

Mermaid MATERIAL



Few can say they make a living acting as a mythical character they idolised as a kid. For Kazzie Mahina, life as a professional mermaid means performing around the world, writes **Paula Hagiefremitis**.

PLUNGING DEEP INTO THE OCEAN WITH your legs strapped together and no oxygen tank may sound like a Houdini escape stunt, but it's all part of the job when you're a mermaid. Since developing the unusual act more than a decade ago, bookings for aquarium appearances and commercials have poured in for self-styled mermaid Kazzie Mahina.

As a child Mahina invented mermaid games with her friends. She would tie up their legs with rope, insist they keep pet frogs and ensure they answered to mermaid names. "I was taking it pretty seriously," she admits. "I thought everyone wanted to play mermaid

games, but apparently not as much as me!" An invitation to swim with dolphins as part of a water-awareness campaign sparked an adult Mahina's interest in performing as marine life once more. It was a lifestyle she fell for hook, line and sinker.

These days the Byron Bay local finds herself traipsing around the world for mermaiding jobs and delving into an underwater world where the likes of Ariel and King Triton are far from fantasy. "I love the adventure of it," she says. "I get to experience things that I probably wouldn't have been able to had I not had this job. I end up with all sorts of opportunities in my inbox; some crazy,

others wonderful." As well as photo shoots and party appearances she's even starred in a music video clip for 'Let's Get Ridiculous' by pop singer Redfoo.

Performing as a mermaid involves far more than swimming with a shimmering appendage. It takes a tremendous amount of skill to be able to dive deep in freezing water and still pose gracefully for photographs. "It can often feel like an extreme sport, but people think it looks so easy," Mahina says. In reality, she's a professionally trained contemporary dancer and has the ability to hold her breath for five minutes while free diving. "If someone is not at ease under the

water, asking them to dance, mermaid, smile and look like they would out of the water is almost impossible." Even aquarium shoots can be challenging, with visitors watching her every move and kids expecting interaction while she works.

Over the years her career has taken her to some of the world's most desirable aquatic destinations including the waters of Mexico, Thailand, Indonesia and Hawaii, where she's had the chance to swim with sharks, dolphins and, most enviable of all, whales. "I was mermaiding in Tonga, swimming alongside a mother whale and her calf. I played and danced with the calf and was right beside the mother. I was so close I could've touched her."

Life as a mermaid is not always smooth sailing, however, and keeping your wits about you while in the ocean is a must. As well as the threat of looking like a fish out of water in a client's photographs if something goes awry, presenting yourself as a sea creature slides

you down the food chain, too. One of Mahina's most perilous moments came during a night swim in Thailand, where she was mistaken for a fish. "As I started splashing my tail about, a fishing boat must've heard and came full throttle towards me with the nets raised up high, ready to trap me. I was about to end up as catch of the day!"

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Marine conservation is a big part of her life as a mermaid. She uses her personal brand as an aquatic icon and her own conservation group, which she calls the MerPod Ocean Tribe, to spread awareness and help educate others about the declining health of our

oceans. Her group has partnered with the Tangaroa Blue Ocean Care Society to help conduct beach clean-ups and information sessions that teach people about the effects of pollution and the importance of taking action for the sake of future generations. It has also teamed up with musician and former pro surfer Jack Johnson and Australian Seabird Rescue for local environmental projects.

Unsurprisingly, Mahina still gets puzzled looks when she mentions her profession. But the tide seems to be turning. "I've noticed the response is completely different to what it was early in my career. In a time where there's no shortage of bad news and terrible stories, one of the things that's made me feel quite fulfilled in my life is being able to be something that's joyful and positive; that's balancing the world out in some way." Plus, you can't help but smile when you see an adult swimming around in a sparkling tail. 



Kazzie Mahina swims with a whale and calf in Tonga.