

## A Good Idea

The idea of going out to Mexico diving, as with many ideas, initially seemed somewhat far fetched. Unfortunately circumstances dictated that I had no time, with pending exams and deadlines to meet, it appeared to be wholly unfeasible. Any spare time I had was sure to be taken up providing a means of keeping oiled the ever turning whirring cogs of the bill machine that is modern life.

Who was I trying to kid! I may be a somewhat older, apparently more mature student, but hey, still a student. There is always a way of justifying the need!

Needless to say with a rationale like that it didn't take long for an idea to turn from just that, into something I *really* should do.

It has been quite some time since all of this took place but believe me when I say, the experience still remains as fresh in my mind as if it was just last week, and I am sure it will remain so for as long as I am in control of my faculties.

There are numerous reasons for the delay in committing this experience to paper. Among other excuses, I have been very busy for the last few months. Well, ok, as a man once said, stood next to me with the indisputable evidence of a heart rate monitor "You are lazy!" Maybe just a little?

Anyway personal weaknesses aside, I suppose I should get on with the stuff that may interest people.

Although it wasn't really necessary as I still remember it vividly, I kept a bit of a diary of the trip. This was really to try and keep some sort of time scale or order to my experiences for recalling, instead of the excitable random story telling that usually ensues when someone asks how the trip was. They usually get the idea but not the full picture!

I don't know if it's just a personal thing but for me, it never ceases to amaze, how, in a place like that, you very quickly stop living by the watch, the days and experiences run together until you can sit back, close your eyes, and look at it like a grand mural or collage, instead of the flick book that for me is a 9-5 week. Who knows, maybe I just prefer a rounded experience to a daily achievement.

Whilst talking of experience, I am not the most worldly experienced diver, nor do I have a chalk board to tally my achievements on, simple guy really, so, "if I gets me facts wrong, makes many mistayks with me fish names and things.", please excuse me, and feel free to correct me!



## Travel Fun.

When travelling out of the UK the fun always starts early, this was no exception! I had a cocktail of bus and train with a dash of walking, and a splash of rain just for good measure. To be fair, it went ok and none of the delays had too much of a knock on effect, leaving me headache free at Liverpool airport. I had already been contacted the previous week and informed that my connection from Amsterdam to LA had been cancelled and would be rescheduled for the next day. This meant an overnight in Amsterdam and another in LA. I was glad in a way that the problems were already apparent, and could be dealt with, it saves having to deal with them after a night in an airport on an uncomfortable chair. Besides any problems now would hopefully reduce the probability of any later on!

It's funny how things work out. As a result of my delays I got to spend a lovely day around Amsterdam sipping cold beer in the sunshine, enjoying the pleasant company of Hanna-Mari, a Finnish girl I met at breakfast in the Hostel. However, finding a Hostel with space after midnight, wandering around the centre of Amsterdam fully laden with bags was an interesting challenge. The rest of the journey was somewhat less eventful apart from a break in the clouds over Greenland, revealing a brief glimpse of a truly wild and fantastic landscape of snow and ice.



The overnight in LA was nice enough, I especially enjoyed the biggest breakfast I think I'd ever had. I don't think I'd ever had a three course breakfast?! I always like to look on it as an adventure when travel plans go somewhat wayward, it's more fun that way, besides, letting anguish and gloom creep in, and trying to find someone to shout at is guaranteed to wind you up even more, they can see you coming and know where to hide! As does your luggage! The last time I had a paddy and stamped my feet, my bags followed the dummy and ended up at the wrong end of the country. Hmm... Lesson learned!

One experience which is probably quite normal, but struck me as weird at the time as I was half asleep, was on the connecting flight from LA to La Paz. I was under the impression it was a direct flight but we touched down in a small airport (the name of which I forget), got off the plane, marched across the tarmac into a terminal building followed by an armed guard, round a barrier and back through a passport control and out onto the tarmac again. We then promptly walked back to the plane, again under armed supervision, and boarded as quickly as we had got off. I didn't notice if we picked up any more passengers, I assume we did? I fell back to sleep a little puzzled and confused.

