



Seychelles Sanctuary

The ocean covers **70 percent** of the planet and is home to 94 percent of all life on Earth. If you really want an **out-of-this-world** experience, try exploring what lies beneath the waves...

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*My preconceived fears of
claustrophobia have been
replaced by vertigo*





One afternoon in Spring this year, my dad said to me, “Son, if you wish to visit another world, totally separate from our own, and have a proper visceral adventure in this life, you only have three options: one, you book a plane ticket to Japan; two, you get on a rocket and blast off into outer space; or three, you dive under the ocean. Those places are all equally alien to people like us, people from Twickenham.”

Age 72, with his leg up in plaster by the fireside, following a recent hiking accident on Dartmoor, and clutching a crystal tumbler of Scotch whiskey, my dad appeared a particularly convincing archetype of experience: ‘the wise old man.’ Since the piggy bank wouldn’t stretch to space, or Japan for that matter, I decided to trust him on number three, and sign up to do my PADI (Professional Association of Diving Instructors) Open Water scuba diving qualification, somewhere tropical. And where better to earn my fins than a remote island in West Africa?

Distant shores

As we approach Silhouette, the third largest of the granite islands that make up the archipelagic nation of the Seychelles, I tilt my head and shoot my cousin, Murray, a quizzical look. Instead of glistening serenely amid calm, turquoise seas with coconut palms swaying lackadaisically on the tropical breeze, the ancient volcanic island erupts from a black sea under gunmetal clouds, a mass of rock, mountain, and jungle, with heavy surf imploding on the surrounding reef. Given the foreboding and desaturated nature of the scene I’m reminded less

of Will and Kate’s honeymoon and more of Merian C. Cooper’s 1933 film *King Kong*.

The boat’s captain explains that the Seychelles is the least populated African sovereign country and that only 150 souls reside on Silhouette. “It’s 20 square kilometres,” he says, “but 95 percent of that is largely inaccessible, pristine UNESCO heritage park full of rich endemism.” Apparently, the island was once home to one of history’s most notorious corsairs (French pirates) Jean Francis Hodoul, who sailed the surrounding seas aboard his flagship the Apollon. He captured and sank more ships than Wikipedia can list (mainly slave vessels owned by the British East India Company). Legend has it that his immense fortune still lies buried somewhere on Silhouette. His tombstone on the main island of Mahe reads ‘Il fut juste’ (it was right). I can’t help but smile at that. No offense, old bean, but I very much doubt it.

When we arrive at the Hilton Labriz dive centre the next morning, the wild weather that plagued our passage from the main island of Mahe has long since subsided. What remains is more like the desktop screensaver we’d been promised. Stanio, or Shrimp to his peers, the young local lad who is to be our instructor for the four-day course, makes his way out from behind the counter to greet us, all smiles, hand outstretched for the shaking, flip flops scuffing on the sandy floor. Having completed all the necessary theory testing online prior to our arrival, we’re ready to jump straight in.

First, we’re kitted out with a shorty wetsuit (the male anatomy’s worst nightmare), then some flippers, and a mask. Next, it’s a weight belt to ensure we sink like a corsair’s cannon ball to the seafloor, and finally our dive apparatus, oxygen cylinder,

Above

A school of yellow tail Surgeon fish



BCD (buoyancy control device/vest), and two regulators (mouth pieces); one main and one reserve.

As we carry the gear up towards the practice pool, where our initial lesson will begin, I feel a soft knock on the head followed by a warm cascade down the collar of my wetsuit. “Sorry about that,” says Stanio, smirking and pointing up into the trees toward a posse of bats the size of cats hanging from clawed feet, wrapped in leathery wings; “they do that sometimes. Don’t worry. It’s lucky!” Before we can be unleashed on the ocean, Stanio explains, we must first get familiar with the equipment and prove ourselves within the confines of the pool.

