



MY BUDDY

THE FREEDIVING INSTRUCTOR

FEATURE **PATRICK VAN HOESERLANDE**

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Freediving, now a vibrant discipline, was a minor one only a few years ago, and a completely unknown one within the Flemish Diving League. When there was a freediver in the vicinity, it was exciting news to the scuba divers present who always tried to catch a glimpse of said freediver during their dive. We've all had to perform a freedive and perform static apnea in order to pass our scuba certification exams, but not because we wanted to dive without a tank in open water. Its recent leap to popularity was accomplished by a small group of enthusiasts. Today I am going to dive with a freediving instructor who was involved in turning that corner.

I drove two hours to get to the dive quarry in Esneux to meet my new buddy. Despite having a GPS, I needed to concentrate on the final approach. It had been a while since I had last driven to Esneux, but I recognised some spots, and parts of the road jolted my memory. The site had changed, but not so much that I did not recognise the place. I found a parking space on the higher ground and looked for a group of freedivers.

They were easy to spot as they had picked a table close to the stairs. The atmosphere was relaxed as is customary with scuba divers. The dive coordinator started his briefing on time. It was to be my first dive in these waters

without a tank, so I listened extra carefully to the instructions. Our dive team consisted of three people, making it easier in terms of safety and individual preparation.

Before we began setting up, I took François aside for a short interview. My first question was to why he started freediving. He told me that as a teenager he had observed some freedivers in action. He found the activity and the sport fascinating. It must be wonderful to glide freely underwater and to swim amongst the fish. It was there and then that he decided to become a freediver too.

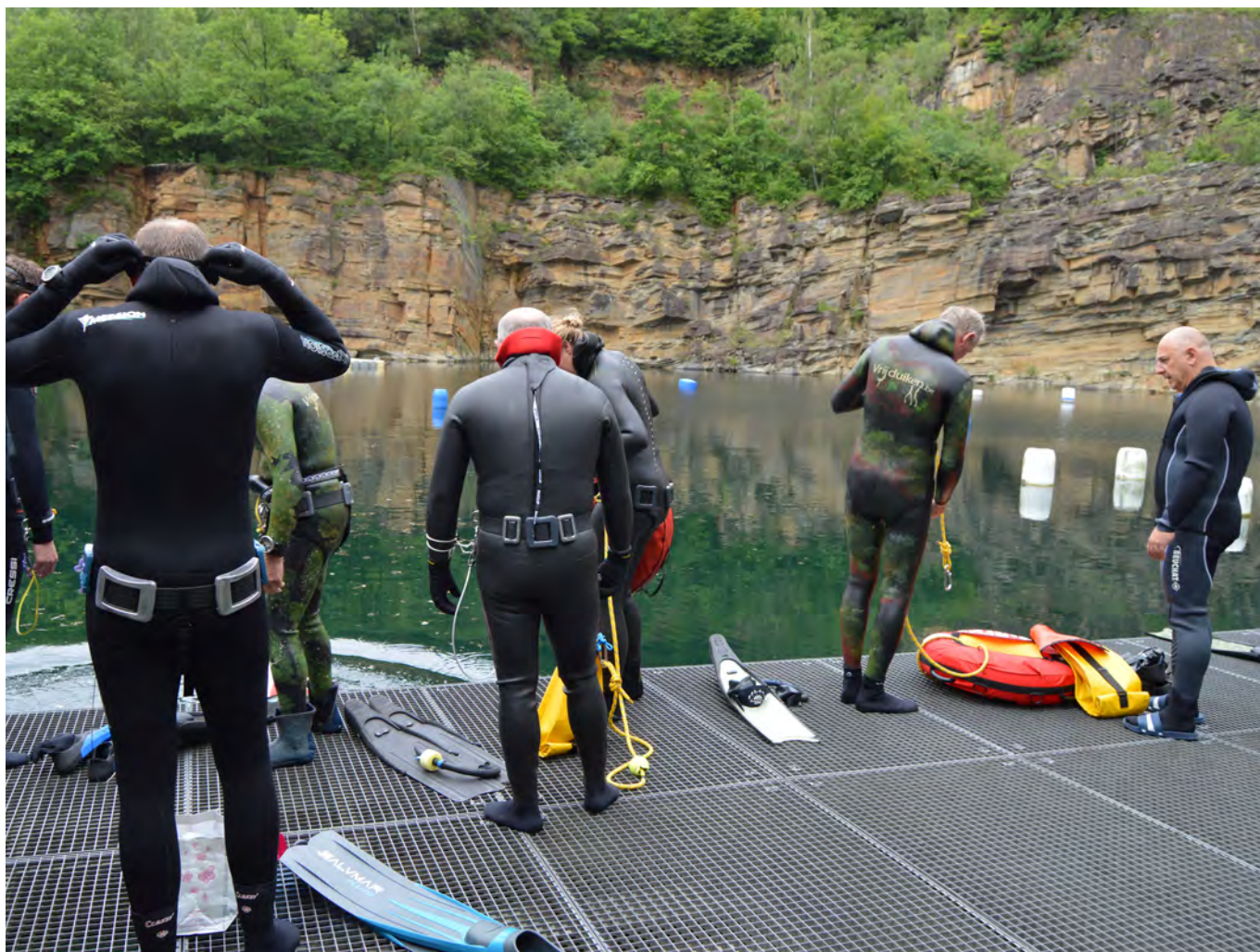
Freediving was not as popular back then as it is now and he started training as a sport diver out of necessity. He climbed the certification ladder all the way to instructor. Although he enjoyed scuba diving, something kept gnawing at him. And that something was the wish to be free of all the additional equipment and to be able to move underwater like a fish. Just as the freedivers had been the first time he saw them.

