

Mozambique | A champion

free-diver is launching

holidays that reveal the

secrets of swimming

alongside dolphins and

whales – without the need

for scuba gear. By Ian Belcher

It's the silence that is most startling. In a dark blue Indian Ocean, raked by shafts of subtropical sunlight, I'm swimming alongside a cluster of at least 20 joyfully cavorting dolphins. They dip, rise, shimmy, twist and circle around me, but not a single sound disturbs the deep peace.

If the silence surprises, so does the freedom. I hadn't expected, after just 24 hours' instruction, to be seven metres beneath the waves, powered by a single breath and unencumbered by tanks or tubes, gliding within feet of these agile mammals.

It's all thanks to a new free-diving course led by Hanli Prinsloo, a South African who has established or broken 11 national free-diving records and swum to a depth of 56 metres. She is launching a series of trips that combine tuition in the sport's essential skills with yoga and extraordinary encounters with marine creatures. Experiences on offer include the chance to swim with giant manta rays in the Maldives, fur seals off Cape Town and jackfish off Mexico's Baja California peninsula.

This week, the first in the series, is all about Mozambique and its dolphins. In the country's far south, 15km along a sandy track from the South African border, steep forested dunes overlook the Ponta do Ouro Partial Marine Reserve and its resident population of about 250 bottlenose dolphins. "It's my favourite location," says Prinsloo. "In one hour you can see dolphins, whales, sharks and whale sharks. I love the smaller life on coral reefs but it's the larger animals that are most exciting."

To help our novice group Prinsloo has assembled a team of first-rate free-divers. It includes her partner Peter Marshall, who, over a stellar international career, established eight world records. We are in experienced, proficient hands. The course is high on practice, low on theory. On the first morning we're on the water by 6.45am, taking advantage of placid sea conditions for training. "We want people to get straight into the experience," says Prinsloo as we head out in the inflatable Zodiac. "Start with too much information and free-diving becomes a cerebral exercise that brings self-judgment and doubt."

The idea is to descend, sloth-like, down a rope to a depth of five metres. We're learning the critical skill of equalising, forcibly trying to exhale through a pinched nose (with lips closed) to relieve pressure on the inner ear. We repeat the manoeuvre with each pull down on the rope. The first 10 metres, where the pressure doubles, are the most critical of a dive. Neglecting to equalise will rupture the eardrum.

We aren't alone. After a few minutes in the water Prinsloo calmly remarks, "We have a little visitor." Directly below us is a fat 2.5-metre bull shark, intrigued by the tennis balls that mark the end of our weighted ropes. The instructors insist we are of no interest to the shark,



Silence of the deep



From top: Hanli Prinsloo free-diving with a whale shark off the coast of Ecuador; Ian Belcher learning breathing techniques; the resort and tuition base near Ponta do Ouro in Mozambique; Belcher free-diving with dolphins in Mozambique

Peter Marshall, Greg Hilliard



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Ian Belcher was a guest of Steppes Travel (steppes-travel.com), which offers a nine-night Mozambique free-diving itinerary with Hanli Prinsloo from £2,845 per person, full-board. Steppes Travel also arranges trips with Prinsloo to Cape Town, the Maldives and Mexico

but the proximity of an alpha predator before 7am tends to focus the mind. Thankfully, by the time I reach the end of the rope the threat, real or perceived, has vanished into the big blue.

During an hour's instruction, equalisation starts to become instinctive and we work on our positioning, initially pulling ourselves down the rope, then using it as a visual guide for swimming vertically downwards. Then we head off to find the dolphins. It doesn't take long – in fact, they come to us. Sometimes beneath, sometimes alongside us, three bottlenoses are playing with a puffer fish, flicking it like a football, passing it from mouth to mouth – behaviour some experts think shows they are deliberately getting "high" from doses of its toxic emissions.

It's the first of several interactions. Following the rules for marine encounters taught before the morning's launch, first we analyse the dolphins' behaviour (leave alone if sleeping), and avoid any chasing or touching. We watch them play with youngsters, mate and hunt for small fish in the seabed.

At times I stare into their huge, intelligent eyes just feet away. It feels like I'm being psychoanalysed. When Prinsloo dives down, performing an almost balletic dance with the pod, it's an ethereally beautiful spectacle. The arrival of a blacktip shark, a shoal of kingfish, and honeycomb rays rounds off a terrific first morning.

The course, with five days' tuition – four of them on the open sea – quickly finds a rhythm. By 11.30am we're back on dry land enjoying a nutritious brunch created by a Cape Town private chef known for her inventive and supremely healthy cuisine. Base camp is a bright, airy villa tucked among palms, Natal mahogany and milkwood trees high in the dunes, 5km north of laid-back Ponta do Ouro and its sand-floored bars. The property's tasteful blend of limed beams, white sofas and artfully distressed furniture is washed with dazzling ocean light through vast windows that open on to a pool deck above the surf-lashed beach.

The deck is the perfect spot for afternoon yoga. Prinsloo teaches a blend of hatha and vinyasa flow with routines geared towards free-diving. Yoga is a natural partner for the sport, developing an awareness of breathing and a focus on calmness – precisely the qualities required. It also has direct physical benefits. Not only does it encourage long sinewy muscles that devour less oxygen than those pumped up in a gym, but its stretches provide a direct boost to lung capacity. "Increased flexibility in your chest and intercostal muscles creates



more room for your lungs to expand," says Prinsloo, who can hold her breath for about six minutes. "My lung volume has grown from four to six litres."

