

So how do you acquire aquaticity?

OCEAN ENCOUNTERS IONIAN SEA FREEDIVING COURSE CRUISES

Fred Buyle & William Winram



I WAS ABOUT TO JUMP INTO the blue Ionian Sea when I was called back by Fred Buyle. "Hold it!" he said. "First, we have to have a moment of silence."

Moment of silence? Did I miss some bad news? Earthquake? Tsunami?

Fortunately, it turned out to be no such thing. The silence was held for all the people stuck on the tube in London, Paris, Tokyo... a very appropriate way to start a sailing/freediving trip around the Greek islands, with the purpose of teaching a mixed bunch of students a mysterious thing called "aquaticity".

"It's all about being in tune with yourself and the water," our two instructors say. Right. How hard can it be? I wonder, and proceed to show William my best duck dive, something I fancy I'm pretty good at.

"You're way too noisy, and use too much energy," he says. Not the comment I had been looking for, but something that sets the theme for the rest of the week.

TWO YEARS AGO, world-class freedivers William Winram and Fred Buyle launched Ocean Encounters. Initially, they were focusing on shark conservation and filming documentaries, but increasing demand from all sides convinced them to offer education as well.

"It's all in the name, Ocean Encounters," they say. "We want people to experience the marine environment on every level. This is why we're on a sailing liveboard, rather than a motor yacht." Diving, sailing, resting and diving again is a rhythm I can easily get used to.

As the week progresses, we all settle down and relax, which translates directly into our diving.

The mornings are spent working on specific skills, which we use to explore the drop-offs around the islands in the late afternoons. AIDA and CMAS courses are available, but William and Fred are looking at each individual diver and what he needs to work on most.

"We want to improve people's awareness of themselves and of their surroundings when they're diving," they say. "We focus on aquaticity, which means a high level of adaptation to the water environment – physically, but also mentally. If you want to fully experience the underwater world, aquaticity is the key."

I STARTED DIVING AT 17, have worked around the world as a scuba instructor and guide, have dived to 100m-plus on trimix and spent the past two years freediving but, as much as anyone else, I tend to keep doing things in a certain way.

While I have what one might call mental aquaticity – that is, nothing under water fazes

me – I still lack some of the gentleness required to freedive most effectively in the open ocean.

On day two, Fred has a surprise for me: he suggests I join him and Chris Marshall in a spearfishing expedition. Whatever hesitations I may have had about hunting soon fade, as I start to understand that spearfishing on a lungful of air is the most selective way to eat fish. You take only what you need, without damaging anything else.

It also requires an astonishing level of aquatic skill and, out there in the gathering dusk, turns out to be one of the most beautiful ways in which I have experienced the ocean so far.



CHRIS MARSHALL

After briefly explaining how to swim with the gun, so I won't shoot myself or my buddies, Fred shows no qualms in letting a blonde girl head off in search of dinner. Demonstrating my new, quiet duck dive, I sink into the blue depths.

On the seabed at 25m, I can see what aquaticity is all about: every bit of energy wasted will vastly reduce the time I have to look around.

As if by magic, a large grouper appears next to a rock. I instantly send it back into hiding with an ill-timed fin-kick.

I am also prone to squeezing my eyes shut when pulling the trigger, which, as the guys tell me, is not the most effective way to hunt.

It's up to Fred to demonstrate how it's done: watching him swim down to catch one of the elusive predators for our dinner shows us what true aquaticity looks like.

Rarely have I seen anyone dive with such fluidity yet purpose. Here is an economy of movement that we scuba-divers tend to lack.

The availability of air at all times means that we don't need to spend time adapting to the

water. How much we can benefit from Fred and William's skill is apparent: apart from simply saving air, being in tune with ourselves and gaining a new sense of calm allows an experience of the ocean of an entirely different kind.

As life-long spearfishers, William and Fred have recently been involved in a project to tag sharks for the Malpelo foundation. "It's very difficult to get close enough to the sharks to place the tags. Through our experience of freediving with tigers and great whites, we were able to successfully tag a lot of sharks," said William.

The two are now planning trips to freedive with tiger sharks and great whites in South Africa, trips open to all. Experience in freediving is not required, but Fred and William will arrange basic training to allow breath-hold novices to interact successfully with the sharks.

Meanwhile, all six students gained confidence daily in the Greek waters. I went as far down as 32m in search of a grouper, and developed a heightened awareness of my place in the underwater world.

People talk about the sense of freedom, of weightlessness that comes with scuba diving, and I agree: the most intense moments under water are those where I feel that the boundaries between myself and the ocean have blurred.

There is nothing quite like floating around deep down, beneath the surface, with only a lungful of air and no stress, no urge to breathe, no fear.

FOR OUR LAST SESSION, we anchored in the prettiest bay of the trip. Ten metres of clear water dropped away under our keel to a sandy bottom at 25, then 50m.

Diving on the wall, I was especially impressed with Sam, the least experienced among us with only seven scuba dives under his belt. I spotted him down at 18m, moving with great ease, clearly enjoying himself.

As we played happily, William shot a video of me diving which, when he showed it to me later, summed up the experience. Unaware of the camera, I duck-dived, finned easily for a bit, then started to freefall. I gently sank, following the contours of the drop-off and angled towards the right to end up near a ledge close to the bottom.

William pointed out that after I started the freefall, I was not using a single fin-kick, and it was true: I was gliding effortlessly through the water, simply changing direction and speed through tiny adjustments in my body position.

I had been aware of an intense feeling of being in tune with the ocean during this dive, but it still came as a surprise to see quite how "aquatic" I had become. This is it: the free in diving. It comes highly recommended.

Anna von Boetticher

Ocean Encounters' six-night freediving cruises are limited to six students, with 1*, 2*, 3* AIDA and CMAS courses available. www.oceanencounters.net