

ADVENTURE



The Big Blue

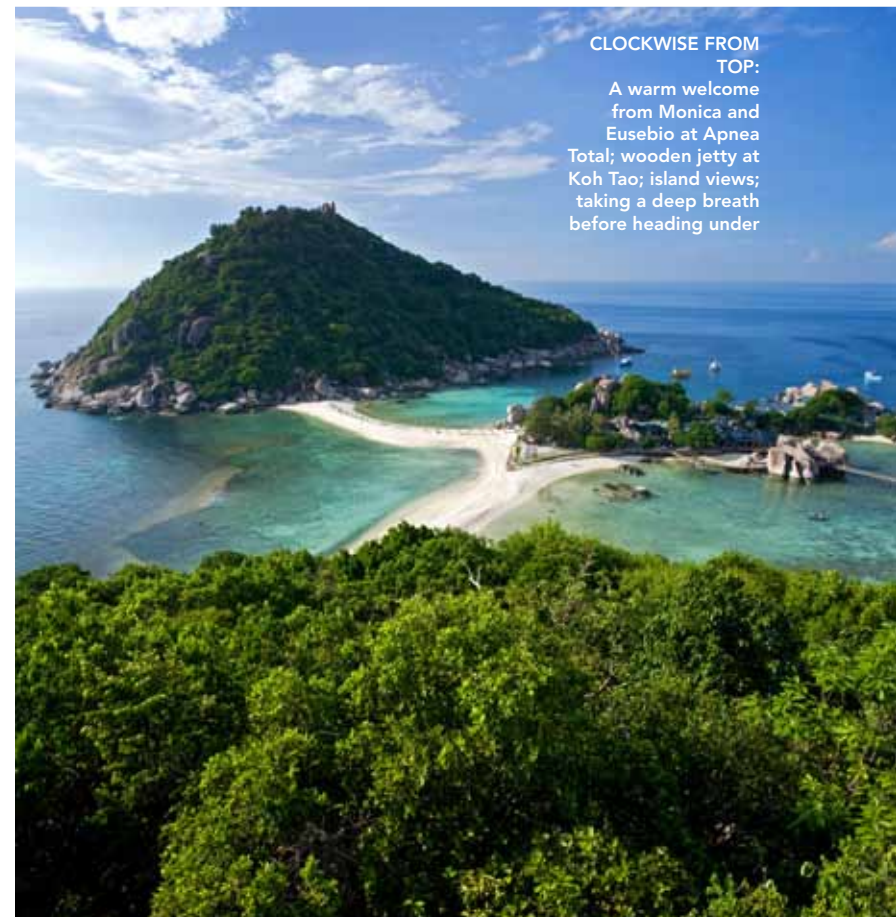
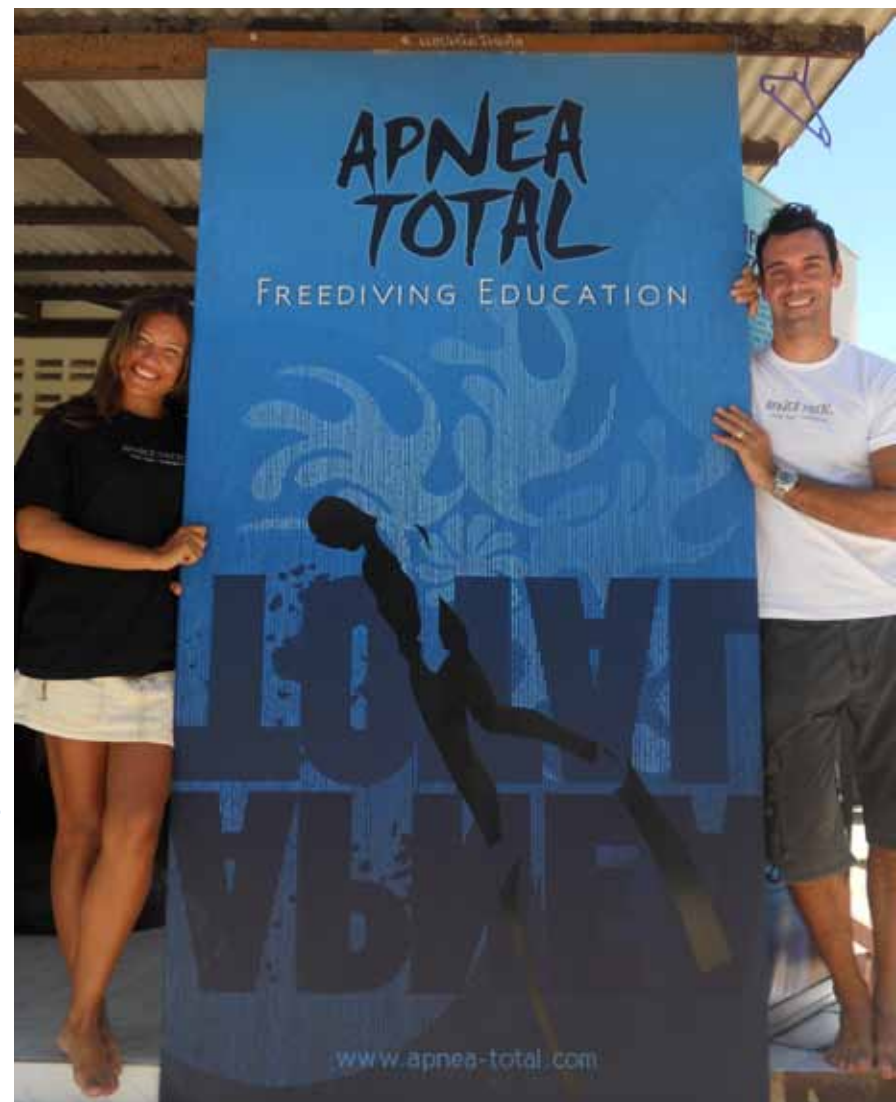
FREEDIVING IS ATTRACTING THOSE SEEKING THE NEXT DEPTH-DEFYING THRILL. BUT AS GRAEME GREEN DISCOVERS ON KOH TAO, THIS FAST-RISING SPORT HAS MORE IN COMMON WITH MEDITATION AND YOGA THAN ADRENALINE-FUELLED ADVENTURE.