The first rule of dive club

“Dive alone, die alone,” whispers Stanio into my ear as he helps me shoulder my staggeringly heavy BCD and oxygen cylinder. “So that we don’t die alone, we must always dive with a buddy, it’s the second most important rule of scuba. Dive with someone reliable, who you trust, they will be your lifeline in case of emergency.” I look across to my cousin Murray who has just tripped up the steps from the bathroom and narrowly avoided throwing himself over the balcony. As he hops across the slippery poolside on one leg, flailing his arms and laughing inanely pursued by a buzzing insect, I begin to wonder whether I’ve already signed my own death warrant.

“What’s the most important rule of diving then?” I ask Stanio as the fly lands on the end of Murray’s nose and he bats himself hard in the face. “Never hold your breath,” says Stanio, who’s also now

watching Murray with a troubled expression. “If you hold your breath,” he says, “the pressurised air in your lungs will expand and contract as you change depth. If the pressure change is too great, your lungs can expand to bursting point.” ‘Blimey’, I think to myself, ‘that sounds nasty’. Even Murray is now paying attention following the grizzly mention of exploding organs.

“The Bends is another thing we try to avoid,” says Stanio, chipper despite the solemn subject matter. “It’s when pressure causes gases, mainly nitrogen, to dissolve into your tissues. If you surface too quickly, the excess gas can form bubbles inside your body, blocking blood flow by stretching and tearing blood vessels and nerves.” Murray and I look at each other as it begins to dawn on us just how serious this diving malarky can be. “Remember BOYLES law,” says Stanio in an attempt to lighten the mood. “It stands for: breathe or your lungs explode, stupid.”

After assembling and disassembling our equipment a number of times, and completing our five-point buddy checks (BCD, weights, releases, air, and fins-to-face), we are finally ready to hit the wet stuff. With BCDs inflated to make sure we bob safely on the surface, each of us steps into the pool with a satisfying kersploosh using a melodramatic technique called ‘the giant stride.’ Once in the pool, we mess around yet further with the equipment, getting the feel for the weight, fit, and location of all particulars.

Face down in the drink, Stanio communicates through a series of charde-like hand signals for us to relax and practice breathing smoothly in and



Who’s writing

Maxwell Roche is a journalist / incongruous caveman who spends much of his time in antiquarian bookshops taking great long sniffs. He also hurls himself off, down, or into anything for a story or photograph, travelling in search of a view, because it’s all about the view. He’s a desperate skydiver, addicted surfer, and frivolous cyclist, horrified by the prospect of missing out and tormented by indecision regarding his future.



out through our regulators. Now, breathing isn't something that I ever thought I'd need to practise, having done so successfully for over 37 years. But in all honesty, I'm finding it difficult. The loud rushing noise that accompanies each breath of flavourless gas, together with the ever so slight amount of suction that's required to acquire it, makes the basic bodily function, unfamiliar.

Once we've mastered breathing, we practise clearing water from our masks underwater by tilting heads back and blowing out of our noses. Soon, the moment I've been waiting for, we are ready to make our first decent. The sound of quarrelsome bats squawking in the trees above slowly fades as Stanio gives us the thumbs down. We release air from our BCDs, allowing the weights around our waists to drag us under. Holding my nose, I equalise the pressure that builds between my ears. Soon we're kneeling on the bottom, hair standing on end with excited eyes comically magnified.

Floating below

On the surface moments earlier, Stanio had explained to us the importance of weightlessness underwater. To explore the ocean floor, a diver must master techniques that allow them to achieve a state of neutral buoyancy; that being the moment at which the diver's weight in the water, at a particular depth (we become less buoyant as we descend), is exactly counteracted by the air in their lungs and BCD. When this happens, neutrality ensues.

