



Can four days of training give the author (left) what it takes to reach a depth of 100 feet on a single gulp of air—and not drown?

TRAVEL

Waiting to Exhale

LEARNING TO FREE DIVE OFF HAWAII'S KONA COAST TAKES IRON LUNGS AND STEELY NERVES.

By James Sturz

ONE BY ONE, we pull ourselves down a weighted line suspended from the ocean's surface, moving steadily toward a pod of dolphins swimming beneath us. Two hundred and fifty yards off the Big Island of Hawaii's South Kona Coast and 50 feet down—that's where we're supposed to linger, letting our bodies adjust to the ocean's squeeze. If we do what we've been taught, our heartbeats will slow, we'll clear the pressure in our ears, and we won't freak out. But this is merely a warm-up, a prelude to what's

coming next: using fins to kick ourselves another 50 feet down on a single breath, all while avoiding blacking out and dying, of course.

I started snorkeling in New York City, in my bathtub, at age 6. By 7, I was exploring the living room, gazing at couches and end tables through my mask. The shag carpet looked like coral. There weren't any fish, but our cairn terrier was the size of a snapper. I first tried scuba in my high school's pool and got certified in upstate New York, during college, in the vichyssoise waters of Skaneateles Lake, which William Henry Seward, the 19th-

century governor of the Empire State, called "the most beautiful body of water in the world." We saw trout.

Over the next 20 years, I became a passionate diver, lugging 40-plus pounds of scuba gear around the world as I ventured into deeper realms of wrecks and reefs. But recently I've returned to my snorkeling roots. Perhaps because when I snorkel, the ocean feels like my personal enormity, while scuba diving makes me feel less like a swimmer than an astronaut sealed up in a suit, following rules. *Don't stay down too long; don't move too fast; don't hold your breath.* That's not what I want.

So I've come to Hawaii to shed the diving equipment. While snorkeling means staying at the surface, free diving means entering the ocean as a kind of aquatic mammal, jettisoning the scuba diver's trail of bubbles and Darth Vader

wheeze. Some people free dive to spear fish; others enter competitions (using a weighted sled and a specially designed lift device, in 2007 the Austrian Herbert Nitsch set the mind-boggling record of 702 feet). As a growing extreme sport, free diving rivals BASE jumping. Of course, in that other high-risk endeavor, you don't have to trouble yourself with getting back up. I'm simply drawn to feeling freedom in the water, and to the dreaminess some divers call the "flow." Imagine Zen breath-holding meditation—in an isolation tank large enough to cover 70 percent of the globe.

Well-suited to this pursuit are the warm, clear waters off Pu'uhonua o Honaunau, or "Place of Refuge," where generations of Hawaiians sought sanctuary after running afoul of *kapu*—the ancient island laws demanding death sentences for such infractions as walking in the chief's footsteps. A fitting spot, then, for doing things that could get one killed.

I've enrolled in the four-day intermediate class run by Performance Freediving International, a school owned by Kirk Krack, who appeared in the documentary *The Cove*, deploying underwater surveillance equipment to record Japanese dolphin slaughter. We begin with six pages of liability waivers. My nine classmates include triathletes, Brazilian-jujitsu instructors, a marine-science student, and a father-and-son spearfishing team in camouflage wet suits. When we pair off, I draw a wildland firefighter from Northern California. Even in neoprene, he looks like Thor.

Holding your breath like a free diver requires relearning to breathe. This means letting the stomach expand, stretching the chest's intercostal muscles to maximize the space for the lungs, inhaling deeply while topping them off like fuel tanks, and then packing in still a bit more air. The urge to breathe that comes from our diaphragm is, to Krack and his instructors, "the lying bastard." What are the consequences of ignoring that urge for too long? Blacking out, and then maybe drowning. "Okay, some tools you'll learn come with risks," Krack conceded to us. "Just as, if you use a saw, you can saw your finger off with it, too."

I can't say I feel more confident knowing that Krack has assisted with hundreds of blackout recoveries, and has passed out underwater six times himself. But I do know he's taught nearly 6,000 students, including the magician David Blaine, and coached divers to more than 100 national and 20 world records.