A lone jellyfish floats by, close to my face. It's good to have his company as, apart from this little guy, I'm completely alone down here, 30 metres below the ocean surface. Like the jellyfish, I'm also without any scuba gear or artificial breathing apparatus – I took a deep breath at the surface a minute or so ago and the oxygen's lasted me right down into the silty cool waters near the ocean floor.

I never thought I'd be capable of doing this, but learning to freedive (underwater diving without scuba gear) is all about pushing limits.

I take my freediving instruction at Apnea Total on the small paradisiacal island of Koh Tao, Thailand's premier diving destination, off the country's southeast coast. Thousands of travellers come here each year to take beginner scuba diving courses or to dive at some of the unique sites around the island, including Chumphon Pinnacle, which has regular sightings of bull sharks. The lively diving scene makes Tao quite a party island, with beachfront bars like The Lotus Bar often packed and buzzing until the early hours of the morning. But while in training for freediving, it's best to swap the buckets of booze for early nights, as the course demands a lot of your body and mind – it's good to be rested and in shape.

Koh Tao's diving scene made it an obvious place to set up a freediving school. "There was already a lot of interest in freediving by locals and travellers and what was needed was a freediving school with a structured and safe method of education," says Spanish freediver Eusebio Saenz de Santamaria, who, along with fellow obsessive Monica Ganema (Argentina), opened shop here in 2004. They've since certified over 4,000 students of freediving. "The conditions of Koh Tao are ideal to teach and learn freediving because for the majority of the year we have sunny weather and calm blue waters. Temperatures are also consistently around 30 degrees Celsius, there are no currents and beautiful tropical marine life," says Eusebio. "The island's a pure paradise with a feeling of good energy, very friendly locals and a laidback lifestyle that makes people want to stay longer and return year after year. Koh Tao is addictive."



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP:
TOP:
A warm welcome from Monica and Eusebio at Apnea Total; wooden jetty at Koh Tao; island views; taking a deep breath before heading under

“The island's a pure paradise with a feeling of good energy, very friendly locals and a laidback lifestyle that makes people want to stay longer and return year after year. Koh Tao is addictive.”



I'm quite nervous on my first day, unsure of what the five-day course will hold. But the relaxed ultra-cool instructors Rodrigo, Patita and Eusebio instantly put our class of three divers at ease, as well as making everything look deceptively simple.