Stanio demonstrates this on the bottom of the pool by filling his BCD ever so slightly and taking a deep breath in. As he does so he hovers gracefully a few feet from the bottom of the pool. Once Murray and I have tried and failed to achieve neutral buoyancy, we move on to an emergency drill. On command, I give the signal to Murray that I'm out of air and wish to share his, pointing towards his spare regulator. He passes it obligingly across, but for whatever reason, it isn't working properly. As I attempt to breathe, I swallow more and more water.

After 20 seconds, I'm near panic, choking, chlorine assaulting my mouth and nose. Leaning to my left, touching my right knee, and sweeping my right arm around in a wide arc, I have hold of my working regulator once more. At the surface, Stanio congratulates me on not panicking, saying that's a key quality in a diver. He promises with a sinister smile, and no apparent concern, pearlescent teeth flashing, afro hair swaying in the off-shore wind, to fix the broken regulator. "The boat leaves for Turtle Rock at 10 am in the morning, boys," he says, flicking a towel over his shoulder and hoiking up flowery swim shorts with all the dexterity of a man raised on the beach. "Don't be late!"

As we cruise on pushbikes from our cabana the following morning, rumbling along the loosely slated boardwalk toward the jetty, I look out beyond the shadow of palms, toward the ocean. It appears displeased, wearing the expression of a man who's nipped to the post office and found himself at the end of a very long queue. Harking

Left

Silhouette above the waves

Above

A moray eel lurks

back to Hemmingway, I remind myself that ‘smooth seas never made a skilled sailor’ and pedal onwards.

As we approach the jetty, the sleek and spacious *Lady Elisa*, our dive boat for the next few days, rocks excitedly back and forth against her fender buoys. The captain isn't quite ready for us, so we loiter on the shore shaking hands with the various jovial crew members. It's then that I notice a young girl not far from the group, squatting on her haunches like the dice players do in India.

The girl is wearing bright terracotta Aladdin-style trousers that billow in the wind. Her thick highlighted hair reminds me of a Shetland pony as it tangles with the long gold and silver trinkets that dangle from her ears and neck. “Guys, meet Aurora,” says Stanio, gesturing with an open palm towards her as she jumps up and waves tattooed forearms and ringed fingers. “Aurora is also doing her Open Water qualification this week and will be joining us on our dives.”

As the boat grumbles through fluorescent waters, beyond the safety of the harbour, I take a seat on the long bench opposite the central rack full of shiny oxygen cylinders. Aurora takes a seat on the bench next to me and begins to stroke one of the cylinders affectionately. “Ahh, beautiful,” she says, giving it a playful flick and creating a satisfying tinnng noise. “So why diving?” I ask, intrigued by this crystal-clad lady with dilated pupils. Clearly delighted to have been asked, she tells me all about how she recently broke up with her boyfriend in Baja, Mexico, the morning after they got matching moon and sun tattoos. “I want to reconnect with nature,” she says. “He tells me he can't live without me, but I assure you, he's still very much alive”. We laugh together for a while as the boat jumps between waves and the molten volcanic tapestry of Silhouette scrolls past.

Taking aim, I spit hard into one lens of my mask and then the other, rubbing furiously with my index finger to coat the glass. Horror-stricken, Stanio, who's conversing with the captain at the stern of the boat, vaults over people and equipment before grabbing the mask from my hands. “What are you doing!?” he cries. “Clearing my mask,” I say proudly, “the way my dad taught me.” Stanio's face has drained significantly of colour. “We have a demister spray for that these days, Maxwell,” he says, producing a small bottle from the pocket of his shorts and honouring me with a few squirts. “It's far more hygenic.” Abashed, I acknowledge my mistake and promise not to spit on anything or anyone else for the duration of the course.

Open water

Fully suited, we are all now standing at the bow of *Lady Elisa*. The sea, which resembles something that's been scrunched and then flattened, is the colour of a prize peacock's tail feather and, despite the lack of calm, inviting beyond all belief. Aurora smiles and pushes politely past us before accidentally falling off the boat with a yelp. Luckily, no damage done. She surfaces with an unwitting grin and I reassess my earlier thoughts about Murray as a diving buddy; things could be worse. Our glass pressure dials are all reading 200 bar of oxygen, Stanio taps the glass front of his, rather like you would do an old barometer, and the needle jumps up minutely. “One extra bar” he says gleefully. I tap mine, but nothing happens.