By the time I arrived in La Paz Airport I was really starting to feel quite travel weary, so was glad to arrive in the evening, spared the intensity of the full heat of day. As I stood waiting for my bags to come along the luggage conveyer I spotted Aharon and MT in arrivals with little Ze'ev sat atop Aharon's shoulders. Thankfully they were easily recognisable from photos I'd seen of them, truly a welcome site, smiling faces and waving.

After the initial, very welcoming introductions, I was glad to let them steer me to their truck and bundle me and my luggage in. At this point it hit me just how tired and hungry I was. Aharon and MT hit the nail on the head when they suggested that the first thing to be done was get some food!

We stopped just down the road from the airport to get some 'road food', which is basically a late night roadside snack bar, without the bar. It was hard to really get a visual first impression of where I was as it was already dark, but one thing I will always remember is that first night, sat by the side of a wide, open road eating tortilla, steak and salad, all washed down with a nice cold drink.

I was there! Sat under a warm Mexican sky in as good a company as you could wish for.

The night drew to an end as we booked in to a hotel for the night and I fell asleep to the steady hum of an air conditioning unit, wondering what experiences lay ahead for me in the next two weeks.

### **The first day**

I awoke early considering the miles I'd just covered. I'm not sure if it was just the heat, already rising, as the sun climbed in the sky. I suspect it was a combination of the excitement and anticipation of the first day of my holiday.

While I'm on the subject, just so it's clear what I intended to do with my time out in Mexico; I arranged with Aharon and MT to have 5 days of instruction broken up over the two weeks of my stay, with the remainder spent exploring or doing a spot of fishing. The idea was to stay flexible enough to allow for the conditions and take each day as it came. For myself, who I never take too seriously nor do I expect others to, it was primarily a holiday and learning experience rolled into one. My ambition was no more than to have lots of fun, learn lots, and anything in the personal achievements department would be a bonus.

Back to what I was saying; Mexico, first day, ah yes.

Most of the first day was spent getting my fishing licence sorted for my stay and changing some money, as once we were out of town we were going to be at least a couple of hours from anywhere except a couple of fish camps. The money I got changed was in the most for some food on my return journey through La Paz and perhaps a Ballena or two from Rosa's to wash down my food, and drink by the fire in the evening. More about that later or I'll get sidetracked again.

Getting the fishing licence was an interesting experience. It proved to be a bit of a run around for Aharon and MT (sorry folks!) with the sun getting hotter with each passing hour and Ze'ev getting understandably more restless with each passing minute. Once sorted we made one last stop to a seafront restaurant for a bit of food and a cold drink so everyone could cool off and unwind a bit before setting off for camp.

By now the sun was high in the sky and it was nice to get moving off the city roads and make the most of the breeze coming through the windows. Every time we came to a

standstill in the truck it was like being in an oven. The heat did not seem to bother my companions too much so I figured I would get used to the temperature in time.

As we travelled out of La Paz both the traffic and built up areas dwindled quickly, leaving a movie like scene of desert scrub with a shimmering tarmac road stretching off into the distance, with a horizon of rising orange and green tinted hills. Very impressive, atmospheric, and very hot.

We happily chatted away about all sorts in the truck that afternoon and before long we were turning off the tarmac road onto the desert road (San Juan de la Costa). This was a bizarre experience. I don't really know what I'd expected, a bumpy dusty track perhaps, but this was like nothing I had experienced. The whole track was like one big washboard. It was, at a guess, something to do with the suspension of the trucks using it. MT informed me it gets progressively worse with time and use, but every now and then, a big truck or lorry goes down it with a metal plate on the back to level it out again. The interior of the poor truck was getting a fair old shaking!



As we rumbled along the road the scenery grew more rugged and dramatic by the mile. The journey to camp really is a fantastic way to start your time there. With the sea of Cortez to the right and the stony scrub covered hillsides to the left, there was only two ways, forward or backwards, giving a growing feeling of a slightly imposing isolation, in a good way of course, which, for me, added to the whole excitement and anticipation of seeing what was round the next headland as we left behind all signs of civilisation.

