

TRY IT NOW

FREEDIVING

Susie Moss headed to *Cornwall's north coast* to learn how to dive underwater without the aid of any breathing equipment



Sea nomads have been freediving for food since mankind first evolved. Some traditional diving cultures still exist, mostly in South East Asia, but with the increase of commercial fishing and other pressures of modern society, this ancient way of life and of harvesting from the water is being rapidly eroded. A new culture of freediving and foraging in the West has emerged, harnessing these time-honoured skills in an equally respectful way.

Balanced between sport and meditation freediving – the art of breath hold diving – challenges us both mentally and physically. Once the technique is learned, it's a wonderfully simple sport and a great way to interact with the seas – without much equipment and with very low impact to the environment. The British coast, despite – or because of – its cold water temperatures, produces a tough breed of enthusiastic free divers. In the spring, when the storms have died off, our waters can be clear and full of life. The plankton bloom in late May can make the water a bit murky, but it brings the basking sharks in, and then as summer approaches, the visibility is good again and there is an abundance of fish to be among. Susie Moss joined Freedive UK on Cornwall's north coast for a weekend of training and underwater enlightenment.



HAVING A GO
Susie Moss
joined a group
of five people
on a weekend
freediving course
in Newquay

9.30AM WHY WE'RE HERE

Five of us gather in the morning sun to meet our freediving instructor and founder of Freedive UK, Ian Donald. We sit on the grassy headland, introduce ourselves and tell each other what's brought us here. Absence of gear, freedom, a move forward from snorkelling and the meditative aspect of breath control are all raised as appealing reasons.

'Freediving is about as far away from scuba diving as football,' says Ian. 'You will be moving in such a way that you feel more in touch with your surroundings, and you'll find marine life behaving differently around you.'

Like any sport, freediving involves learning the techniques, training, confidence and practise. He talks us through the different freediving disciplines and what we will cover to reach our target of AIDA two-star qualification.

10AM BREATHE SLOWLY

We begin by focusing on our breathing, finding ways to become aware of our breath in a calm and controlled manner, and, most importantly, to avoid hyperventilating. I find myself nervous, wondering if being an asthmatic will hinder my ability, and I regret the extra coffee at breakfast – surely I'll struggle to lower my already thumping heart rate. He assures me it'll be fine, and it seems we're all nervous about something. We learn how

ASK *the* PRO

Ian Donald, Master instructor at Freedive UK, gives his advice on getting started if you're scared of deep water.

'It's not going to be an easy journey, but you'll never regret it once you reach the end. The first step is down to you. Buy a mask and a snorkel, go to a sheltered beach, walk into the water and get used to breathing through a snorkel while looking at the underwater world around you. Even a deep rockpool will do. The next step is swimming with a mask and snorkel. Start without fins and just use breaststroke in still and safe water. This can be a swimming pool but better if it was the sea. Once you're confident with this stage, it's time to enrol on a freediving course, such as Freedive's UK Recreational Freediver, for a relaxed intro, no pressure and loads of fun.'



to achieve a slow resting heart rate; hands on our stomachs, we practise calm inhalation and extended exhalation. This is called the breathe up and helps to lower our heart rate, before the final big breaths; first inhaling to about 75 per cent capacity, then exhaling as much as possible, and then inhale to 100 per cent. We all practise sucking in air and filling our stomach, chest and lung cavities.

11AM POOL PRACTISE

To practise our breath hold in an easy and controlled place, we head to a private pool a short drive away. First we must 'lube up' the suits that Ian provides in order to squeeze into them. I'm used to regular wetsuits being an ungainly struggle but these are something

ABOVE Susie and her course mates head down to the sea carrying their flippers ABOVE, TOP RIGHT Instructor Ian wore a different coloured wetsuit so his students could easily identify him when they were in the water

else. Luckily, Ian has the technique down so following his instructions of dowsing the suits with conditioner helps to slide them on. In the water, we practise our relaxation and our breathe up before embarking on increasing our breath hold. It feels bizarre, lying face down in a pool for as long as you can manage. We work in pairs, supporting each other and guiding the floating bodies where needed. After some practise, we get to the test time: we must each achieve at least two minutes static apnea (holding breath) to qualify. We're encouraged to urge each other on to reach our target, but also told how to help our partners to the edge and get them out of the water if needed. I watch coast photographer Kian puffing up,

rising in the water and then holding his breathe for an impressive three and a half minutes. Then it's my turn, and I feel ridiculously tense at the thought of it. I lie face down for what feels like an eternity, floating in liquid space, conscious of the bubbles in my ears and the water trickling into my mask, all the while trying to quieten my screaming mind. I am amazed when I reach two minutes and 20 seconds. Next, it's weights and fins on for the dynamic apnea test – moving underwater for at least 40m on one breath hold. The fins are huge, longer than regular ones for extra effectiveness in the water and greater hilarity on the surface. We learn how to swim keeping our legs straight, bending at the knee as little as possible for



maximum glide. I find the breath hold easier when moving, less mind control perhaps, and more to keep me distracted from the bursting chest sensation.

1.30PM LUNCH & LEARNING

We return to Towan Headland for our pasta-packed lunch. We learn more theory while our food goes down before we can get into the water again. This time we discuss pressure and equalising. As divers, we need to equalise our ears, our sinuses and our mask. Ian runs through some of the nasty sounding consequences of not equalising and we all realise how important this technique will be to us. We learn the Frenzel technique – pinching our nose closed, placing our tongue on the roof

ABOVE, LEFT The group learned how to breathe through a snorkel while looking at the underwater world around them ABOVE Susie got her hands on a starfish ABOVE, RIGHT Two buoys in the water marked out the depths the free divers had to reach

of our month and gently moving it upwards until the pressure in the middle ear is equal – most commonly used by free divers for depths of up to 40m. We're also taught to duck dive – a smooth and rapid way to enter the water head down and gain depth fast. Soon it's our time to try it out.

