



MY BUDDY

THE BIOLOGY SNIFFING DIVER

FEATURE AND PHOTOGRAPHY **PATRICK VAN HOESERLANDE**

Diving is a hobby with various possibilities. There are plenty of good incentives to take your gear and get underwater. In this new series titled 'My buddy', I'm in search of diving enthusiasts who spend their limited time underwater for a special and specific reason.



SEALED
DEAD END
WILF



Diving is a hobby with various possibilities. There are plenty of good incentives to take your gear and get underwater. In this new series titled 'My buddy', I'm in search of diving enthusiasts who spend their limited time underwater for a special and specific reason. The idea is to demonstrate the enormous possibilities of our favourite sport. For my first article, I've fixed a dive with Kiki Vleeschouwers, whom I, after our dive, call a biology sniffing diver.

Our dive site is the 'Put van Ekeren'. During the preparation of our equipment, I have a look in her dive box. In Belgium, most of the divers use plastic boxes for transportation to protect the inside of the car from the water dripping from our wet dive equipment. I believe that from the equipment you find in one's box, you can easily make out the kind of diver they are. In Kiki's case, I find a simple underwater camera, a high quality dive torch and a large magnifying glass. My conclusion after the quick inspection, is it will be slow, easy diving, in search of small things.

Nevertheless, I ask the question on the character of our dive. Her answer, "A long browse around, looking for everything that can be found. I stick to one square metre to explore and investigate all the fauna and flora." I kind of suspect what that means and I like this

type of diving. In my opinion a diver can never swim too slow, only too fast. Her description of the dive does not surprise me, because I knew she liked this kind of dive. As a veterinarian, she's fond of small animals and that passion also applies for those living underwater. Despite our collaborating on a few diving projects such as a book for youth divers, the Experimental Deep Dive Team... we have never dived together. I'm open to surprises.

When collecting all our things to walk to the point of entry, I notice that she carries long fins. They are the kind of fins you use to cover long distances, fast. I prefer to dive with short, sturdy fins for manoeuvrability accepting the slower speed as a trade-off. I suppress my fear of a speed dive with the thought of the square metre.

We get into the water before the evening rush. I let Kiki lead. After the buddy check, she takes one glance at her compass and starts to glide over the vegetation. Her path is everything except rectilinear, which makes me suspect that she follows her instinct instead of specific magnetic direction.

From time to time she passes some unidentified plant or animal into my hands. I want to ask her what it is, but I realise that our level of sign

language doesn't lend itself to this complicated level of conversation. Suddenly she begins to dig in the sandy bottom clearly looking for something. Judging by her facial expression, she didn't find what she was looking for.

Farther along, she encourages me to look through her magnifying glass. I'm studying a freshwater isopod through the huge lens. It seems strange that something like this works underwater. Then she hands me a set of shells. I look surprised at their being empty and wonder what is so special about them. Later, during our debrief, she tells me that bivalves are saltwater specimens and thus these had to be fossils. The prehistory here? At the bottom of this lake?

What started off to look like a random pattern to me, after some time made me lose all sense of direction, but my buddy seemed to know where to go. She only consults her compass to traverse sandy open spaces. That's the moment I understand why she has the long fins. I can hardly keep up with her. We stop for a moment at one of the many statues. Not to admire its artistic features, but for the 'vegetation' that grows on it. These animals deserve a closer examination, because they are being photographed. That picture will not win in an underwater photography competition



or be put on display at an exhibition. No, this digital immortalisation is for identification purposes and further study above water.

And that's how it goes for more than an hour. In the end we admire a small school of carps. However, the fish find it too busy this evening and choose to swim away towards the protected area. A big pike leaves us a little more time to admire him (of is it a her?).

Although I've logged more than a hundred dives in this lake, I've learned a lot. The list of plants and animals that we have encountered is long: Asian mussels, shoot moth larvae, pond snails, pond spice, red water mites, zebra mussels, freshwater sponges, freshwater polyps, perch, tench, white koi...

On my next dive here, I will pay even more attention to my surroundings and enjoy it more. After all, knowledge brings understanding. I compare Kiki's diving pattern with the pseudo-random walk of my family dog when he is sniffing around. A little bit of browsing here, a sniff there, a small investigation and then suddenly crossing the street to sniff something else. The same behaviour the whole walk of the forest. Soon we come up with a name for this kind of diving, 'biology sniffing'. This term describes it well.

To conclude our dive, I enquire about Kiki's most spectacular biology dive. That is without a doubt, the close encounter with a leopard seal in Antarctica. The briefing for that dive was loaded with warnings and a list of things you were not allowed to do. Not really something to reassure you before you hit the water. During the encounter with this intelligent predator, she could only have a high admiration for these animals and despite the special character of the dive, she wanted to get out of the water sooner rather than later. It was clear to her that as a diver you were on his terrain. You were the stranger; he was allowing you to visit him. Hearing that from somebody who has dived with sharks, gives it extra weight.

I thank Kiki for this introduction to her 'biology sniffing' dives and the chance for experiencing it. It is only one of many facets of our hobby that I have discovered. I leave the parking lot to head towards another buddy to learn of their special dive interests and techniques.

Do you know anyone who has a unique dive mission and wants to be my buddy on one of these dives? Or are you such a diver?

Then please get in touch with me by email: patrick.vanhoeserlande@nelos.be.



Diver: Kiki Vleeschouwers
First Dive: 2007
Total Dives: 567
Club: Moby Dick Diving Team
Certification: 3 Star Diver
Specialities:

- Deep Diving Qualification up to 60m
- Basic Nitrox
- Underwater photographer Level I

Equipment: Underwater magnifying glass & underwater camera.
Favourite Dive Site Local Waters: Put van Ekeren
Favourite Dive Site Abroad: Socorro, Mexico
Most Spectacular Dive: A close encounter with a leopard seal in Antarctica.