The road twists and turns its way in and out of the hills along the coastline and as we motored on I began to understand why it was not really very safe to do the journey at night. We had recently passed a few large holes and a collapsed part of road. A mistake at even a modest speed along this road could well be your last in places.

We arrived at the camp sometime in the afternoon to find that some cattle had paid a visit. They had turned over some of the storage boxes and proceeded to strip all of the contents of its cardboard packaging. Quite why the love of cardboard I don't know but Aharon and MT assured me it was their favourite food in the camp, and that it was not a common raid as the local dogs usually run them back into the scrub. I suppose it is not that hard to understand when everything they eat is covered in thorns, usually at least an inch long! They had done no real damage apart from make a bit of a mess and knock down the awning for keeping the truck out of the sun. They had however left a calling card right in the middle of the camp simmering nicely in the sun!

Once we had tidied up and got everything unpacked and sorted out, MT ran me through the basics of how the camp was run, the toilet facilities, safety and the local wildlife. I particularly liked the shower and other amenities they had built from minimal materials. After this quick low down on the camp and sorting out of kit, I finally sat down to take stock of where I was and to have a look around.

The site of the camp, El Coyote, is a stones throw from the sea and nicely sheltered all round by scrub, not half as exposed as I suspected it might be, with the houses of the Clammers and their families just a little further inland. The heat of the sun is intense when it's overhead, but in true camp fashion there's a shelter over the table, which like most kitchen areas, forms a natural focal point. It's also a bonus that the fire (and coffee pot), water and food are all within reach of your chair!



With the shade from the sun and the front of the camp open to the cool Coromuel breeze off the sea it made for a very comfortable spot. The scene out of the back of the campsite was to me one of an old Spaghetti Western, with the impressive Cardon Cacti casting long shadows in the evening sun. The sun sets over the hills behind the camp, creating some of the nicest colours I've had the pleasure to see, stretching left and right until meeting with the sea again somewhere on the distant horizon. Aharon set off the scene crouched over the fire, straining some 'cowboy coffee' into his mug (A Stetson and spurs would not have looked out of place!).



The remainder of the evening was spent by the fire chatting and discussing the days ahead, until my eyes still heavy with travel refused to stay open any longer, forcing me to retire to my tent.



## El Coyote

### Tuesday

I awoke the next morning to the sound of gulls and the sea lapping gently at the shore. Such a nice way to be woken up instead of some inane buzzer going off in your ear hole. Today was going to be my first day in the water and the acid test as to whether I was going to use a monofin or work with bi-fins. Reason being, it would be more productive to continue with bi-fins if I wasn't comfortable enough with the monofin. I hadn't really had the chance to use it anywhere other than brief periods in the pool back in Sheffield. It showed!



We took the boat a short way up the coast to a sheltered shallow bit of water a few metres from the shore and dropped a weighted, measured 50m line to swim along. MT showed me a few exercises, mainly different monofin training techniques, which I was to repeat under their watchful eye. I'm not sure if the problem was a combination of all the new input, the first time I'd used it with a wetsuit, forward facing snorkel, and merely swimming on the surface in the sea all at once, or if I was just naff with a monofin. In short, I felt the morning's exercises were a disaster and was resigned to the fact that I was probably going to be using bi-fins. Aharon and MT seemed quite optimistic, sympathetic maybe, but decided we would try again down a line in deeper water, which left the rest of the day to try something else.

After being told about the fun Haydn had during his stay collecting Chocolatas, I decided that on Aharon's recommendation I'd give it a go, so off with the monofin and on with the bi-fins.

Chocolatas are a type of clam about 2-3" across with a very shiny chocolate brown shell which reside in the sand in shallow water buried an inch or so out of view. They can be eaten raw with all kinds of stuff sprinkled on them; we had lime and pepper sauce. The only clue to their whereabouts is two little white rimmed holes in the sand like a pair of eyes about 10mm apart. As soon as you see them, because you can guarantee they will know you are there before you see them, you have to plunge your fingers into the sand and root them out before they can dig themselves in deeper.