Typically, we spend mornings in the classroom learning theory, physiology and special breathing techniques (the "breathe up") to help pack the body with as much oxygen as possible. We huff and puff, making daft facial expressions and strange sounds with our mouths, as we learn to fill our body in stages, the stomach, diaphragm, chest, even throat packed with air. Then, in the afternoons, out in the clear blue water surrounding the island, with the sun shining, we put what we've learned into practice and refine our technique.

"The key to this discipline is relaxation," Rodrigo explains, before we try our first dive – a relaxed body and mind burn up less oxygen underwater than a stressed active mind. "Once you're in the water, people feel excited. With time, you become more focused, more relaxed, more confident. If you're making a salad, you don't just use tomatoes, but also other ingredients: onions, peppers, >



แมงกะพรุนลอยไปตามน้ำ ผ่านหน้าผมไป ผมรู้สึกดีที่มีเพื่อนอยู่ใต้ผิวน้ำทะเลแห่งนี้ ผมไม่มีอุปกรณ์ช่วยดำน้ำ และออกซิเจนที่ได้จากการขึ้นหายใจเหนือน้ำเมื่อนานที่กว่าๆก็ยังเพียงพอให้ผมอยู่ใต้น้ำได้จนถึงตอนนี้ ผมไม่เคยคิดเลยว่าจะสามารถดำน้ำแบบไม่มีอุปกรณ์ดำน้ำ หรือที่เรียกว่าการดำน้ำตัวเปล่าได้มาก่อน ผมหัดการดำน้ำตัวเปล่าที่ Apnea Total บนเกาะเต่า อันเป็นจุดดำน้ำขึ้นชื่อของประเทศไทย ที่มีนักท่องเที่ยวมาเยือนนับพันคนต่อปี

เกาะเต่า นับเป็นแหล่งดำน้ำที่เหมาะสมแก่การดำน้ำตัวเปล่า เนื่องด้วยสภาพอากาศที่แจ่มใส น้ำนิ่งไม่มีคลื่นลม อีกทั้งบรรยากาศใต้น้ำก็สวยงาม ทำให้นักท่องเที่ยวต่างอยากอยู่บนเกาะเต่านานๆ

While in training for freediving, it's best to swap the "buckets" of booze for early nights, as the course demands a lot of your body and mind

cucumber... You use lots of ingredients in freediving, too – relaxation is one ingredient, so is technique. It all comes together, an art, a feeling, which makes you really enjoy being in the water.”

Our target depth on our first day is 10 metres. But there are a lot of “ingredients” to remember, from getting the “breathe up” right and the way you dive down into the water to the positioning of hands and feet on the rope we use to descend on. I have a bit of trouble equalising (holding the nose and blowing, to relieve pressure on ear drums) as I go down and also struggle to put everything together comfortably. I don't feel very relaxed either, but at times quite anxious. The idea of reaching 10 metres, and beyond, seems a long way down.

But after each dive, when I return to the surface, Rodrigo or Eusebio gently encourage, talking me through ways to understand my body better and pointing out ways to improve. “A positive mindset, relaxation and self-confidence are essential factors in freediving, more important than physical attributes, such as large lung size or fitness,” says Eusebio, as we rest on a buoy at the surface. (Eusebio is capable of diving to 81 metres and holding his breath for over seven and a half minutes). “Self-confidence is the first essential key that we build in our courses and once our students feel confident of their abilities then relaxation naturally follows. It's with this positive mindset that people can then focus more clearly on their technique in order to maximise their performance.”

Gradually, my “salad ingredients” start to come together and I make the ten-metre mark on my last dive. But at the end of the day, there's a feeling of trepidation about going any deeper.

We're set homework, including breathing exercises and yoga and meditation techniques, as well as visualizing what we plan to do the next day. It works remarkably well.