The sport is simple enough, as we learn it: a diver descends headfirst alongside a weighted measuring line, kicking hard, then slowly, and then not at all—because by 66 feet, a compressed wet suit has lost its buoyancy and the diver begins to sink; after that, kicking wastes energy needed for the return trip and accelerates the heartbeat, depleting oxygen. Meanwhile, the pressure in the ears feels as sharp as a drill and requires clearing, most often by pinching the nose and blowing.

On the fourth morning, as we head out from the shore of Pu'uhonua o Honaunau—past sunbathers and

snorkelers, coral beds and lava flows, damselfish and yellow tangs—it's not long before nothing but blue lies beneath us. The instructors warn us not to get a number in our heads, but of course we want to reach 100 feet, even though most of us have never before tried going deeper than 30. I think of this goal as swimming the length of a Boeing 737 that has crashed nose-first into the ocean. Setting a depth goal and reaching it might as well be free diving's narcotic.

If scuba diving is an outward journey—Krack calls it tearing through a forest in a Hummer with the AC on and the windows up—free diving is an inward passage. It's a lone descent, as you feel your body adapt to the depth. The mammalian diving reflex kicks in: the heart slows, peripheral blood vessels constrict, the spleen compresses and dopes the body with red blood cells.

As I kick down, I'm bubbleless, sleek. A bright metal plate at the end of the line marks 100 feet. A solitary squid watches me descend. I kick and kick, feeling my fins paddle back and forth, through a medium with 800 times the density of air. The water is clear here. I shouldn't be looking at the plate, but I can't help myself. I reach and grab it, before turning to head up to the surface. I've been sinking, so now I have to kick hard, as I bring my hands together overhead. I've slipped from my Zen state. My legs feel leaden, as my diaphragm contracts. What can I do but kick? At 33 feet, I'm aware of my instructor motioning for me to sweep my arms down in a final push. The contractions are worse, but I know I'm not far. So I kick. The air expands inside my mask. It's possible—and thrilling—to take the minutest sniff. Then I exhale, as I've been taught, before breaking the surface, so I can immediately breathe in. Thor takes me through six recovery breaths, aware that 90 percent of blackouts occur after surfacing, and I signal that I'm okay. I look at my gauge, and it reads 102 feet, with an underwater time of 1 minute and 11 seconds—longer than it should have taken, but I'm alive. Floating, I keep breathing in. I'm breathing hard.

Then the instructor asks, "Who wants to go deeper?" ■



The author, surfacing, initiates recovery breathing to prevent a blackout.

James Sturz is the author of the novel *Sasso*.

JAMES STURZ

DEPARTMENTS

8...EDITOR'S NOTE

10...THE CONVERSATION

GALLERY

68...Count Your Blessings

By John Krause

80...Fitting In

By Jen Hsieh

POETRY

48...The Interrogation

By Amit Majmudar

62...The Residency

By David Yezzi

81...The Foley Artist's Apprentice

By Caitlin Doyle

104...WHAT'S YOUR PROBLEM?

How to get Ben Bernanke's beard, and other advice

By Jeffrey Goldberg



Free diving means entering the ocean as an aquatic mammal—and holding your breath. Page 25.

Dispatches

POLITICS

17...Can the Tea Party Take Japan?

Tokyo conservatives look westward for inspiration.

By Molly Ball

FRONTIERS

18...Call of the Wild

Community and solitude in the Alaskan wilderness

By Darcy Courteau

MUSIC

22...Band Aid

Teaching Afghan soldiers to play in sync

By Brian Mockenhaupt

FAMILY

23...The Despot's Child

Bad tidings reach Muammar Qaddafi's son Saadi.

By Jacqueline Frazier

TRAVEL

25...Waiting to Exhale

Learning to free dive off Hawaii's Kona Coast takes iron lungs and steely nerves.

By James Sturz

TECHNOLOGY

28...The Data-Driven Parent

Will statistical analytics make for healthier, happier babies—or more anxious adults?

By Mya Frazier

May issue designed by Pentagram; cover photograph by Phillip Toledano

JAMES STURZ