After 10 minutes or so of looking in vain I decided it was time to learn by example, so I followed MT down to see how it was done. Once I had seen what I was looking for I saw them all over the place. I was amazed that without a clear picture of what you were looking for you could swim blindly across the apparently featureless sandy bottom, and see absolutely nothing! I think, for the minimum effort involved, it's certainly one of the most fun and rewarding methods of game gathering I've encountered.

Before long, between us we had soon collected enough for more than a hearty snack and called it a day.



Once the boat was unloaded, the wetsuits rinsed and hung to dry, we sat down to enjoy our catch. The Chocolatas were truly delightful with a splash of lime and a bit of pepper sauce. They are a very deceptive food and I was full before I realised it. I was sure I had not eaten that many, but then again, Aharon did just keep passing them over. I wasn't quite sure how I was going to manage the rest of the food MT was preparing!

While we ate Aharon started working through the theory contained in the manual provided with the course. This manual is a thoroughly interesting read and a very comprehensive guide to understanding the subject matter surrounding freediving. Once however, we started discussing the contents, it became clear that as comprehensive a guide as it was to me, it seemed to become more of a structured set of topic descriptions or 'bullet points' used as a launch pad, to delve into the wealth of knowledge that Aharon and MT possess and are able to recall and discuss in great detail. This was going to be a great learning experience!

This became pretty much the routine for the duration of my stay, after a great day diving (as they all were!), we would sit down, discuss the day, what had been learnt (lots!), and what could be improved (many bad habits and technique usually!). After the food and theory session, as the sun started to set again over camp providing another fantastic backdrop, we would get comfy by the fire and talk the night away whilst sipping a Ballena (pronounced ba-ye-na) from Rosa's. Rosa lived in the village behind the camp and with the Clammers having their catch collected every other day she made use of the transport and kept a small stock of supplies, including beer. A Ballena or "whale" is a litre bottle of beer in Mexico. I grew very fond of, and miss every day this time sat in front of the fire looking at the stars overhead listening to stories. To be honest, it reminded me of a feeling long forgotten, that feeling as a child, sitting down to watch Jackanory, and being whisked away and immersed in to an imaginary world of wonder and discovery in a far off land, except this was for real, not on TV. In a word, fantastic!

## Wednesday

I seemed to have got over my travel tiredness after a couple of good nights sleep and was awake early. The sun was just above the horizon and everything was silent and still. In fact it was so still that I felt like I'd just stepped into a video on freeze frame, half expecting it to suddenly slur into life. Nothing. Not even a ripple on the sea, it was like glass.

I turned around to see what must be the vultures MT had told me about. They were just as creepy as she had described, sat on top of the tall Cardon Cacti with their wings outstretched, waiting for the first warm rays of the sun to dry the desert night condensation from their wings before they take to the air for a day of scavenging on the less fortunate. They sit there like statues, unmoving, adding to the whole surreal feel of the early morning in Baja. It's even creepier when you walk past the cactus underneath them, as they all turn in unison, wings still extended, keeping you in view. Strange, very strange!



The silence was finally broken by a pelican hitting the water in a dive, another spectacular scene to see with your own eyes, and then almost like that video slurring back to life the whole place comes alive. It even seems that the sea has suddenly woken up. Once something decides it's time for breakfast, it all kicks off and nobody wants to miss out.

After eating a light breakfast ourselves we decided that a spot of fishing for the day would not go amiss. It would also give me a chance to see a bit more of the coast line and do a bit of exploring. It proved to be a good way to ease myself back into diving gently at a nice leisurely depth as I'd not really had the opportunity to do a lot in the past few months. We motored up the coast to a headland called Punta el Mechudo where Aharon and MT had some previous success in catching a spot of supper.

The sea was starting to get a bit choppy by the time we got there, due to opposing currents and winds, but soon died down once we moved a bit further around the headland. Aharon instructed me on the rules we were going to dive to and how far away from the boat we would be fishing, just in case we had any unwanted visitors lurking around trying to muscle in on our catch. Aharon had seen a bull shark in the area tailing MT a few days previous so we were to keep our eyes open. It was a completely new environment for me so I was more than happy to take the advice given.