As freediving within our federation was so limited, François researched to see how others did it. Step by step, he learned the tricks to diving on only one breath. Enthusiastic about his experiences, he did not want to keep the joy of this dive discipline to himself but desired

to share it with others. It did not take long to introduce freediving to the league. He was one of the first to be awarded the title of I* Freediving Instructor. That strengthened him to push further and help others build a network of freedivers themselves. If it had not been for François and the other enthusiasts, apnea diving in Flanders would still be in its infancy.

We started with several shallow dives to warm ourselves up. Then we moved towards our first freediving location, at the Cylinder. I decided not to enter it, but to swim beside it as I did not feel confident enough to move around in such a confined space without a tank at this stage. That was still outside my comfort zone. Because we were three, I had more time to prepare myself mentally. When it was my turn to slide into the water, I almost hit the bottom and spotted François swimming by and disappearing into the opening. During my ascent, I glanced down to check if he was following me, but I did not see him, yet I felt he was close. My suspicion was confirmed when he broke through the water's surface shortly after me.

We dove a few times by taking turns in preparing, diving, and serving as a safety spotter. We were not the only team in the quarry so we switched positions after a while in order to give everyone the chance to dive



the different platforms. Our next station was the aircraft resting in slightly deeper water:

Although the water was a bit murky, we were able to gauge our bearing as to where the wreck lay thanks to the rising bubbles of a group of scuba divers below us. We lowered our weight and shot line. François dove first to make sure that we were positioned above the plane. It took a while before his return to tell us that our buoy hovered just above the tail. This was great, as beginners it was nice to have an early reference on our journey to the bottom.

Between dives, François gave us tips on how to equilibrate our ears better and how to prepare for the next dive.

The last station was located near some stairs made of stone leading to the bottom of the now water-filled quarry. These dives would have a more horizontal profile which was fine by me as I felt that my eardrums had had a tough day by this stage.

These kinds of dives make your work as a safety spotter much harder as you have no indication of your buddy's whereabouts (remember, there are no bubbles to follow). Only a good dive briefing and strictly following the detailed plan can mitigate the lack of visibility. As a bonus, we encountered more

fish, making our dives even more interesting.

When the main safety spotter back on the pontoon waved to the groups of divers, we knew that the diving day had come to an end. Once we had swam back and exited the quarry, we started our dive debriefings and later finished up in the canteen.

A big thank you to François for guiding me through these breath-hold dives and teaching me some new tricks. It's always nice to have a local icon logged into your logbook as your dive buddy. After saying our goodbyes, I drove down the gravel road towards the highway and made my way home.

During our freedives, I recorded some dives with my action camera. You can watch the results via <https://youtu.be/vLQYUdHTqPk>.

For my next story, I will dive with a buddy of a completely different calibre. I have mixed feelings about this one as it will take me out of my comfort zone... You'll have to tune in to find out what it's all about.

Do you have any recommendations for a new buddy? Your suggestions are always welcome.

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ABOUT MY BUDDY

Diver: François

First Dive: Scuba diving in 1972, and freediving in 1998

Number of Dives: 400+

Dive Club: Scylla Diving, Belgium

Certification: 2 * FDI

Other Certifications: Rescue Instructor
Special Equipment: A deco computer with "Taravana" mode and Hektometer Freediving Goggles.

Favourite Local Dive Site: Quarries: La Gombe and Lessines, Belgium.

Favourite Dive Abroad: Kas, Turkey
Preferred Type of Dive: Diving with a weighted sledge (variable weight/no limit).

Most Spectacular Dive:

An unforgettable freedive with a dolphin in Spain in 1999, and of course, the Blue Hole in Dahab, Egypt.