FURTHER CONSIDERATION

Waiting to Inhale

Under the sea in Turks and Caicos, a novice freediver learns to relax and breathe easy (or not at all)

“Feeling like you have to breathe is not a lack of oxygen, but too much carbon dioxide inside. It tricks the brain,” dive instructor Samantha Kildegaard counseled as I felt the overwhelming urge to gasp for breath, despite doing nothing more than lying on the floor.

Only a few minutes earlier I was admiring the colorful bands of turquoise, aquamarine, and teal in “the ocean of 32 blues” surrounding the island of Providenciales in Turks and Caicos. Once Kildegaard arrived for our freediving lesson at Beach Enclave resort, I stretched out on the villa’s living room floor to begin a meditation, body scan, and breathwork. After I was sufficiently lulled into a Zen state, she handed me a weight belt and gestured to the pool.

Kildegaard demonstrated the mission with the grace of a mermaid: swim the length of the infinity pool in one long breath, weight belt and fins on. I let myself sink down four feet, laser-focused on how long I could hold my breath. Was it seconds? Minutes? Didn’t we compete as kids to see how long we could hold our breath? I usually lost those contests. I kicked my fins quickly and shot across the 15-foot pool on one breath, shocked I could do it. A few (calmer) laps later, I was deemed ready for the open ocean.

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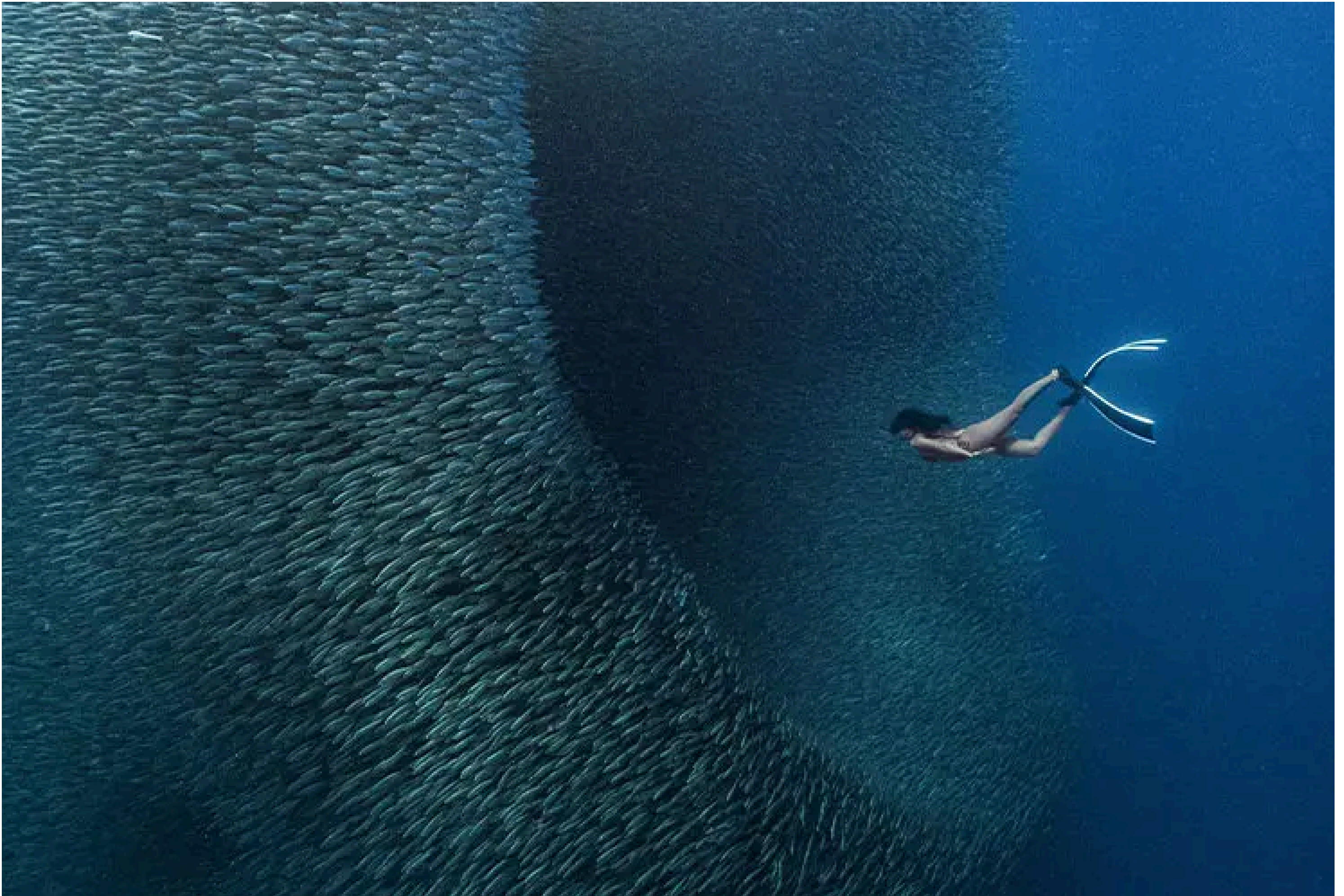
underwater without any breathing apparatus. Diver Tanya Streeter set a record off the coast of Providenciales in 2002 for the deepest “no-limit” dive, a startling 524 feet 11 inches, holding her breath for three and a half minutes. Jacques Mayol, an early pioneer of the sport (and inspiration for the film *The Big Blue*), set several records from the 1960s to the 1980s. He was the first person to reach 100 meters (328 feet) in one breath and was a diving fixture around Turks and Caicos, staying underwater as long as four minutes and regularly startling tourists who thought he’d drowned.