We had a good days fishing, although the visibility was fairly low I had chance to have a good look around and see just some of the many fish lurking among the rocks. One thing that struck me was the large number of Puffa fish in between large boulders, and large schools of Parrot fish grazing in formation across the bottom. Other fish that showed themselves included Pargo, Cabria (particularly good eating) and various Snapper, Tangs, Morey, Trigger fish, small blue Chromis and Sergeant Majors. These were the ones that were identified, mostly pointed out by my companions, although I'd recognised a few. There were many more, of all shapes and sizes, but with the visibility



a bit low and my disposable camera lacking a flash, it was a shame that I'd caught little more than shadows in the green.

Once we had taken what we needed for the table we headed for home. It was getting on in the afternoon now, and I know I was certainly starting to feel tired.

On the way back to camp we were fortunate enough to come across a large pod of Striped Dolphins travelling in the same direction. It was broken up into smaller groups, spread over a large area and you could hear them chattering away to each other, a sound I was familiar with but had never heard first hand. We slowed to the same speed and although timid, still came close enough to have a good look at. It was the first time I had seen dolphins out at sea and was thoroughly delighted when they started leaping out of the water as they swam along side and in front of the boat. Unfortunately either their interest waned, or they were moving out into deeper water, but as we travelled along the coast line, they moved away soon disappearing into the distance. Although a brief experience, still one of many that made my stay a great one, and one that will be remembered.



## Thursday

Today was going to be a monofin training day. After my last performance I was not overly optimistic, but regardless, I was there to learn and was keen to get it right. It was overcast most of the day which was actually quite a relief from the heat of the sun. I made the mistake of just taking a baseball cap instead of a rimmed hat and despite plenty of sun block; the tops of my ears still got nailed, even with only limited time in the sun. When you are out on the boat in the sea there is no escape from the sun in the mid day heat other than wearing a suitable hat or the hood of your wetsuit, I didn't fancy the latter as it's matt black, and feared that 'boil in the bag' brain was going to make me feel very sick, very quickly!

As we loaded the boat and set off we were watched intently by Pelicans, presumably hanging around in the hopes that they'd be getting some fish heads on our return like the previous day. Personally I find them witty creatures to watch. As graceful as they are in the air, skimming the tops of waves with their wingtips with little more than a couple of flaps periodically in the trough of a wave. Get them on land and they might as well be wearing a red nose and clown shoes! I'm not sure if it's just the weight of their seemingly top heavy heads or their webbed feet, but they stumble around on the rocks as though drunk, blinking their beady little eyes in what looks like surprise. They are fantastic birds and bring a smile to my face every time I think of them staggering around! I guess I am just easily amused.



To do line work from the boat, it's just a short distance straight out from the camp. The bottom shelves off gradually and makes it relatively easy to get somewhere near with a depth guess. Once set up with the line a metre or so off the bottom, we all did a few warm ups and then I got my monofin on and did a shallow dive to get a feel for it again. For some reason I felt a lot more comfortable with the monofin on today and the technique seemed to come a bit easier. Aharon and MT seemed happy enough to let me carry on with it so I took that as a good sign.

After doing a few constant weight dives I felt happy enough to have a go at some variable weight dives, so we moved out over deeper water. The set up on the boat for this is ideal. The rope is tied off at the required depth, and the free end has a weight attached with an old petrol funnel over the knot so you can put your hand inside it and grip the knot with very little effort. The weight is fixed to the side of the boat by a quick release clip so minimum communication is needed; you can go from relaxing straight into the dive without having to do any more than give a



pin a quick tug. The diver is attached to the line via a lanyard with a swivel and big stainless steel ring, a Velcro wrist strap attaches the diver securely to the lanyard. This seems to be common practice now when doing any training on a line, and makes a lot of sense as the diver is never lost from the line, which is effectively their life line to the surface.

As this was the first time I'd done any proper variable weight dives to any kind of depth I was quite excited which did not really help me concentrate on what I was doing. I didn't let it stop me from having the best fun I've had diving for a long time. I was smiling all of the way down and almost laughing on the way back up, flooding my mask and getting water up my nose. I broke the surface in a splutter of laughing and trying to catch my breath! MT joined me, laughing and blowing water out of her nose. She had seen the face I was pulling, and smiling, she too had flooded her mask. Aharon had got the depth absolutely spot on with me coming to a stop half a metre off the sandy bottom.

