

A person is swimming underwater in a dark, greenish environment. The person's arms are extended forward, and their body is angled downwards. The water is dark and murky, with some light reflecting off the person's skin and the surface of the water.

MY BUDDY

THE MERMAID

FEATURE **PATRICK VAN HOESERLANDE**

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Every diver's dream is to dive with a mermaid, right? Many years ago, I had that privilege. Her picture is still found in my first logbook. However, yesterday, I bumped into a school of mermaids. That was not entirely a coincidence, because my buddy was Anne Verelst, also known as 'Mermaid Ariel Starfish' or 'Mermaid of the Kempen'. While kids were watching through the window from the public area, I tried to capture the dancing motion of the underwater ladies on camera.

In all fairness, I must say that when I discovered there were women – and the exception of one gentleman – who wanted to live their fantasies out as mermaids, I found it to be quite a bizarre idea. It seemed as if these women were refusing to grow up and trying to escape reality by reliving a childhood imagination. As a diver, I could not take this seriously. Yet, I felt from an unbiased journalistic point of view, I had to write about this type of diving. Whatever my opinion on this pastime, I could not leave it out of 'My Buddy' series.

I felt a bit caught out when Anne refutes this with verve. Yes, she caught the mermaid virus after watching Disney's movie "The Little Mermaid", but how many of us did not start our diving paths because we got hooked watching Cousteau's documentaries? As scuba divers, aren't we trying to get that same feeling

we had when we watched those films? And as apnea divers, are we not searching for 'The Big Blue'?

To swim like a mermaid is not just about swimming around with a fish tail. It is a combination of:

- **Being an underwater model:** whatever happens, always smile at your audience and move elegantly;
- **Free diving:** after all, you have to give the impression that water is your natural environment;
- **Mono finning:** I know from a recent experience how difficult it is;
- **Endure cold water:** you don't get to wear an insulated dive suit, mermaids have to wear a costume bikini to play the part.

If you look at it in this way, it is hardly an escape into a child's fantasy, but an integral facet of a diving sport. As an experienced diver, I would not be great at it and would certainly not slip through the water like Neptune.

Anne tells me that she has been doing this for quite a while and still likes it. Despite her visual handicap, the group immediately accepted her. Her limitation in sight, hinders her less in the water and so she feels at home. When she casually mentions that she also mermaids in open water, I delete my last mental bias and see

this branch of diving in a completely new light. She never travels without her tail and promptly shows me some holiday photos to prove it. I can imagine the scenario on the beach when a sunbathing tourist spots her tail and yells to his wife, "Honey, I think I saw a mermaid!", to which she replies, "Yeah, sure. You've been lying out in the sun too long, darling."

The tail is characteristic to the mermaid. It is an evolutionary thing: most start with a simple homemade tail which is basically nothing more than a fabric tube to camouflage the mono fin. Later, after gaining experience and exchanging ideas, they switch to a more graceful and complex tail. The creative ones make their tails themselves, while others have them custom-made which come with a fairly high price tag.

Although you recognise a mermaid by her tail – and I speak out of experience – the garment is also the most difficult item of the costume to put on. It's quite an awkward task lying on the side of the pool and crawling backwards into your cocoon. Before the start of the dive, my buddy expressively asked me not to take pictures of this part of the ritual: it would not be flattering and it would ruin the 'little mermaid' magic. A bit like you shooting spoilers in Santa's dressing room. While observing the difficulties of the preparations, I completely understood her request.



The helpless ladies slowly transformed into mermaids as they gracefully moved through the water. I donned my BCD and joined them. Amongst the fish, I looked for a good place to position myself, out of the way. I watched them diving alone or in small groups as they invariably swim towards the window where a lot of children and parents wave to them. The children come to admire the mermaids underwater after they have been introduced to a dry specimen in the cafeteria downstairs. Everyone is gazing in wonder as the smiling mermaids parade in front of the glass. The spectacle is visibly enjoyed on both sides.

As a scuba diver, I feel out of place at this underwater party. In the meantime, there are other divers who have joined us, but they hardly give the mermaids a second look. Do they lack the spark of fantasy or do they find mermaiding an inferior activity? I shake off the thought and continue to enjoy this unique diving experience.

It's time to use my role as an underwater journalist to get better acquainted with the tailed beauties and start to socialise. They are more than happy to explain the different tails and how to recognise the different mermaids. Some of them are scuba divers, others have experience in free diving. They all have their own personal plan to become a better mermaid.

They all enjoy it and it warms them to see the joy it brings to the children. And they need the warmth, because the lack of a neoprene gives some of them goose bumps. Still they do not hesitate to dive for another round of applause in front of the happy audience.

When the cold becomes too much for Ariel, she offers me a last opportunity to take pictures with a big smile on her face and to film her swim to the other side. I struggle to keep up with her with all my equipment on and clearly less graceful in my crossing.

After a reverse metamorphosis and a hot shower, we talk for a moment longer: A first encounter with a mermaid is always special, and a dive with a group of them, is worth it. The chance to meet them is greatly enhanced after researching their Facebook page, and mermaids are not just found in Belgium.

Thank you, Anne, aka Ariel, for being my buddy and introducing me to the 'Mermites'. With my dive gear loaded up and some nice memories to take with me, I leave TODI. I draw a line through my list at 'diving with a mermaid' and drive on to meet my next buddy.

Do you know someone with a special interest in diving who would take me on as his or her buddy? Are you such a buddy? If so, please contact me at patrick.vanhoeserlande@nelos.be. I look forward to your suggestions.



Mermaid: Anne Verelst

First Year: 2012

Total Dives: 20 scuba dives, I don't log my mermaid dives.

Club: Sub Aqua Nijlen

Certification: I* Diver

Other Certs: Free Diving level 2

Special Equipment: Dive mask with special lenses for my eyesight, fully customised mermaid tail made from silicone rubber, and a mono fin.

Favourite Dive Site: TODI, Lac of Ekeren, Oosterschelde and Transfo dive tank.

Favourite Dive Site Abroad: Crete

Preferred Type of Dive: When there is a lot to see in clear water.

Most Spectacular Dive: My first wreck dive in Crete.