The afternoon yoga leads directly into our first session aimed at increasing our breath-hold. Back in the South African port of Durban, where the trips assemble to drive north, I had sat by my guest-house pool and held my breath for a fairly standard minute and 20 seconds. Now, relaxed and lying horizontal on my yoga mat, I'm aiming to increase that time with a technique called triangular breathing. By inhaling for six seconds, then exhaling for eight, I slow down my heart rate, cutting my oxygen

At four minutes and six seconds, my breath-hold is three times what it was at the start of the course

use. After several such "breath-ups" I take my large pre-dive breath: a three-stage inhalation where I visualise the air filling my stomach, chest and shoulders. The effect is dramatic. On the third run, my breath-hold hits three minutes and 15 seconds.

Prinsloo has launched the range of free-diving tuition holidays to fund the work of I Am Water, a foundation she established in 2010 to promote ocean conservation. The new trips serve a dual purpose of raising funds for outreach work with underprivileged children while exposing paying guests to exquisite marine life – thus hopefully making them more likely to support conservation efforts when they get home. "Immerse someone in water and they immediately become a living, breathing part of the ecosystem," says Prinsloo. "They develop a strong sense of being one of the planet's species."

Prinsloo has spoken on ocean conservation at the Davos World Economic Forum, Oxford's Saïd Business School

and the UBS Global Philanthropy Forum. Her most effective stage, however, remains the open ocean. On the second of what Marshall describes as "the world's best Groundhog Days", Prinsloo helps us double our descent to 10 metres and work on diving and finning techniques. The tuition is followed by several glorious dips with a pod of about 50 dolphins that gambol and surf in the wake of the Zodiac. Our newfound ability to swim alongside them, even if just for 20 seconds, is truly liberating.

At one point I look up from the seabed and see an energetic dance of dolphins and free-divers. "It's far more harmonious than with scuba divers and dolphins," stresses Prinsloo. "Scuba's loud, with bubbles constantly coming in and out. Sea creatures just don't live with that noise. Some it scares, some it annoys. Wild dolphins have occasionally become used to scuba divers but most have no interest."

By necessity, the week includes some theory. We cover everything from the Polynesian origins of free-diving to the effects of depth pressure on the body, and safety routines. Yet even on our day off the ocean there's a practical session to demonstrate our lung development. In what Prinsloo calls a "dead man's float", she supports our limp bodies face down in the pool. Everyone's breath-hold rises. At four minutes and six seconds, mine is three times longer than it was at the start of the course. It's unsurprising to find that Prinsloo's expertise in optimal breathing and oxygen conservation has been used to train everyone from the Springbok rugby sevens to ultra-distance runners, cyclists and surfers fearful of being pinned down by massive waves.

The final days see us diving deeper, with some reaching 15 metres, and the dolphins staying with us for an hour. It feels more like a growing friendship than a mere marine encounter. The final free-dive over Techobanine reef brings hard and soft corals with hawksbill turtles, groupers, snappers and eels – a different playground for our new skills.

Prinsloo has a hit-list of countries and marine species for future courses. She hopes to dive with dugongs in Papua New Guinea, humpback whales in Tonga and manta rays in Indonesia's Raja Ampat islands. Already scheduled is a new trip in October to one of Mexico's oldest marine parks, Cabo Pulmo. "We'll show what the ocean used to look like," she says. "Giant teeming balls of millions of jackfish open and close around you. Elsewhere we've fished them out. It's a thrilling example of what the ocean could, and should, be."

I NEVER LEAVE HOME WITHOUT . . .

What special items do expert travellers pack to ease their journeys? In the latest in our series, mountaineer Mostafa Salameh explains why he never flies without his Koran

I never leave home without a copy of the Koran – and some techno music. When I

reach the summit of a mountain, I open my Koran and read a page aloud. I listen to techno when I need motivation. It especially helped when I skied to the South Pole earlier this year. I was listening for hours every day. I can't hear properly any more . . .

My life of exploring began in January 2004. I woke in the middle of the night after I had dreamt I was standing on the top of the world reciting the *adhan* – the call to prayer. I'd never climbed a mountain before. My only training was going clubbing every weekend and I was smoking two packs of cigarettes a day.

I grew up in refugee camps in Jordan and Kuwait; my family left Palestine in

1948. I came to England aged 18 to work as a cleaner and waiter for the Jordanian ambassador, before washing dishes in Soho and learning English. I moved to Scotland in 1998 to study at Queen Margaret University and then became food and beverage manager for the Sheraton hotel in Edinburgh. It was then that I had my dream.

I had to Google "Everest"; I had thought it was in the United States and had no idea how high it was. Everyone thought I was mad. It was only after the Scotsman newspaper wrote an article about me and my dream that I started being taken seriously. His majesty King Abdullah II of Jordan offered to support



Mostafa Salameh holding the Koran at the South Pole in January this year

me, if I first managed to climb some smaller mountains.

I took unpaid leave of absence from my job in April 2004 and set off to climb Mera Peak in Nepal and Lhakpa Ri in Tibet. I didn't get to the top of either, but everything changed on Denali, the highest peak in the US, later that year. I managed it – I don't know how – and that was the turning point of my life.

With royal backing and after a lot of training, I made my first unsuccessful attempt on Everest in 2005. I went back in 2007 but only reached Base Camp as I had a chest infection. Then in 2008, running low on funds, I sold everything I had and tried again. I finally reached

the top of Everest on May 25 – Jordan's independence day.

Since then, I've become one of just 12 people in the world to have completed the "explorers grand slam" – climbing the highest peak on each of the seven continents and skiing to both poles. The Koran was with me all the way.

Mostafa Salameh is the first Muslim to have skied to the South Pole and to have completed the "explorers grand slam". He is author of *Dreams of a Refugee: From the Middle East to Mount Everest* (Bloomsbury). He was talking to Carl Wilkinson