Variable weight is such an enjoyable way to dive. I enjoy doing constant ballast but the acceleration you get attached to a weight is a fantastic feeling. Just zooming down into the blue with a hiss in your ears. I particularly enjoyed watching the horizon appear out of the gloom upside down as you approached the bottom. All very new experiences but fantastic fun at the same time.

Aharon did not quite seem to share my enthusiasm for doing variable weight dives after the first couple, the deeper I went the more line he had to haul back up into the boat! Nor did he appreciate my justification that I was just keeping him fit! I think both he and MT get a lot of pleasure seeing people enjoy the sea like that and they certainly made sure I did that day. Unfortunately my feet were starting to suffer from being stuck in my monofin, although they lasted longer than I thought they would, it was time to get back in the boat for me



## Friday

The sea was flat calm again in the morning with a layer of cloud giving a half light eerie feel to the place. I was awake early and saw a pod of dolphin leaping around just off shore near the boat, catching breakfast I presume, as they were circling an area, with gulls squawking and circling overhead. It was decided that today we too should get some more food, as the last of the fish was finished off the previous night. We had a steady morning with the intention of going further up the coast later in the day, so took our time in getting organised and having a good breakfast.



We set off in the late morning and as soon as we were in open water it started looking like it might be a busy day. There were more than the usual numbers of Manta Rays leaping out of the water, something I never knew they did until I went to Baja, and we even caught a big old seal, a Bull I think, dozing in the cool morning sun. He casually rolled over and slipped beneath the surface as we passed in the boat.

After about 15 minutes into the journey Aharon yelled from the back of the boat. He had spotted something jumping, off in the distance. We followed where his finger was pointing and a few seconds later spotted a large Humpback Whale splashing back down into the water, and another one, and another! They were a long way off but were unmistakable as one after another breached and crashed back down. They were heading East out to deeper water past Isla San Francisco. We were planning on heading out past this island and Los Islotes, three small islands between Isla San Jose and the mainland.

I was getting the camera out but thought better of it as the Whales were so far away, when Aharon stopped the engine and indicated off to our left. I have never been close to a Humpback Whale and there was nothing to scale it against, but I'd have guessed at a few hundred metres away, in shallow water, three whales. The smallest of the three breached a couple of times and rolled to have a look at us. It was a small calf and looked to be having a lot of fun. Aharon and MT figured, judging by its size and the fact that they were in such shallow water, it was probably very young. All three were there, a cow, calf, and a bull. This was one of those experiences that should be on everyone's wish list. It's certainly been on mine for a long time and is one that will not be forgotten in a hurry. The cow breached shortly after the calf and then sounded disappearing from view with the characteristic fluke sliding quietly under the water.

During all of this time I'd been sat in the boat with camera in hand, looking over the top of it slack jawed and not even taken one picture. I came to my senses just in time to catch the large bull sounding, and that was the last we were going to see of them, it looked like they wanted a bit of privacy and



slipped away past the back of the boat towards deeper water. What a thing to see! That made my day and I'd seen what I really hoped to during my stay. I wasn't really bothered that I didn't catch it on film as it was well and truly committed to memory. I have just that last little reminder.

We didn't have that much luck with the fishing further up the coast, but such is the way in the sea, so we headed back to Punta el Mechudo to see if we would do any better. Sometimes it seems bizarre when one day you can't move for fish but the next day, in the same place in the apparently same conditions, it is completely deserted!?!

As we motored back between the islands we slowed down to have a look at the Seals lounging around the lighthouse. As soon as they saw the boat the females and the young were keen to dive in and come and have a look. They seemed very curious and playful but we didn't fancy getting in the water, I for one didn't fancy the thought of competing with the bull who had just sat up from his sleep on the island. He really did not seem happy about us getting too close to his females and I think we would have been daft not to take that as fair warning so we continued on our way after a couple of photographs.



We had a bit more luck back at the previous fishing site and MT caught us a lovely red snapper for supper, so fishing and day alike, both done, we returned very happy campers.



