](#)  
[>Fortunato's Garden](#)  
[>Holding the High Note](#)  
[>Calling All Curlews](#)  
[Back Issues](#)  
[Events](#)  
[Privacy Policy](#)  
[Site Archive](#)  
[Crossword](#)

# Hana Hou!

THE MAGAZINE OF HAWAIIAN AIRLINES



## Balancing Act (Page 3)

**There's no question** that snorkeling with a dolphin pod that's whistling and playing all around you in the crystalline water is an incredible experience, one that's a million miles away from SeaWorld. "This is an ocean safari; it cannot be experienced in a park," says Victor Lozano, who owns Dolphin Excursions, which also runs tours off the Waï'anae coast. He offers the peak experience: being with wild dolphins in the water. He calls the swim-with part of their tour "The Drop," but there's no guarantee it'll happen on any given day. Lozano will allow swimmers in the water only if the spinners are awake and playful. He's also set guidelines to



protect the dolphins, like waiting for the dolphins to approach and not chasing them down and plunking people near them. Resting or traveling dolphins might not interact, but if they do approach, Lozano believes it's fairly harmless for swimmers to move slowly and quietly toward them. Even with those precautions, though, Lozano would prefer to see stronger protection. "Honestly, I wish NOAA would shut it down," Lozano says of his own swim-with tours.

If that sounds surprising coming from a businessman who depends on wild dolphin encounters, it reflects the understanding that protecting spinners is as much a priority for tour operators as scientists. The only reason Lozano hasn't followed Ewalt's lead is financial, he says. He can't afford it. But if the government were to level the playing field by banning swim-with tours, the economic incentive would be removed. But, Lozano says, it's hard to fashion effective regulations when tour operators who might be affected threaten to sue.

The Marine Mammal Protection Act of 1972 (MMPA) already prohibits the unauthorized "take"—that is, harassing, hunting, capturing or killing—of any marine mammal, including spinners. There's disagreement, though, on whether interaction with humans qualifies as "harassment." In some cases swim-with tours may constitute harassment, and in other cases they may not, says Laura McCue, who runs Hawai'i's wild dolphin conservation efforts for the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration. The MMPA does not explicitly state that being in the water with spinners is illegal, though NOAA's Marine Mammal Viewing Code of Conduct specifically warns against swimming with them. It also advocates viewing the dolphins from a minimum distance of fifty yards.

In 2011 McCue helped launch Dolphin SMART, a voluntary program based on guidelines set in the Florida Keys in 2007, to address how people interact with spinners. "SMART" is a mnemonic for: Stay back fifty yards from dolphins; Move away cautiously if dolphins show signs of disturbance; Always put your engine in neutral if dolphins are near; Refrain from feeding, touching or swimming with wild dolphins; Teach others to be dolphin-smart. Ewalt's Hawaii Nautical was the first operator on O'ahu to earn the certification, and others have followed, including Port Waikiki Cruises, Holoholo Charters, Ocean Joy Cruises and Star of Honolulu-Hoku Naia. McCue is now working with Kona operators on their certification.

"Dolphins are important to Hawai'i," says Lozano. "We gotta give them some space and just watch 'em." And because the dolphins are so beloved and so emblematic of Hawai'i, their population needs to be carefully monitored, Tyne says, adding that he believes that tourism can even help to protect the dolphins because tour operators provide an ideal platform for education.

"Spinners are amazing animals," UH's Lammers says. "We need to not let our love for them overwhelm us so that we smother them."

Page: [1](#) | [2](#) | **3**

[\[back\]](#)