For our first descent we have agreed to go down on a line for guidance to a depth of 17m for approximately 55 minutes, depending on oxygen consumption. In my head, 17m is a long way. I look up towards the clouds and try to imagine it, roughly equivalent to a five-storey building. One of the crew jumps overboard to prevent Aurora from drifting away on the current, while we hold a final briefing. Stanio tells us that if any member of the group has an oxygen reading of 50 bar or less, we will surface. To communicate this underwater, he shows us the ‘end of dive’ hand signal which

*It's comforting waiting
just under the surface,
like watching hard rain fall
on a tent when you're
cosy inside it*



Before long, we've met deadly lionfish, puffer fish, Moray eels, stingrays, a hawksbill turtle, and a barracuda



involves crossed forearms in an x-shape, and a stern expression.

Stanio has just given the thumbs down signal to descend. The biggest moment in any prospective PADI diver's career is about to unfold, primary immersion in wide, open water. I'm clinging to the guideline like my life depends on it, choking on the chop that bats us back and forth. Cramming my regulator into my mouth, I give Stanio the thumb and forefinger 'ok' sign and slowly empty my BCD. Jacuzzi temperature water begins to rise beyond my mask and for a second everything plays out split screen, the swan-like hull of the *Lady Elisa* is visible on the surface and below, the vast indomitable blue. Paranoid, I equalise my ears every few seconds with my right hand letting go of the line and hanging momentarily suspended, untethered, weightless, as we sink feet first.

10m below, neither the surface nor the seafloor is discernible. My preconceived fears of claustrophobia have been replaced by vertigo. Aurora

is still quite a few metres above. Stanio ascends slightly, tugging on her flipper. Meanwhile, Murray and I give each other the shaka - fist curled with thumb and pinkie extended. Despite his mouth being crammed full of a regulator, I can tell he's smiling.

Stuck like flies on a piece of blue paper we contemplate the emptiness until suddenly we are engulfed by life. Stripy silver fish of an unknown species rise up in their hundreds from below, teaming in impossible unison, darting this way and that as though pursued by a devilish foe. Part of me starts to wonder if there might be a much bigger fish approaching out of eye shot. Yikes. As Aurora drops into view, we continue merrily downwards until we reach conveniently sandy spot on the seabed where we kneel together in a circle.

During each dive, before we are allowed to swim around and look at the fishes, we must each perform a series of pre-agreed tasks, the first of which is removing our masks to simulate them being

Above

A beautiful hawksbill turtle

dislodged. Once Stanio is happy that I haven't panicked as a result of being maskless and unable to see in the deep, he gives the signal for me to put it back on. As the subsea world comes back into focus, I'm instructed to remove my regulator and cast it aside. Stanio, again happy that I haven't panicked, tells me to find the regulator again. On my first attempt, I miss the regulator which forces me to hold my breath for just a few seconds more than I'd like. My unease at having to try again is heightened yet further when a man-sized shark fades out of the darkness over Stanio's left shoulder. I ram in my regulator, jettison the unwanted water with a sharp breath out, and point in the direction of the shark, which has mercifully, vanished.

Aurora at this point, perhaps startled by the deadly fish, pumps too much air into her BCD and starts disappearing off towards the surface at an alarming rate. Stanio goes in hot pursuit, and while he does, Murray and I have another chance to soak up our surroundings. We're knelt in front of each other, content as old colleagues around a meeting room table, except we're 17m underwater and breathing normally, with no immediate time constraints and a whole ocean to explore.

