

Travel Adventure

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Off the coast of Pondicherry, on a morning with ample sunshine, a group of us sat huddled in a small fishing and scuba diving boat, in anticipation of our swim and consecutive dive into the sea-green water of the Bay of Bengal. The shimmering light on the surface of the water did little to assuage the fear that gripped the knots in our stomach, but the ocean breeze was a cool reminder that this was still a friendly warm day in the world and a great beginning to a new exploration.

Diving deep. Colloquially, this term means to examine a subject in a lot of detail. The sport of deep-diving or underwater diving or deep-sea diving is a religion for water enthusiasts, a journey to experience the calm of the underworld, a calling to examine the detailing of water. A frugal and a lazy person's sport, deep-diving doesn't require flashy appendages. The garments of the sport are mask, snorkel and fins, and the tools are buoy, rope and weights. The water is your element and field of play. For my chosen risqué, I free dove as a fish would, relying only on the elements to guide me. Oh, and the buoy, rope and weights.

I first heard of free-diving as a water sport, within the context of the life of the surfer, waterman and adventurer Jay Moriarity, who lost his life in a free-diving incident. Having closely followed his life, I was anxious about the sport, as a car driver would, who

To be One with the Sea

witnessed their racing hero die in a wild countryside accident. But since the time Moriarity lost his life in 2001 (he was freediving alone, without all the necessary safety information), the sport has developed more vigilance and today it is introduced with thorough safety, rescue and self-care training.

Enter Jeroen Elout, 47, a Hollander seaman and founder of Freediving



Coaches of Asia, who sailed across the Indian Ocean during peak pandemic, to spread the message of love for the ocean and introduce the masses to the real estate that is the sea. It is common knowledge that the water has the greatest expanse over this planet (oceans cover 71 per cent of Earth's surface), and yet human activity is mostly constricted to the land. Over 80 per cent of the global ocean remains unexplored. Deeply affected by the common human fear towards the water, Elout set sail across countries like the Philippines, Zambia, Uganda, Tanzania, Seychelles and (now) India to share his training as a free-diver, compiling his over 20 years of experience in a slim red notebook, and coaching learners and water enthusiasts to become free-diving instructors. When asked why he does what he is doing, he answers simply, "People don't care what

they do to the ocean, because they have no connection with it. So, when I teach people sea-diving, they can see what is happening to the ocean, to the animals and corals who get hurt by our actions."

The Bay of Bengal is home to a wide array of sea life. In the past decade, Pondicherry has emerged as a popular destination for sea divers, especially those training for scuba diving, and with the emergence of dive schools (our group was also hosted by the dive school Temple Adventures who welcomed the cause set by our instructor), water enthusiasts are encouraged to be certified in the sport. For my purposes, I was on holiday in Pondicherry, lured into the sport by a reluctant non-swimmer, with the temptation of a free workshop. With little to no marketing, Elout, had gathered a small group of local and travelling water enthusiasts who would be trained to become freediving instructors within the

short span of a fortnight. Armed with a unique teaching methodology, Elout radiated the confidence of a shy army general, on a mission to transform people's experience underwater.

Back to day one of freediving. Most experienced swimmers, who have been trained in the pool, approach the sea with trepidation. It is a highly changeable territory and to swim in it requires utmost vigilance. While glancing underwater, one can often catch ones' breath at the fictional threat of an errant shark (there were no sharks on the Pondicherry coast), or a stinging jellyfish (plenty of those). The waves are a constant companion, and to battle with them is like taking a beating from nature for all the sins of human activity. However, free diving invites these threats and compels you

to relax in the face of them, for to dive underwater is to forget that your body is fragile. It is to accept that the ocean is fragile too.

Once the buoy was firmly attached to the ocean floor with a rope, I was invited to take the first dive. I glanced downwards and then immediately surfaced to share my surprise over the presence of inseparable microplastics in the water. The visibility was scant (my poor eyesight didn't help matters) and all I could see in the water were particles of plastic that had made the water their home. I wasn't gulping down the water for fear of ingesting more than my average consumption of plastic. My anticipation for sharks quickly transformed into my anger for plastic and its audacity to pollute sea life. But water is water, so I still had to practice my patience, because a single yell of fury underwater and all the breath would leave my body. After several timid attempts to go deeper, I boldly made my way down the line up to five arm-spans (roughly 3.5 metres) and was accompanied by tiny fishes which I strove to protect from my grasping fists. My capability improved considerably after further attempts in Aurovilles' splendid quarries and the pier of Pondicherry. My personal best remained over 8 metres in 7 days (but I wasn't counting), for I was much too focussed on experiencing calm underwater.

To panic

The first rule of training in any water activity is to not panic. Water doesn't meet panic with compromise. Non-swimmers are initiated to water with floating exercises. Surfers are asked to predict swells, to time themselves right. If you time yourself and observe for breaks in the waves, you can ride onto any swell. Free divers are asked to hold their breath for a comically large period. A foolish question often crosses the brain, "But how do you stay underwater for so long?" You hold your breath, that's it. This happens

over long sustained practice and with the will to betray the instinct for air. Free divers spend entire careers mastering



this one fundamental activity and invent methods to salvage the oxygen within the body, even finding pockets of air within the body and preserving them. Relaxation methods, visual deprivation, slow swim-out, appendages like fins, meditation etc. are encouraged to conserve oxygen and elongate the dive time. Once you take the big gulp of air to dive deep, you stay underwater till your lungs scream out in protest, or your ears ring in pain due to the water pressure. The latter is not the best reason to break the surface, but it can be a compelling one for newcomers (a technique dubbed Vasalva is employed to counter pressure built around the ears). My first few dives ended with long complaints about the enclosed state of my ears underwater, the tragic reality of the human body, but one that immediately enshrouds you in deep silence, golden for escaping into a different world.

