

# Bullet Train

SPINNER DOLPHINS OFF LANAI, HAWAII

**I** **KNOW WHAT'S** coming.

As I exit through an opening in the lava-rock cavern called First Cathedral — a popular dive off the Hawaiian island of Lanai — I hear the high-pitched din of clicks and squeaks building above the noise of my bubbles. A pod of spinner dolphins is approaching, the volume of chatter signals that more than a few are heading my way.

My gut tells me the dolphins will pass through the sand channel alongside the cavern. So, I make a hard right, swimming fast, before I dump the air from my BC, plant my knees on the seafloor and lock my gaze west down the length of the channel.

For about three minutes, the sound grows. Then, just as the cacophony crescendos, the pack leaders swoop into the mini canyon at the edge of my visibility like an undulating bullet train that's just jumped the tracks. They move in a tight formation, a seemingly endless line. Individuals occasionally break from the crowd,

careening down to skim the seafloor, or bolting for the surface.

This is Hawaiian big-animal diving at its best. Many divers link Hawaii synonymously with humpback whales, which congregate there every winter. But most will never see these behemoths below the surface. More common — and more exciting when they arrive en masse — are encounters with the resident spinner dolphins that cruise the coastline year-round, sometimes in pods hundreds of acrobatic animals deep. To be graced with this experience requires about 90 percent luck, because interaction is at the dolphins' discretion. Make no mistake: These animals are clever, rarely approaching divers by accident. What's the other 10 percent of the encounter? A mix of awareness and attitude. Divers must first recognize the pod's approach in time to get into position, and second, avoid any action — swimming after or trying to touch the animals — that will scare the pod.

From my vantage point on the seafloor,

I watch the pod, which is some 150 to 200 strong, perform the eponymous spins and loop-the-loops unique to this wild species. They disappear above the surface only to dip back in to perform another curling maneuver underwater. The mothers display less bravado as they swim down the middle of the pod, casting protective glances toward their calves in tow. After maybe seven minutes, even the stragglers pass. The chatter fades and the whole impressive display disappears just as quickly as it arrived. — *Travis Marshall*

## Quick Guide HAWAIIAN RAFTING

**ADVENTURES PADI Dive Center** • Boat: *Hoku*, max 18 divers; *Pele*, max 12 divers  
 • Nitrox • Trimix support • Rebreather support • Gear rental • Computer rental  
 • Nearest airport: Kahului airport (OGG) in Maui is 45 minutes away • [hawaiianrafting.com](http://hawaiianrafting.com)

### More on the Web

[sportdiver.com/maui](http://sportdiver.com/maui)



Spinner dolphins hunt in the open ocean at night and rest during the day.