## Saturday

With both day and night sessions moving along nicely, we had reached the point in the course which covers safety and rescue. I had the feeling that today's session was going to be hard work, with nothing but bi-fins going into the boat.

Having a slightly lazy disposition I have very quickly realised the benefit to me of the monofin when line diving. I can get where I want to go, quickly in a few kicks. These things bring to reality the childhood dream of being able to zip around underwater, and for better or worse, just make me want to go quickly.....everywhere! I got pulled up on this enthusiasm and was swiftly advised that as I got deeper I might want to try a softer fin and slow things down a bit, to compare the two and evaluate which would suit me best. I figure that's what it's about really, finding what works best for you. Being out here is a great place to experiment and try new things, and you couldn't ask for better information or instruction on tap, especially as the student to instructor ratio is so low. (I was very privileged to have the undivided attention of both Aharon and MT when I went to visit!)

Once the boat was loaded we motored a short distance straight out from camp and dropped the anchor and variable line. The following rescue exercises had me thoroughly puffing and panting, especially trying to retrieve my weight belt, put it on, and return to the surface. Swimming with only one bi-fin was no walk in the park either! Doing these exercises certainly brings home the seriousness of personal and buddy rescue situation, even in a controlled one.

Mid day and early afternoon was spent in the shade going back through the theory of what I had learnt that morning, and covering some additional topics, ensuring a good understanding of the problems that could potentially arise while training, or just exploring a dive site.

After a light lunch it was firewood collecting time. Using a fire to cook, and for warmth in the evening soon takes its toll on the woodpile, and after a hard morning, a leisurely hour or two collecting fuel sounded like a good idea. The two types of wood we were after were Mesquite and Choya.

The latter is collected from the ground after the dead cactus skeleton has shed its spines and collapsed. It looks almost like wooden lattice Brandy Snaps and is the tinderbox of the desert. You only have to show this stuff a flame and it is off. It burns hot and fast, ideal for getting a fire going, or boiling that all important morning coffee pot.

Mesquite is the harder, denser wood of the two, again collected from the ground after it has died. Cutting through this stuff with an axe is near



impossible, the only way of breaking it being to follow the grain and split it thin enough to be snapped.

I saw my first scorpion whilst collecting wood, strange creatures that they are. This one was no bigger than my thumb to the first knuckle, and wasted no time scuttling away to find sanctuary when I lifted up its home and disturbed it.



I was surprised at even my own misconception of the desert, thinking it was a completely inhospitable landscape of sand and cacti. When Aharon mentioned wood collecting I thought we'd have to look very hard to find fuel for the fire. How wrong I was. You don't have to walk more than a few paces before you find wood. It may not be the wood you're looking for, but it's there in abundance. In places it gets to the point where you are only taking the best bits. We had collected enough to replenish the woodpile back at camp in only a couple of hours.

With the rest of the day free I helped Aharon measure and sort out a 70m line which was going to be used as a fixed line and left out at sea. After measuring it out I took the opportunity to watch and learn how to tie eye splices, and splice two ropes together. A very useful skill to have as most knots left in the sea will usually, mysteriously work undone. It is great to be able to spend time with such people, with a lifetime wealth of knowledge and skills, happy to pass them on. I only wish there was more time in a day!



## Sunday

After going out in the boat to do some more line work, I had a major let down. I had bunged sinuses! It was such a shame as the sea was like glass and such a lovely day. There was not a lot I could do about it so after trying to clear it by blowing my nose a few times I resigned myself to the fact that today would have to be spent on dry land. Initially I was a bit miffed but perhaps I could do with a day off. I simply wasn't used to diving every day and was perhaps a little more tired than I wanted to admit to myself.

I spent the rest of the day relaxing or going through the remainder of the theory left to cover in the course. I also did a few breath hold walking exercises so Aharon could point out how to use them as a training aid, particularly with the use of a heart rate monitor. I got caught out doing this and it was clear from my heart rate after the exercise that I wasn't trying quite as hard as perhaps I was supposed to. "You are lazy!" Blasted Aharon with a smirk across his face, as we sat back down under the shade. Busted! And I thought I was quite convincing!