3.15PM INTO THE SEA

We're lucky to have a sunny weekend and the water is blue and inviting. Having conquered my nerves in the pool, I now feel more enthusiastic about getting to play in the sea. We trundle down the cliff path, an excited group clad in neoprene wetsuits full of anticipation. Ian has whet our appetites for sea adventures with tales of basking sharks, sun fish, and dolphins he saw in this same bay last year. We snorkel and duck dive our way around the coast, practising our equalising and our breath hold as we go. I'm no mermaid, and feel ungraceful and cumbersome as I struggle to master the techniques but am alive with the joy of it and falling in love with the underwater world. I'm elated to swim more and push myself further. Ian guides us towards interesting seaweeds such as pepper dulse, gutweed and nori, and shows us hermit crabs and spider crabs lifted from the seabed. It's been a great first day, completed with a wonderful sunset, rolling surf and a motorbike ride to get back to a fine meal in Mawgan Porth and a comfy bed in our B&B.

DAY 2 11AM QUARRY CHALLENGE

We arrive at a strangely bleak yet oddly attractive quarry site with Ian and the crew. A couple of dogs sniff around the campfire pit and I feel like I'm in a sci-fi movie set. The water of the quarry is ominous, smooth and inky dark. The sight of a snake slithering across the water only heightens our nerves, but the sun is shining and Ian is calm and reassuring. There are two buoys in the water marking depths. Our first aim, which we're all given plenty of time to practise and complete, is to swim down to 10m on one of the buoy lines. This is where it's essential to equalise or it becomes painful. The most dramatic change of pressure is in the first 10m of depth and so equalising our cavities is vital from the moment we duck dive down. I discover this is a mental as much as a physical game, having to concentrate and focus at the same time as staying relaxed. Working my way down the line hand by hand into the darkness is daunting, but the reward is the streaks of yellow above, tantalising fingers of light beckoning us back up to the surface. Next I spend time on trying to improve my duck dive in order to help reach the second goal of finning down to 15m, this time not holding a line. I find it disorientating and hard to remember all the instructions, keeping my head tucked in to go straight and smoothly through the water, and I lose my way in the murky depths. We all keep practising, with a



good sense of camaraderie urging each other to keep pushing.

12.15PM SECOND ATTEMPT

We break for a rest, basking in the sun. Despite our thick suits, the water is very cold and we need to warm up. Then it's back in for second attempts on constant weight. With new determination, I have a go and after lots of tries finally get the hang of finning down to 15m – in fact, I'm so enjoying the sensation of looking back up at the light above while in relative darkness that I bump my head on the quarry bottom. Ian has been a supportive presence every time and gives me a thumbs up as we slowly rise to the surface.

1.45PM TIME TO EAT

A welcome lunch of warming soup and delicious flapjacks is provided by the quarry owners, and we chat about Ian's freedive experiences around the world. It provides incentive to train harder as we hear about adventures with amazing marine life both abroad and in our own UK coast. Ian's a keen spearfisherman and has written a book on underwater foraging, covering not just fish, but edible seaweeds and other plants. Hand-picking lobsters off Newquay was a big lure for him moving to the area eight years ago.

2.45PM BUDDY RESCUES

Hoping we've let our food go down enough, we face the dark waters of the quarry for the last

ABOVE Large and longer-than-usual fins are worn by free divers to help them move around more effectively
BELOW After completing the practical aspects of her course, Susie went in search of interesting underwater species

time. I learn buddy swimming techniques and have to 'rescue' Ian, bringing him up from 10m in order to pass all the practical aspects of my AIDA two-star course. I'm so pleased to have completed it and take time out to just play and dive in the water.

5PM FUN IN THE SEA

After being in the quarry for so long, Ian decides to call it a day there as he still wants us to enjoy the coastline around Newquay. We're grateful he hasn't rushed us to complete our challenges. We drive back for another chance to enjoy our new freedom. Feeling more confident than just 24 hours ago, we snorkel around looking for species to dive down for. I spot a spider crab and am so excited to tell the others that I let it get away. The visibility is good here and it's a beautiful golden evening. There are shoals of sand eels glinting through the water and masses of starfish in the cracks of the rocks.

6.30PM FINISH

We have to leave this magical world to finish the weekend with a multiple-choice theory exam. I'm glad to say I passed, and so gained my AIDA certificate. It was a rewarding two days and I've found a new passion. For nights after, I dream I'm back in that enchanting watery world, and the lure of the light above still captivates me.



NEED to KNOW



There are freediving courses across the UK, using pools, quarries and the coast. Susie used Freedive UK (freediveuk.com) as it guarantees lots of time in the sea.



WHAT TO BRING

All equipment – wetsuit, fins, snorkel and mask, weight belt – are provided, but bring your own wetsuit if you prefer. You'll need your own swim stuff and a towel, and warm gear for after swimming, plus lots of liquid – it's easy to get dehydrated. Freedive UK provides all lunches and a reusable water bottle.



WHAT IT COSTS

The AIDA one- and two-star course is over a weekend and costs £300; or for no qualification pressures, try the Recreational Freediver weekend for £225. There is also a half-day taster for £50, and other courses, including foraging and spearfishing.



WHERE TO STAY

Newquay is a very popular tourist destination, so there are plenty of hotels and B&Bs to suit all budgets. Susie opted to avoid the crowds and stayed out of town in The Seavista (seavista.co.uk) in nearby Mawgan Porth. It has fabulous sea views and serves a great breakfast.