Meditation relaxes body and mind before a dive

ผมค่อนข้างประหม่าในวันหัดดำน้ำตัวเปล่าวันแรก แต่ด้วยวิธีการสอนของครูสอน ทำให้การฝึกเป็นไปได้อย่างง่ายดาย ในช่วงเช้า ผมเรียนเรื่องทฤษฎีเป็นหลัก ทั้งเรื่องสรีรวิทยาและเทคนิคการหายใจเพื่อเก็บออกซิเจนไว้ให้มากที่สุด เมื่อตกบ่าย ผมก็ได้ไปอยู่ในน้ำท่ามกลางแสงอาทิตย์ เพื่อฝึกฝนสิ่งที่เรียนรู้มาจากช่วงเช้า คุณรอดริโก ผู้ฝึกสอนกล่าวว่า สิ่งสำคัญคือการผ่อนคลาย เมื่อร่างกายและจิตใจผ่อนคลาย ก็จะใช้ออกซิเจนน้อยลง การผ่อนคลายเป็นส่วนประกอบหนึ่งของการดำน้ำตัวเปล่า ที่ต้องใช้ควบคู่ไปกับส่วนประกอบอื่นๆ เราฝึกดำน้ำกันที่ระดับความลึก 10 เมตร และฝึกฝนกับส่วนประกอบที่ช่วยในการดำน้ำต่างๆ เช่นการหายใจ การดำลงได้น้ำและการวางตำแหน่งมือและเท้า

The next morning, I feel more confident and relaxed – and it shows in my dives. By the end of day two, I go down, with comparative ease, to 20 metres, my feet touching the weight at the bottom of the buoy-line.

Being underwater au naturelle makes freediving a different experience

to scuba. “With scuba, you're carrying all that heavy equipment on your back, so freediving is much freer,” says Eusebio. “And with scuba, you're more like a spectator; >

whereas with freediving, it's like you're actually swimming with the fishes." It's impossible to stay under the water as long without an oxygen tank strapped to your back, but the time under the water becomes a strangely calm meditative experience, free of the raspy in-and-out noise of breathing with scuba equipment, and with nothing but deep blue water in all directions.

The more you do, the more you feel capable of. On day three, after a good relaxed "breathe up", I float perfectly still on the surface of the water (known as a Static Dive) and hold my breath underwater for three minutes and 11 seconds. This requires going to your own personal "happy place" (a song or mental picture that makes you feel calm) and relaxing every part of your body and mind. It's an odd dreamlike state, floating lifelessly on the water, Eusebio holding my arm to check I'm still conscious, while geeing me on to push beyond my comfortable limit – my personal best of the day, a shocking four minutes and 15 seconds.

We're trained to bring on our Mammalian Dive Reflex (MDR), something humans share with dolphins, seals and whales. This involves a slowing of the heart rate, the redistribution of blood from limbs to our core (brain, heart, lungs...) and contractions in the diaphragm, all of which helps maintain consciousness and allow lungs to withstand pressure in deep water. The contractions are a disturbing uncomfortable sensation at first, but they're also a freediver's friend – get to know, understand and like the MDR, or at least to not be afraid of it, and you can dive further and for longer.

The dangling legs of my fellow divers at the surface seem a long way away now when I'm diving and the water is colder and murkier, with particles floating up from the ocean floor – a sign of how deep we're going. On day four, I reach 27 metres, but know I can go further. >

PHOTO BY: IX SHEN



Floating back to the surface

เมื่อผมขึ้นสู่ผิวน้ำจากการดำน้ำแต่ละครั้ง ครูฝึกจะคอยให้กำลังใจและสอนให้ผมเข้าใจร่างกายของตัวเองมากขึ้น เพื่อให้การดำน้ำมีประสิทธิภาพดีขึ้น เช่นการคิดในแง่บวก การผ่อนคลายและความมั่นใจ ที่เป็นส่วนประกอบของการดำน้ำตัวเปล่าที่สำคัญมากกว่าขนาดของปอดหรือความแข็งแรงของร่างกายเสียอีก การดำน้ำแบบนี้ให้ประสบการณ์ที่แตกต่างจากการดำน้ำแบบใช้อุปกรณ์ เมื่อปราศจากอุปกรณ์ดำน้ำหนักๆที่ถ่วงหลัง ก็มีอิสระในการดำน้ำมากกว่า ทำให้รู้สึกเหมือนกับว่าเราว่ายน้ำไปพร้อมๆกับปลา แทนที่จะเป็นการดำน้ำไปแอบดูปลา

“A positive mindset, relaxation and self-confidence are essential factors in freediving, more important than physical attributes, such as large lung size or fitness”

“Freediving is a way of understanding life. When I’m freediving, I’m in commune with myself and the environment. That’s my goal too in the rest of my life, with family, with friends...everything”

This kind of activity isn’t to be taken too lightly, though. Freediving is quite safe, but of the three students in my group, one experiences a short blackout as he returns to the surface and another has a little “samba” (a shaky episode resembling the Brazilian dance). Both of these are signs that the brain isn’t getting enough oxygen as we demand more and more of our bodies.