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When we’re children, we instinctively hold our breath — in protest, out of curiosity, for control. I’ve routinely taken my breathing for granted until there were disruptions: illnesses, allergies, mental and physical stresses. I knew from studying breathwork during the pandemic that if I could control my breath, I could control my anxiety. It’s something they teach Navy SEALs: Inhale for four counts, hold for four counts, exhale for four counts, hold for four counts. Repeat.

If our brains drive the car, so to speak, our lungs work the pedals. When you’re nervous, you breathe too quickly — but the quickest way to regulate your nervous system is by slowing your breathing. All the brain really wants to do is keep the body safe and alive, yet our nervous systems were built for survival, not for modern-day stresses we can’t physically outrun. What if our lizard brains thought freediving was just a form of drowning on purpose and not some superhuman feat?

I’ve second-guessed myself underwater ever since a scuba dive in the Caribbean nearly a decade ago, when the bite on my regulator didn’t fit comfortably and an instructor pressured me into the ocean anyway. I was breathing so rapidly that we had to cut the dive short because my oxygen tank was depleting faster than expected. I couldn’t concentrate on anything except the possibility of my impending doom, no matter how hard I tried. Ever since then, I’ve been aware of how calm I need to be to enter the ocean, lest my lungs

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oxygen you practically need to crumple to exhale it all.

Now, I had to essentially shun that.

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It was a short drive and a shorter swim out to Coral Gardens, part of Princess Alexandra National Park,

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sometimes gin-clear waters are home to the third-largest barrier reef system in the world.

Out in the water, I learned the art of the duck dive: exhale to empty the lungs, then swim forward, bunch up, hold the breath, invert, kick vertically to propel straight down, equalizing the ears all the way. It was a to-do list in motion.

For my first dive, Kildegaard attached a life preserver to a 20-foot-long rope anchored in a shallow part of the sea. I exhaled completely, inhaled slightly for my own peace of mind, and dove down, doing a sort of reverse rope climb. A solid wall of water pushed against my eardrums, reminding me to equalize regularly by pinching my nose while breathing out. I expected lungs full of fire and an internal revolt. Instead, I plunged into silence as I grasped the rope, hand over hand.

Each subsequent dive became easier as I pushed through the abnormality of not breathing. I looked forward to breaking the barrier between above and below, traveling from a zone of splashes and sloshing waves to hearing absolutely nothing. Physically, it felt like a sensory deprivation tank — with fish. I grew comfortable pushing myself another foot or five in the still-warm water, eventually descending nearly 15 feet on a rope with enough air to resurface at a steady pace. But therein lies the stress.

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breath to keep going?

Kildegaard made it all look easy, shimmying elegantly and diving so deep that the water pressure pulled back her face as if she was skydiving into the depths. Meanwhile, each time I dove, a little voice in the back of my head kept saying, “Don’t breathe in now, but get air soon. Please.”

Fish seemed to mock me with their comically heavy bodies and tiny fins working overtime, an incongruous design in contrast to my swimsuit, goggles, fins, and natural buoyancy fighting the depths. The colors of the water and sand around me seemed cooled and muted, while occasional schools of yellowtail snapper and parrotfish passed nearby.

The stakes were too high underwater. I had to override my mind’s well-intentioned nagging, because its dedication to keeping me alive was stressing me out. Sometimes we are our brains, sometimes we are our bodies — so maybe it was time to listen to my body. My brain disapproved of this so much that it refused to talk to me until the dive was over.

The next day, I sailed out to West Caicos with Big Blue Collective. On land, mosquitoes bit through my wet clothes and scoffed at my bug spray while I walked around the abandoned wild island, full of black cormorants and fossilized reef baked into the ground. Diving into the water provided relief and a potential for adventure thanks to my new freediving skills. I

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cave, carefully eyeing the exterior (not brave — or stupid — enough to look inside).

Like a dolphin, I surfaced for air repeatedly and then ducked back down, methodically equalizing and playing it cool until a turtle swam by. I paused to get a better look and unwillingly floated up to the surface. My confidence faltered when I arrived at a wall that dropped from 40 feet deep to over 5,000. My ocean playground disappeared into the dark abyss with colder waters. I no longer had the seafloor for reference. This was for scuba divers.

Many devoted freedivers scoff at scuba, citing the bubbles, the tanks, the *restrictions*. It seemed like a petty rivalry until I dove into it. Scuba diving is akin to Formula One. Freediving is more like...a bicycle, and a bicycle is only as effective as the rider. With freediving, there's no Darth Vader soundtrack in my ears, which could both shut out the rest of the world and reassure me that I was alive and well. But with only fins and a mask, unencumbered by anything else, I could approach the fish (and even another sea turtle) almost incognito. I enjoyed my silent film under the sea and then floated back up to the surface, re-entering the world I know with a calm but satisfying breath.

Hillary Richard is an award-winning freelance writer and an editor at Further. She has jumped into the ocean on all seven continents, but she strongly prefers warmer waters.