As I watch the surface of the sun-spangled sea sparkle from below (perhaps the most beautifully abstract thing I have ever seen), beyond the silhouetted forms of Stanio and Aurora, who are having a rather heated game of charades, my train of thought drifts toward the profound. I've never felt less significant. Thousands of miles from home, buried below the weight of all that water.

Bit of a PADI

"CESA," says Stanio while we cork up and down on the surface ahead of our fourth and final dive stands for 'controlled emergency swimming ascent.' "This is your last test," he says. "We're going to descend to 5m and simulate an out-of-air emergency. When I give the signal, slicing my hand across my neck like this, I want you to take your last breath, remove your regulator, look up, and swim slowly to the surface, no faster than your bubbles, exhaling slowly through pursed lips as you do so."

For the first time in the course, I'm a little bit apprehensive. The reason for the slow exhalation is to stop the air in your lungs expanding as you ascend. From 5m, there's only so much damage that can be done but imagine finding yourself airless and buddy-less 17m down. A very lonely and desperate eventuality. For all the blissful calm and wonder this scuba game offers, it can't half get ugly fast.

"You've passed!" signals Stanio to each of us in turn as we kneel for the final time in a sandy clearing on the seafloor. Aurora starts to hover worryingly and Stanio, wise to her habits by now, grabs a flipper before it's too late. The next 35 minutes is my favourite of the entire experience. Free of the trepidation that comes with examination we now have no agenda except to explore.

Single file we fly along the reef, the rhythmical rushing of my breath inducing an almost meditative state. When an interesting fish or creature pops fourth we all hover and gawp. Perhaps my favourite





encounter is with a quirky yellow fish with blue lips that looks like it's auditioning for RuPaul's Drag Race. Before long, we've met deadly lionfish, puffer fish (deflated, sadly), Moray eels, stingrays, a hawksbill turtle, and a barracuda. We even find Nemo peeking out from among the hypnotic strands of an anemone.

The sheer volume of life down here, condensed as it is on a digestible scale, is what's so special, almost like flying over your local town and observing the residents. Just as my old man said, scuba diving really is a rare window into another world. Stanio's ability to spot tiny creatures from a distance astounds me. He glides so quietly on the horizontal, making no discernible motion, arms folded, equalising his ears with a subtle movement of his jaw, controlling his buoyancy with his breath rather than the BCD, giving off barely a single bubble. Meanwhile we kick our legs and wave our arms, thrashing against the current, going up and down like yoyos. On each dive, he uses less than half of the oxygen we do.

With a blast of air from his spare octo regulator Stanio inflates the surface marker buoy which takes off like a Houston spacecraft toward the surface. He gives us the thumbs-up and we slowly ascend to 5m where we are due to make our three-minute decompression stop, allowing our internal tissues to rid themselves of the nasty nitrogen. As we rise toward the 5m mark, my ears naturally depressurise, which is a blissful feeling, akin to stretching and yawning at the same time. At 5m, we enjoy our last three minutes of magic below the blue, suspended. It's comforting waiting just under the surface, like watching hard rain fall on a tent when you're cosy inside it.

That evening, we sign our certificates and debrief at Grann Kaz, the 158-year-old colonial plantation home-turned-restaurant of the French Dauban family, historic proprietors of Silhouette island. Stanio tells us stories of ghostly goings on at the old house as we tuck into his favourite; cold beer and traditional Seychellois spicy, creamy octopus and coconut curry. Aurora waves her PADI certificate cheerfully toward some hotel guests on a nearby table, while quite a large piece of papaya salad dangles from her chin. None of us has the heart to tell her.

For your first foray in the underwater world, I'd highly recommend giving yourself the benefit of the doubt and doing it somewhere user-friendly like the Hilton Labriz, Seychelles. It's luxurious without being pretentious, the water is consistently warm and clear, and the reefs that surround Silhouette are alive and bursting with life. There's a whole world down there just waiting to be explored, so what are you waiting for? Make this year the one you bag your PADI. 