She dreams about them, talks about them incessantly.
Sometimes she seems more orca than woman.

Michèle A’Court meets Ingrid Visser.

Ingrid Visser looks just how you hoped she would – fit and tanned, with green eyes and long, sun-streaked blonde hair piled up nonchalantly on top of her head. If they make a movie about her, she’ll be played by Meg Ryan.

In the meantime, the 30-year-old is getting to play herself in a one-hour film about New Zealand orca, and she’s also in the final year of her PhD, the first person to write a thesis on New Zealand orca.

We settle on the sea-wall for a chat. We work out that we’ve talked before. On the winter solstice, 1992, my husband and I were married on the beach at Mt Maunganui. Four orca attended the service and swam beside us as we walked around the Mount afterwards. So we phoned Orca Project Hotline to tell her that a bunch of them had gatecrashed our wedding. Ingrid remembers our call. (The hotline is a free phone service sponsored by TVNZ that goes direct to Ingrid. She’ll get to the sight if she can and, if not, it still helps her build up a picture of orca movements for her PhD research.)

We had been so excited to see the orca pod. Most people are – witness the nose-to-tail collisions on the Auckland harbour bridge when anything whale or dolphin-like passes underneath.

But Ingrid is in a different league. “Obsessive?” I ask. “Beyond obsessive!” She laughs happily at her own weirdness. “I dream about them, I talk about them... I was on the phone to a friend once and he asked me how many orca I had in my room. Posters, photographs, models... I counted 300-and-something.”
Ingrid has a library of more than 5000 images of orca, collected originally for identification for her research, but now used for postcards and calendars.
‘They’re killers, but they only kill to eat. You don’t call your cat a killer feline.’

I learn quickly not to call them “killer whales”. It’s a misnomer. They’re not actually whales, they’re the largest of the dolphin family. And sure, they’re killers, but they only kill to eat. You don’t call your cat a killer feline,” she laughs. There are no recorded incidents of orca in the wild killing humans.

I ask her what it is that draws her to them. “There’s no one thing. Partly it’s the colour scheme. It’s like, wow, they’re so black and so white. And they’re big. We’re talking seven tonnes of meat-eating machine. And they’re so regal, so majestic... I still get goosebumps when I see the orca for the first time that day. I never get sick of it. I still want that passion of going out to them. I have spent hundred of hours with these animals and it’s still a thrill.

“The other day I was just out here,” she says, waving at the Waitetuna Harbour, “and Spike, one of the big adult males, breached at sunset. He came out of the water and it was like, ‘Oh my god, how fantastic!’ There was one other girl on the boat who got immensely excited, but the others on the boat were like, ‘Well, yeah, he jumped out of the water, that was pretty’. Two hours later, she and I were still buzzing, just nuts... It’s obsessive.”

She doesn’t remember when the obsession started, can’t remember a time before orca. But she does remember that she had a passion for whales and dolphins, even as a child.

Her parents bought her a subscription to a children’s natural history magazine. “It was my pride and joy. But I swapped a whole year’s subscription with another girl at school for a dolphin poster.”

She tries to explain it as one of those girls’ passions, the way some kids are “horse-y”. Certainly, a pony passion would have made more sense. Born in Wellington to Dutch immigrant parents, Ingrid grew up on a farm near Palmerston North. She says she loved the “typical New Zealand country life, but always had a sense “something was missing”. When the family moved to Tutukaka on the coast near Whangarei, she knew what it was – the ocean, and the things that live in it. So imagine how it was for her when, at the age of 16, Ingrid got the chance not just to live beside the sea, but to live on it, like a tight-knit orca family pod.

“My parents wanted to take me and my sister back to Holland, and thought we might as well see something of the rest of Europe while we were there. Dad went to a travel agent to book the trip and when they told him how much it would cost, he said, ‘For that money, I could build a boat and sail around the world’. So we did.”

None of the Visser family had sailed before. The journey took Ingrid and her father four-and-a-half years, sometimes accompanied by her mother and younger sister, mostly just the two of them. The experience had a huge impact on late-teenage Ingrid. She remembers being treated like a god by people who had never seen white-skinned, blonde-haired people before, and being asked to bless their babies. She remembers seeing child beggars who had been purposely maimed so they could work the streets, and the horror of African famines.

“You want to do something, but there’s nothing you can do. You see animals being hut and hutt and starved. When human life is cheap, animals’ lives are absolutely meaningless.”

Giving meaning to orca’s lives by understanding how they live is the focus of Ingrid’s adult life. There is plenty of mystique about these huge creatures, but some things have been learned since people stopped killing them and started watching them about 35 years ago.

Ingrid has discovered that New Zealand orca feed differently from any other orca community. In our waters, they eat stingrays – something never seen before. Just recently, she watched a couple of orca take 18 stingrays in six hours. She has also seen our orca engaging in “benthic” feeding, digging and sniffing on the seabed for food. “What I’m finding out is world-first stuff.”

Ingrid is getting to know our orca, finding out who their friends and family are. And they are getting to know her.

“Did you see Gorillas In The Mist?” Diane Fossey ‘habituates’ gorillas, gets them used to human contact. Digit is this big, gentle gorilla, the first animal to reach out to her. Well, there’s a Digit here.”

