

Lesson Zero

Adventures of an apprentice Free Diver

Over the last three days I have done something I have always wanted to do; something that I was a bit fearful of doing – free diving. I've SCUBA dived for twenty five years, in all sorts of conditions around the world. During this time I've observed free divers and spearo's and considered them phenomenal sportsmen and women, albeit slightly nuts – when you are bubble blowing at 20+ meters and a free diver appears at your elbow and waves at you with a huge grin on their face they have to be nuts!

Now I am pretty relaxed underwater as I believe that the secret of a great dive is to be relaxed, watch what the wee fishies are doing, breathe long and slow and never ever give into pressure of your own making. Issue is, when you SCUBA you have air on demand, when you free dive all you have is the air that is in your lungs. Most divers (of any sort) know that you have more air in your lungs than you need to make it to surface – sub-consciously. In real life breathing is a genetic reflex action, probably the most basic reflex we have. This was what made me fearful and uncertain. Would I be able to control this reflex, would I be able to maintain my freedom of choice – of not to breathe when my body and sub-conscious said BREATHE.

Day One – yoga, breathing, theory and breath hold in a very cool pool. The first three were easy; the breath hold was something different. I went into the water pretty anxious, I wasn't wearing a hoodie so water trickled down my spine when on my back and down my front when I turned. I was cold, uncomfortable and tense – pretty foolish when air was no further than a lift of my head away. My longest breath hold was 2:30 minutes. Pathetic when you think of it.

Day Two – The wind was pumping and there were a fair amount of white horses on the water. The shore break wasn't too bad but there was a gnarly swell running. The five of us hung on the surface buoy (Hanli and Christaan our instructors and three pupils – Julie, Paul and me). I was the first to be sent down. Long deep breaths, relax, snorkel out of mouth, reach for the line and pull hand over hand, equalizing constantly on the way down and not quite getting my body into the correct aerodynamic position. At about 8m I could feel my diaphragm pulsing and my brain saying 'you need to breathe'. It became more difficult to equalize, I turned and went for surface. As I did this I heard the whales singing, I looked around and saw clean blue water and before I knew it I was at the surface with Hanli saying 'great, you were relaxed, go deeper, stay on the rope and listen'. I wanted to do it again, I wanted to hear the whales, I wanted to command my mind for I knew when I did that I would be able to master my breathing reflex.

My two team mates did their dives and it was my chance again. Long slow breathes, relax, calm the mind, completely exhale and a huge inhalation, snorkel out of mouth and slip below the waves. Hold onto the rope and go. Before I know it I am at 17m, the bottom of the line. I turn relaxed, diaphragm pulsing, mind calm, blue water and all around the song of the Humpbacks – a brief moment of mastery before I gently begin to pull myself to the surface. I pause allowing myself to hang in the blue – utter peace

and the whale song. I break surface with a huge exhalation of air with a huge free divers grin on my face; I want to do this again.

The next rope dive and the three finning dives were just as deep, not so relaxed. The conditions were the same, so the reason is in my head and because it is in my head I can vanquish it. I know I have the choice to overcome it or allow it to prevent me from exploring something I have shied away from for such a long time – I choose to subjugate it.

Day Three – I'm a free diver dude! An enthusiastic amateur I might be but man that was an exhilarating experience. Wind was light, sea calm with 1-2m swells. Easy launch and we came across a Humpback and her calf about 2km off the beach. They are big, really big. The fluke she was slapping was at least 4m long. We dived twice and I missed her and the calf. Julie and Paul saw one of them on their dives. On our third dive at about 6m the female swam 7m below me. Swimming on her back I saw her white stomach and flukes and her massive tail as she just ...disappeared. I really want 30m viz and a couple of whales to hang around for a while – now, that is a possible experience.

We came across a pod of dolphin followed by a school of yellow fin tuna. They were moving and not in the mood to hang around. Some of the others had glimpses and took some photos and film footage.

We stopped off Clanshal at Raggies Cave. As we passed a boat filled with divers kitting up I said to Julie 'doesn't it look complicated?' Lying in the water you could make out the sand patches and a little of the brighter coloured soft corals. We had maybe 15m of visibility. Lie on the surface, breathe in and out, relax shoulders, final breath from the bottom right to the top of the lungs, duck dive, tuck head in, fin and then fall to the top of the reef at about 12m. I have done this dive often and have even dropped in from the same surface position, this was different; no noise except the sharp clatter of the Shoal and my diaphragm going thump, thump, thump. Only a second or two to peer around and I miss seeing any of the three Raggies floating there, one, two, three kicks and I'm free of inertia and gliding in circular motion as I scan the Shoal, fish swirling all around and see two groups of divers with their bubbles rising at the same speed as me,. I seem to have so much time. Wrong thought! Two quick hard fins, bwaaaaahhhhh, insert snorkel 'en vasbyt'.

Steve the skipper and diver-in-charge, calls me over and says to follow him. He has free dive fins on, does this every day of his life and is dive fit. He takes off like a Jack Russell while I follow panting like a stout old spaniel by the time I reach him. I lie looking down to where I can dimly see patches of sand, this is deep. I carry out the same dive procedure with an extra whoooo of air. For me this is as technical as free diving gets. I get my body in alignment and with strong, big finning I clear my ears. At about 17m my mask is flat against my face, at 20m I'm wondering about mask squeeze. Equalising is not easy as my lungs and the air in them are under an additional two atmospheres of pressure. Stweeeeeee go the ears. I'm at the bottom. I've become one of those Nuts!

No time to look around, there is only one way to surface and that is at 90°. Once I'm on the move I know that I'll make it to surface. The old diaphragm is thumping away and

my head is ok. I stop finning for a couple of kicks and listen for whale song, none today. Steve comes up a little later and shouts well done. It's great when feedback is so positive and delivered with such good intent.

We arrive at the shark string that we had put out a couple of hours earlier and within a minute the first Black Tip arrives. It knew what to what was coming - food. When I hit the water and turned around; there was a juvenile Dusky with four Black Tips darting about for the pieces of chum floating in the water.

I have done this dive on SCUBA so I knew what to expect. I was not nervous or anxious but I was reluctant to make my first dive. When I did, I went to 10m and looked up. Above me I could see the divers and sharks silhouetted against the surface. There were sharks at my level and below, moving urgently and being remarkably relaxed about it.

I drifted near to the boat when James, who was throwing chum into the water, sent some my way, in fact within a meter of me. A Black Tip tore in snapping at the bait. Now when a shark feeds (not sure if this is so for all of them) it also sucks water through its mouth and out through the gills. The bait disappeared before you could blink and it turned to snap a second piece. By this time it was really close and when it turned its head for the third morsel we looked each other right in the eye. I withdrew my arms into my body and hung there, for a second or three, it snatched the food and was gone.

When I realised how close the shark was I tensed for a moment and then was calm. This fish wasn't going to hurt me. Hell I was bigger than it. It just wanted to feed.

These past three days have been one of the things that I will remember all of my life. To be able to do such a thing as to dive to the bottom of the ocean, ok really shallow parts of the ocean and to get so close to such animals in an environment where there is such space and in which everything is moving is really humbling. When you are at the bottom of a water column 20m deep, relaxed and fairly comfortable you know you need to do more of this.

Hanli, Christaan, Paul, Julie, Liz, Steve, James, Mark and Gail – thank you for three great days, three days of learning that I can do the things that are important to me, that change of most kinds can be accomplished if you really want to, and have great teachers.

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