

Open My Eyes

by Danielle S. Tepper

My face hit the water and I was home.

The ocean has always been a part of me. I was born and raised in New Jersey, where going to the beach was as common as going to the mall or movie theater. Growing up, I was a girl who loved to search for seashells and breathe in the aromas of the boardwalk. I am proud of my roots and I know the Jersey lifestyle is something that will always be an important part of who I am.

Leaving the ocean behind when we moved to Pennsylvania was one of the hardest things I've ever had to do, so to be able to visit it each summer with my family on vacation is a gift. We love to travel, usually to hot and tropical places. We have gone on a handful of cruises and visited numerous islands in the Caribbean. We have snorkeled in the Bahamas, on St. Thomas, Grand Cayman, Belize, and Mexico. But to visit this ocean, in this place? It was nothing short of amazing.

Hawaii. The English dictionary simply didn't have the right words. Each one that popped into my mind seemed too cliché to properly fit the vision before my eyes. Everyone always hears about how beautiful it is; you see it in movies and on TV, see pictures and read about it in magazines, but those two-dimensional images just don't do it justice. My parents had visited Maui and Oahu on their honeymoon almost 25 years ago, and I had looked at the photos with an intense jealousy all my life. In this little corner of the world, the ocean was incredible ... and finally, here I was, at 20 years old, on the Big Island for two whole weeks with my family. I never wanted to leave.

Our first week had just flown by in a blur of new experiences, spectacular

sights, and eccentric meals. We took countless photos and documented every restaurant, every beach, every moment and detail, so that we could keep them forever.

Our first day, we were driven all around the coasts of Kona and Hilo on a bus trip. It brought us to the Kona Coffee Plantation first, where we were able to tempt our taste buds with shotglass-sized cups of different blends, while learning how they used the land to cultivate the entire island's supply of delicious beans. It then took us to a botanical garden, which was incredible to behold; the fact that so many lush blossoms of every shape, size, and color were able to thrive on an island comprised mostly of lava rock was truly impressive.

Then, the main and final event: Kilauea, the island's active volcano site. We were able to view the caldera and witness the plumes of vog, or volcanic smog, and we suddenly understood why catching a glimpse of the hot Hawaiian sun was so rare. The vog was thick and settled over the Big Island like a cloud. The only times you could see the sun were very early in the morning as it rose, and sometimes, if you were lucky, right before it set in the evening. The vog also helped explain why temperatures never reached any higher than the balmy mid-80s.

We spent many days snorkeling right off the beaches—some had sand as white as freshly fallen snow, others as black as the sky on the nights when I would wander out to the lava rocks outside our resort, find myself one that was large and flat, and lie back to look at the stars as the waves crashed and a light breeze tickled the branches of the palm trees.

I became addicted to the sound of my breath blowing in and out of a snorkel. We floated lazily over stunning coral and watched multi-colored fish dart in and out. Colors always seem brighter underwater; the yellows and pinks and turquoises of the fish looked so much more vibrant than they would if they were viewed on land. I took our underwater camera and somersaulted straight down to photograph a closer look. I so badly

wished I was scuba-certified, so I could just stay down there for hours. When we weren't indulging in water so clear it looked as though it could have been poured straight from a bottle, we were exploring caves and collecting shells as sea turtles (or 'honu') circled our feet. Lunch everyday consisted of soggy PB&Js, which we ate as the salt crusted our bodies and we couldn't have been happier about it.

The Royal Sea Cliff Resort, which was our oasis-away-from-home, hosted various authentic Hawaiian activities, which included hula classes and workshops where we could make our own plumeria leis. The aroma of those flowers was simply intoxicating. After I strung each bloom, I leaned down to inhale their sweet scent. One morning, my mother and my little sister and I made anklets from miniature shells and colored beads, while my father went fishing.

Toward the end of the week, we went horseback riding through Waipio Valley, which was laced with some of the island's highest waterfalls. My sister and I plucked hibiscus blossoms from the trees we passed overhead and stuck them in our hair, making silly faces for our father as he took pictures. On the drive back to Kailua-Kona, we stopped at Rainbow Falls, and again at Akaka Falls, and stared at the beauty around us. We saw people hiking off to the side of the base of Akaka Falls, and followed them. We discovered a lava tube, wide and high enough to walk through, and took a little adventure. We left exhilarated, and made one more pit-stop for some homemade ice cream.