Having a day out of the sea gave me time to sit back and watch the wildlife around the camp, and there was plenty of it. Some of the more colourful life around the camp was the birds, with Yellow Tailed Oriole and Red Cardinal flitting around from tree to tree. On returning one afternoon we were not the only ones to have done a spot of fishing, and were fortunate enough to see, up on the top of a cactus, an Osprey, sat enjoying a sizeable catch. Possibly the most amusing bird was the Chicuaca, (Hope that is spelt correctly? Some kind of quail I think?) which would stage military style raids on the camp. They would run around the camp perimeter in rank and file, with their little plumes on top of their heads bobbing around, and then, when they thought nobody was looking, they would sneak up to the bowl of water left out for them and take a drink, or grab a quick crumb of food if any had been left for them. Not as daft as the pelican but just as funny to watch!



The warm evening drew on and I left having a shower until sunset when it was a bit cooler. What a great way to have a shower, with water still warm from the afternoon sun and a view that no bathroom or shower curtain could come close to offering. The colours really are breathtaking.

While I was having my shower the tin bath had been filled and put on the fire to warm up for Ze'ev. I had taken a children's illustrated copy of the hobbit out there, a present from Haydn for the little guy, which MT had been reading him each night by



lantern light swinging in the hammock together. Tonight he was getting the bed time story by the fire, in the bath and under the stars. After the water had cooled, he fell asleep wrapped in a towel on MT's knee still listening to the tales of Bilbo Baggins of Bag End. The picture says it all really.



## Monday

This was my last day of diving. My time here had gone so quickly. This morning as with the others, MT spent time before breakfast going through breathing techniques and stretches. Today we concentrated on a bit of yoga technique and specific stretches and exercises to assist my monofin technique. I really felt these as my stiff limbs and torso objected strongly to what I was persuading them to do. I, like a few I suspect, have done years of exercise with no real consistent stretching in my routines. Never too late to start though eh? It's strange that I never keep stretching up for long, even though when I do it for a period I really feel the benefit of it.

After the stretching and breakfast we made our way out to sea to have one last day of monofin diving on the line. I was still feeling a little bunged up but was happy to see how I got on. The warm up dives went ok so I decided to give a couple of constant weight dives a go. The first went well but the second got cut short by a blockage. I really dislike that feeling behind your eyes when your sinuses don't equalise properly, like someone poking at them from the back with a sharp stick. I managed to shift some of the snot by blowing my nostrils one at a time, and after another successful dive I decided to have a go at some variable.



The dives went ok considering. I was happy with what I'd achieved but still a little frustrated at having to put in so much effort getting air into my sinuses. I don't often have problems with equalising in the sea, so when I do, I tend to get a bit miffed. As soon as I start getting frustrated I may as well call it a day because things tend to just get worse. After taking my own advice we turned the boat back to shore.

The worst thing about the last day of a holiday is having to pack the night before an early start. It sort of hits home a bit early that this is it, that's ya cracker, time up, game over, collect your kit and back to Blighty.

It was another warm starry night and after packing, was spent drinking a bottle of beer and recollecting the last two weeks, all that had happened, all I had seen, and all I had learnt.



## Tuesday

Homeward bound. We set off early from camp, in first light to get there in time. I don't remember talking a lot in the truck on the way back to La Paz, lost in my own thoughts probably. I did see a Road Runner though!

We stopped at the same cafe on the sea front for a bit of breakfast and finished as we first started, chatting over some tortilla and cold drinks, before moving on to the airport

I am not really one for long goodbyes so once my luggage was checked in and the flight was on the departure board we said our goodbyes and I was sat alone, back again where my Mexican adventure began.

Most of the return journey was spent daydreaming, reliving the last two weeks, delaying the onset of the reality check I was going to get when I arrived back in Sheffield.

If you fancy something a little bit different and a bit special, and for me, an experience of what freediving is, was or just can be about, then Baja is a nice spot and the company is great.

I don't think I could really put into words how at home I felt, and my gratitude for the time I had with the Solomons, but I'm sure they know how much I enjoyed myself. So on a personal note, in short, thanks again folks for a fantastic time and some fantastic experiences and I'll see you soon.