She’s a female orca, the first one to make physical contact with Ingrid, and it’s an ongoing relationship. “When she sees me, she comes to the boat, does a few bubble blows, blows raspberries, and then she touches my hand on the edge of the boat. The first time it happened, she touched my hand four times. I thought, ‘This is what my whole life is for’.”

She calls these events “orca-induced encounters” – they make the moves, she just stays there, watching, with her hands on the back of the boat. “If the animals choose to leave, I don’t follow. If they’re evasive, I don’t chase them. New Zealand has the highest rate of orca-induced encounters. We’re fortunate we’ve got friendly orca.”

I ask Ingrid if there is some kind of spiritual dimension to her relationship with them. “As a scientist, I say no. As an orca fanatic, I say yes,” she laughs. “It’s very magical. There are times when I’ll go
out in the boat with Cheli, who I’ve known for a number of years, and we’ll both look at each other and go, ‘That way’. And we go that way and we’ll find the animals. You just get that gut instinct. And 80 times out of a hundred, they’re there.

“When I first started, the sceptics at the university said I’d never see the same animal twice, and I would never be able to predict where they were going to be, so it’s a great big fat raspberry to them, isn’t it?” she says gleefully.

Orca are easy to tell apart, Ingrid says, “with just a little bit of looking”. The international system of identification is by the shape of the dorsal fin, but because many orca in our waters have clean fins, Ingrid also identifies them by their white eye patch. What began as photo survey to identify local orca has blossomed into a library of 5000 images (not just of orcas), some used on postcards and calendars and sold to help fund her research.

And this self-taught photographer recently won the best picture award at the 1996 Kodak Oceans photographic competition, beating professional photographers from all over the world. Though she almost missed the awards ceremony.

“I always have my pager and cellphone with me, so I’m ready to go at a moment’s notice. I was driving to the awards when I got a call about an orca sighting. I thought, what would I rather do, go to the dinner or go see some orca? I didn’t know I had won anything, so I chose the orca.” But some fast-talking from colleagues who knew she was in for the big prize eventually got her back on the road to the ceremony.

Ingrid completes her PhD in August this year. It has been a tough road for someone who describes herself as “a lazy little trollop”, who would rather “sit on a couch and watch videos of orca” than study.

She failed her first year of veterinary science (“I wanted to study animal behaviour, but cut them up or put them down”) before she completed a BSc in zoology and marine biology.

She has encountered resistance to her work along the way. She wanted to do her Masters degree on marine mammals, but says university academics wouldn’t let her. “I was told it wasn’t possible. It’s too big a project and no one had ever done it before. I was told I’d be better off just to go and do some little invertebrate and get a good statistical background. I’m dyslexic, so statistics is not my forte.” She ended up doing her Masters on oysters.

“I’ve progressed from oysters to orcas, so at least I stayed in the right part of the alphabet. That took two years, and during the whole time I had a picture of an orca pinned above my computer at the university, and I’d sit and look at it and think, I’m doing this because I’m going to work with them. I’ll finish this, and then I’m doing the orca thing.”

Her PhD supervisor at Auckland University, Professor John Craig, describes her as “incredibly focused”. “Of course, the focus is orca. She’s single-minded, she’ll pursue that end, regardless of other issues. She’s self-reliant. She’s managed to fund her research and put enormous effort into it. She won’t suffer fools or people on status trips,” he says.

Ingrid’s research is incredibly significant, and hard to come by. You have to do a lot of work for small results. This is the first thesis on New Zealand orca, and it’s going to attract more interest as more of it becomes known.”

Ingrid will present her research to an international conference on marine mammals in Europe at the end of 1997 – if she can find a sponsor, she says, though it’s hard to believe that she won’t.

“Being single-minded means she’s also the queen of doing three things at once. While completing her Masters, she was already preparing her PhD, hunting down sponsorship and gathering experience by taking off to the Antarctic for three summers as a lecturer and guide.”

“If I’d known how hard it was going to be, I never would have done it. About half my time is spent seeking sponsorship or giving back to sponsors. You’ve got to try to reward them.”

Ingrid is working on a one-hour film produced by TVNZ for the American Discovery Channel and worldwide release, with the working title Orca. It will take 12 months to complete, and producer Andrew Penniket describes it as “a year in the life of orca around New Zealand", with Ingrid as a guide.

Penniket is an underwater film-maker who met Ingrid on a diving trip. “It was meeting her, and seeing what a dedicated and enthusiastic person she is, that made us want to do the film,” Penniket says.

He says there is evidence that New Zealand orca are becoming more familiar with people, more friendly, cheeky and playful. “My basic question in the film is, ‘Why don’t they eat people?’”

When people tell Ingrid she’s lucky to be doing what she loves, she quotes her father. “The harder you work, the luckier you get.” Frits Visser has been a big influence – you can see his ‘I’ll build the boat myself’ attitude shining through in his daughter.

Like an adult orca, Ingrid still lives at home, partly because she can’t afford rent, mostly because of their close bond.

It’s dark on the beach at Mission Bay, and I’m concerned that Ingrid is now very late for dinner. She says she doesn’t care, that she could talk about orca forever. I keep checking the surf, expecting to see Digi out there, watching.

“I’ll be working with orca for the rest of my life,” she says, and you know that she will. “If I couldn’t do this, I wouldn’t be who I am.”