The halfway point of our vacation was spent at an authentic luau. The three of us got dressed up and did our hair while my father put on one of his signature tropical shirts. We arrived, and were instantly greeted with leis made of tiny white shells. A photographer snapped a shot of us with the ocean as a backdrop: "Next year's Christmas card!" according to my mother. Before we got our food, we gathered to watch the men, adorned in tribal tattoos and loincloths, dig up the pig that had been roasting underground for hours. My sister poked me in the ribs and pointed,

horrified, as she saw the pig's face emerge from its seaweed wrappings. During dinner, I tried poi and gagged. Once the show started, we stared in awe at the dancers and especially the fire-twirler, who spun circles of orange light faster than anything I'd ever seen before.

That was the night we finally saw our first Hawaiian sunset; the way the sun kissed the water and splashed a rainbow of colors across the sky was utterly breathtaking. That was also the night I knew I would want to come back to Hawaii someday. Our first week had been undoubtedly and undeniably amazing ... but nothing compared to this. This was the experience I had been waiting for before we had even boarded the plane back in PA.

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That was the way I always felt when attached to a mask and snorkel, as the previous week had proved beyond a shadow of a doubt, but this was different. We were nearing the end of our two-week retreat, and we were at Pu'u honua o Honaunau, or "Place of Refuge." It was a historical park and sanctuary, where you could explore ancient temples and admire 'ki'i' (wooden statues), and wander down the beach in search of sea turtles that often rested in the shallow water there. We were warned not to walk on the great wall, which was built many years ago with large lava rocks, or we would risk disrespecting the royal chiefs. The best part about Pu'u honua o Honaunau was how easily you could simply walk up the beach, jump off a boulder, and discover a coral reef.

That day, however, we had taken a guided raft; we weren't just there for fish. After we jumped into the cove, our guide instructed us to swim further out and wait. So, we waited. My eyes scanned the water impatiently. I felt jittery; there were butterflies flapping their giant wings against my ribcage and I tried to get rid of them with a few deep breaths. I wasn't nervous ... just terribly excited.

Sandwiched between my mother and sister, I wasn't sure what happened first; my mother grabbed my arm, my sister squealed inside her mask, and my father, who was floating a few feet in front of us, started frantically pointing. I heard our guide from above the water instruct everyone not to splash. I looked straight below me, and there they were: a pod of 20 to 25 wild spinner dolphins, passing just below us.

Our guide had explained that during the late morning and early afternoon hours, the dolphins are at their resting stage. They move slowly, with very little activity, and keep close to the island's shores for safety. This offers an ideal opportunity to witness them in their natural habitat, outside the confines of an aquarium tank or other structured experience. He was certainly right in saying that it was truly the only real way to see dolphins. Just the sight of them was enough to jump-start my heart, which had immediately leapt into my throat when my eyes focused on their sleek gray bodies moving gracefully through the water.

I squeezed my sister's hand. My dad was furiously snapping pictures with our disposable underwater camera; the faint skritch-skritch of the film-advance wheel traveled through the water to my ears. All around us, people were pointing and talking through their snorkels. I could hear muffled cries of, "Oh my God!" and, "Would you look at that?" and the excited shrieking of children.

I let go of my sister and softly flippered away from the crowd. My arms were still at my sides as I tried to splash as little as possible. The pod moved slowly but surely, and I easily followed them for a few moments. From the sounds coming from everyone else, another pod was passing behind me. I craned my neck and saw the second pod pass across the first, creating a checkerboard pattern of these gorgeous creatures. I caught a glimpse of a handful of babies swimming alongside their mothers, and the high-pitched sounds they made as they communicated to each other raised the hairs on my arms and neck.

It was at that moment that I was struck with the knowledge that this was the experience of a lifetime, of my lifetime. I had seen coral and fish enough times that, while it was always exciting, it was nothing new. But this ... this was something I knew I would remember forever.

I swam back to my family and popped my head above the surface, as they did the same. Our guide was waving to us, motioning us back to the raft. I was surprised to see how far the water had moved us from it in such a short time. A glance to the horizon showed that the dolphins had already moved on. We saw a couple flip themselves out of the water and come back down with a splash; we laughed. When our group was once again seated comfortably inside the raft, we sipped bottles of cool fresh water and held on tight as our guide whipped us over the waves, bringing us back to shore. While the rest of the group shared their experience with each other, my family included, I turned my face to the wind and smiled. My hair was a tangled mess. My skin was parched. I could feel the tightness on the bridge of my nose and my shoulders where there would soon be a painful sunburn. Every so often, the spray of the sea would jump up to greet me, and I welcomed it each time.

Alone with my thoughts, I soaked it all in. Hawaii had changed me. The Big Island, free of the commercialism and tourist traps of its fellow islands, was a gem on the globe that had introduced me to unbelievable beauty and an introspective appreciation for this different culture. *I sincerely hoped that I could one day return to it and experience it all over again.*