

Article Taken from Diver Magazine in the UK

Can you imagine what it would be like to swim with sharks, blend in with shoals of fish, race barracuda or come head to head with inquisitive lionfish? Imagining is often the closest we get. The problem with scuba is that we're just too clumsy. We're cocooned by bulky equipment and a noisy, fish scaring discharge of air. Free-diving using no more than masks and fins, might be the answer. World record-holder Tanya Streeter says: "All you have to be is comfortable in the water and in good health, especially your ears. Given that, anybody can free-dive". What anybody? Even me, a dedicated scuba-diver? There was only one way to find out. I would learn how to free-dive.

Umberto's methods

First stop is the Free Divers school in Eilat, run by Aharon Solomons and his wife MT (Short for Maria-Teresa).

Both were qualified as instructors by world free-diving record-holders Umberto Pelizzari and Francisco "Pipin" Ferreras. Aharon is capable of a constant-weight free-dive to more than 55m and MT to more than 50m. Previous training successes include Lee Donnelly, the British constant-weight record-holder. I know I am in capable hands. Course venue is the family-run Divers Village on the outskirts of Eilat, away from the skyscraper hotels and production-line dive resorts. As with any scuba course, there is theory to cover. Aharon begins with the 15 safety rules, which include: never free-dive alone, never free-dive after scuba, and know your limits. The lectures continue with physics, physiology and technique. Aharon and MT teach free-diving the Umberto Pelizzari way. As we watch videos of Umberto in action, Aharon explains how his philosophy has influenced them: "What he demonstrates is that elegance and style go hand in hand with free-diving". We end the day with some abdominal breathing exercises. Changing to this method of breathing increases the capacity and efficiency of the lungs. So why isn't everybody taught this? Aharon smiles: "It's not that we don't learn, it's that we've forgotten. Watch a baby breathe; it's all from the abdomen". Before I leave for the hotel, Aharon gives me a final piece of advice: "Remember, it's all about the mind and body working together. While free-diving we enter a contract with our body. We develop a sensitivity to what it's saying and above all we learn to listen to it". There's a lot of talk of "the mind". Umberto says that to get past your physical limits you must dive with your head. The next day I'm taken out for my first constant-weight training session. I soon learn that it's not all about finning up and down a line. Aharon and MT teach a variety of methods for descent and ascent.

On my last dive of the day I manage 20m, and hit the surface desperate to breathe. I feel I have already reached my physical limit. Despite this I feel safe. My buoyancy is such that at 15m I could float to the surface without effort. Also comforting is that during every dive Aharon or MT follow me down, watching for any sign of problems. In the afternoon Aharon introduces me to static apnea, using tables designed by Umberto's coaching and medical team. The purpose is to build up tolerance to increased levels of carbon dioxide and a decrease in oxygen levels, the same physiological changes a free-diver's body goes through during a constant-weight dive. Along with two previous students, Sari and Shirley, we carry out more breathing exercises, with Aharon and MT talking us through visualisation and relaxation techniques. Then we go out into the shallows to start the exercises. The first breath-hold is the shortest and hardest. However after a few more something weird happens - it gets easier. On the last one I don't want to come up. I've held my breath for 2min 20sec and strangely, it feels

as if only a minute has gone by. Walking back to the diver's village, Sari talks about the static apnea exercises: "I find them really relaxing. While I'm doing them I picture myself diving on a wreck. I open a hatch and inside I spend time looking at

all life in there". On the third day we're back at the line for more constant-weight training. I am more relaxed and comfortable. The breathing comes together and my mind starts to get to grips with pre-dive visualisations. Constant weight and static training sessions continue. I build up to a breath-hold of 3 min 5 sec. Aharon and MT lecture on equipment and how to build up a personal training schedule. It's the end of the week, and our final session on the line. About 23m below I see a lionfish

hovering. I fin down to join it. In silence we come head to head. The lionfish remains still, gazing at me. After what seems like 10 seconds I decide to ascend. When I tell MT about the encounter she smiles and tells me that often free-diving is "about having the time you need down there". Aharon tells me to "go and say hello to the lionfish" but I go into a glide and sail past it. My depth this time is 28.4m, my journey home is filled with thoughts of gliding through clear, blue waters. I have opened the door to a silent, peaceful place where my mind and body are totally relaxed.

I feel a strong desire to return.

- Brendan O'Brien