My breathe ups on my last day are focused and positive, all my ingredients coming together smoothly. I’m relaxed and confident, enjoying the experience of being in the water. I set a personal record of 31 metres – something which seemed impossible at the start of the week. Each day, I’m getting to understand my body better and learning that both mind and body are capable of far more than we regularly accept. It’s incredibly satisfying – now, rather than apprehension about what’s coming next, I’m keen to push through and find out how much further I can go.

But the lessons of freediving stay with you long after you get out of the water. As Rodrigo says: “Freediving is a way of understanding life. When I’m freediving, I’m in commune with myself and the environment. That’s my goal too in the rest of my life, with family, with friends...

everything. With work, you always have to think about what comes next. Freediving is to live in the present and not think about anything else. You use the art and tools inside you and discover your potential.” And it does leave you wondering, once back on dry land, if in just five days you can shatter what you previously thought were your limits, what else are you capable of?

Two-day beginner Freediving Courses with Apnea Total cost 5,500 baht and 3-day Advanced Courses cost 7,000 baht. For more information, visit www.apnea-total.com. □

ADVENTURE HOT SPOTS

Thrill seekers are more than catered for in Southeast Asia. Here’s a round-up of a few of the region’s most adventurous, and spectacular destinations.

- Reefs around the islands of Koh Rong Saloem and Koh Kong, which are two hours from Cambodia’s coast offer an incredible diversity of hard and soft corals teeming with macro-life such as mini sea-horses, nudibranches, marine worms and octopus, all ideal for underwater photographers and critter hunters. www.divecambodia.com
- The limestone cliffs and crags around Tonsai Beach in Krabi, offer vertiginous some of the world’s best rock climbing for beginners and experienced climbers. www.rockclimbingthailand.com
- Some of the Maldives finest diving is to be had at night when predators become active on the reefs – Maaya Thila night dive, for example, is an opportunity to see white tip reef sharks and moray eels hunting for their next unlucky meal. www.maldivesdivetravel.com
- A challenging 57-km mountain-biking trail through meadows, streams and rocky trails, on the edge of the ecotourism village of Chi Phat in Cambodia’s Cardamom mountains, lets you explore bat caves and ancient burial jar sites. www.ecoadventurecambodia.com
- The Similan Islands, around 100km northwest of Phuket, are among the top ten dive sites in the world, with underwater rock gorges, coral reefs and, at Richelieu Rock, the chance to see whale sharks. www.sunrise-divers.com
- Take a sea kayak out to explore the popular Phang Nga Bay, in the Andaman Sea near Phuket, paddling around tiny islands, secret coves and limestone karsts, occasionally dropping anchor for a bit of snorkeling. www.paddleasia.com
- Experience the white sand beaches and clear blue waters of the Maldives from a dizzying height, pulled along in a parachute being a speed boat for a bit of parasailing. www.cirrusholidays.com

เมื่อฝึกบ่อยๆครั้ง ก็ทำให้ดำน้ำได้ดีขึ้น ในวัน
ที่สาม ผมก็สามารถลอยตัวเหนือน้ำได้ ทั้งยัง
กลับหายใจอยู่ในน้ำได้นานกว่า 3 นาทีก็บออีก
11 วินาที เรายังฝึกการดำน้ำแบบสะท้อนน้ำ
อันเป็นเทคนิคที่มนุษย์ ปลาโลมา แมวน้ำและ
ปลาวาฬมีเหมือนกัน เทคนิคนี้ได้แก่การลด
อัตราการเต้นของหัวใจ การส่งถ่ายเลือดจาก
แขนขาสู่แกนหลัก เช่นสมองและปอด และ
การหดกะบังลมเพื่อให้ปอดสามารถทนต่อแรง
กดดันในน้ำได้ เมื่อนักดำน้ำคุ้นเคยกับการหด
กะบังลมแล้ว ก็จะช่วยให้นักดำน้ำสามารถ
ดำน้ำได้นานขึ้นและลึกขึ้น เมื่อถึงวันที่สี่
ผมก็ดำน้ำได้ถึง 27 เมตร และยังไม่ต่อก็อีก
วันสุดท้ายของการฝึก ส่วนประกอบต่างๆ
ของการดำน้ำตัวเปล่าทำงานร่วมกันได้