If a giant task lays ahead of you, you tackle it one step at a time. In this case, thorough theoretical learning prepares you somewhat for going down the line (I made my first sea-dive with little to

no theoretical knowledge). One arm span at a time, you make your way downwards, in the hope to see the ocean floor immediately. But the depth is not a joke. It can be overwhelming to realise that a lifetime is not enough and the human body is incapable to reach the deepest trenches of the ocean floor in a single breath. But it is still exhilarating just to glance at a different reality and many pro deep divers have set several records for reaching great depths and making good time. But for some, the trip down the line is a homeward journey. We are all from the water (and can be of the water too), and in a subconscious state, we all yearn to escape back to our mothers' womb. A rope and some fluid to float in is not an alien environment, and deep-diving offers that reacquaintance with the mothership.

Community style

Deep divers are encouraged to enrol themselves into a community. When in water, they are expected to employ a buddy system -- a group of people entrusted to look out for one another when diving underwater. While deep-diving is a private experience (everyone experiences the mothership uniquely) it is also a shared one, in that your buddy ensures you go down below and come upwards safely, using whatever little controlled mechanisms (like tugging on the rope periodically and group calls underwater) to provide support underwater. Rotations are set employing clear instructions on who will take their turn down the line and rescue methodologies are drilled into the brain, in case of emergencies. A jellyfish sting is a mild emergency, but a black-out is a major emergency. We took turns to fake black-outs in the water, to keep our buddies in the pack vigilant of our safety. A three-finger peacock sign is the marker of a healthy experience. And in case one of us panicked in the water and thrust their safety onto a buddy, we were trained to keep calm and follow protocol. I made several friends over faked emergencies.

In Pondicherry our group of enthusiasts quickly transformed into coaches for the newcomers. Each diver was encouraged to practice their teaching capabilities on the incoming learners. Equipped with practical knowledge, each of us felt capable of imparting theoretical and hard-earned practical know-how. The teaching methodology in the workshop was simple, each learner can transform into a teacher, and quickly. There was no time to waste when it came to

people in coach mode right from the very beginning - to create this big group to make something about this big problem that we are not connected to the ocean.” A step towards conservation also begins with ocean consciousness and for the various environmentalists that Elout has trained, the first step begins with connecting with the entity that we are entrusted to protect.

Freediving is an accessible sport, conducted in shallow and deep waters, in quarries (greater experience owing

a buoy, and with a sizeable rope (6-10 metres), make your team of divers. This activity is encouraged in shallow waters at first, for non-swimmers especially, who are not necessarily discouraged to experience this sport, if only to rid themselves of their fear of water. “It is perfectly natural to fear things that can kill you,” says Elout, who has trained several non-swimmers to enjoy the sport, and spend more time at sea.

Way of life

But how is this way of life relevant in the post-pandemic, climate anxious 21st century? To this, the 47-year-old seaman replies, “I am amazed that in this overpopulated world, I can sail around for days without meeting people, without seeing a boat. I wish that for more people. I know many who are stuck at places where they are uncomfortable with having to pay way too much money, for little space to live in, and yet they all tend to live on top of each other because they believe that opportunities exist in the big cities and not in the villages and at sea. It takes more skill to be away from the city, but once you can do it, you won’t need anyone, which allows you to go places where few people can go.”

If free-divers are allowed to roam the world freely, they can be counted upon to spread the message of love for the ocean, and more importantly that of our emergent state. The planet is at a tipping point, readying for a large onslaught by nature against human activity. Counting down on the time left we are frantically persuading one another to take action to conserve life. If you are looking to connect with nature, perhaps start with water. The life inside is hurt by human deeds. My experience was less thrilling when I found there was just plastic waiting for me underneath. I am sure the fishes are not thrilled too.

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initiating new people to connect with the ocean.

When quizzed about his faith in peoples’ teaching capabilities, Elout replies, “People not connected to the ocean is a crisis and this means to fix it we need thousands of coaches. The method of training is based on how they train big armies for a war coming up next month. There is no time to mess around. There is no time to do things the slow way. People have to get trained on the spot, very practical not diving into theory, cutting out the things that are not important, only focussing on things that are important and applicable to the situation. Making sure that there are strong safety methods and standards and getting

to the calm surface water), rivers, ponds or sea, by amateurs and pros, by sailors and fishermen, conservationists and scientists studying ocean life. A writer diving deep is probably looking for answers to life’s fundamental questions and a mother could just be looking for some peace from her toddler. If you find yourself in the middle of the ocean and are looking to make your first dive, a simple exercise, to begin with, is breath control and relaxation. If you can float on the surface of the water with a snorkel and a mask on your face and can wear it in calm response to the waves of the sea, you are ready to make a gentle splash underwater. When you are with a group of people, you can fashion a rock into a weight, a rubber tube of a tyre into