



Photograph: Dan Burton

World champion free diver and Brighton graduate Tanya Streeter talks to BGA about the perils and pleasures of one of the world's fastest emerging extreme sports.

Plunging to new heights

"The darkness was incredible down there - not just dark blue any more, completely black. Beautiful." Not the dark of a cave or a mine but the velvet dark of the 'vast deep' described by world champion freediver and Brighton graduate Tanya Streeter.

While most of us are content to explore the ocean depths watching nature films from our armchairs, Tanya has made the underwater world her natural habitat.

Born and raised on the island of Grand Cayman in the Caribbean Sea, Tanya spent much of her childhood in the water. She remembers "spending hours snorkelling with the stingrays, and long afternoons crouching over rock pools where the iron shore trapped a multitude of different creatures.

"And I remember winning endless competitions to pick up rocks from the seabed. So my fascination with the ocean

and passion for the beauty of life within it began there.

"And when I couldn't be in the sea I would spend so long in the pool that my hair turned fluorescent green and my eyes burned with the chlorine, just to feel how I thought the fish did!"

Seventh record

On 17 August this year in the waters of Club Med Turquoise in Providenciales, Turks and Caicos, Tanya broke the world freediving record. She reached her goal depth of 160 metres in a dive time of three minutes and 26 seconds and her plunge shattered both the men's and women's world freediving records.

With just a single breath of air from the surface, she descended down an officially measured dive rope on a weighted sled. On reaching her target depth, she inflated a liftbag which brought her back to the surface.

Watching over her safety were five

pairs of divers, positioned at various depths and at the surface, who signalled to Tanya how deep she was at each stage of the dive.

Tanya took up freediving, one of the world's fastest emerging extreme sports, only five years ago and this is her seventh world record. Freedivers, equipped with just a wetsuit and a pair of fins, aim to plunge as deep as possible and get back to the surface without passing out. The sport calls for physical strength and stamina, enormous lung capacity and steely mental control.

The descent rate is an incredible seven feet per second and explains Tanya "in this discipline there is less of a physical element because the diver is assisted by the sled rather than having to self-propel. But, of course, there is a massive mental element to sled diving because of the depth."

She says the beginning of the dive is not too difficult but, as the water pressure increases, the lungs compress and fill with blood plasma - a process she insists is a natural phenomenon. However, there is still an airspace remaining in the sinuses and ears which continues to be compressed by the increasing pressure during descent, exposing divers to the risk of burst eardrums.

Tanya said: "It only really hurts - in my ears and sinuses - after a certain point in the dive and the discomfort in the chest is relieved once the lungs have filled with the fluid because fluids are not compressible.

"The most dangerous part of a free dive is the last 20 metres where the reverse partial pressure can cause the level of oxygen in the diver's blood to plummet. Blacking out is the body's safety mechanism but you need people around to help you if that happens. That is the single most important rule of freediving - never dive alone."

Other occupational hazards include jellyfish stings - her face was once stung so badly that "my lips looked like they'd had surgical implants" - and sharks. But,



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she says, walking alone in London frightens her more than sharks which rarely attack.

For competitive diving strict training, in the gym and in the water, is vital. In the three weeks before the 17 August plunge Tanya completed ten training dives, each taking her deeper. Since breaking her first record she has demonstrated an astonishing determination to push both her body and her mind to their limits.

Environmental interests

She has also worked hard to understand the science behind the sport by taking part in medical and scientific research, some of which features in a Channel 5 documentary in a series called 'Extraordinary People' to be shown early next year.

One of the bonuses of Tanya's high profile success is the involvement it has brought her with organisations concerned with the conservation of the world's oceans and their inhabitants.

"Two years ago I was invited by the Reefball Foundation to join a trip to the Caribbean island of Dominica where guests made and deployed specially-designed concrete 'reefballs', on which coral would begin to grow.

"These structures get a few hundred years headstart on nature by providing the basis of a natural reef and I'm pleased to report that our reef is now teeming with sea-life and showing many signs of coral growth.

"I've also collaborated with the Whaleman Foundation, appearing in promotional videos designed to raise awareness of the threats to these beautiful mammals from ocean pollution and from plans to lift the global ban on commercial whaling.

"Most recently, I was invited to be an official spokesperson for the UK-based Whale and Dolphin Conservation Society which works to educate the public and the 'marine entertainment' industry about the misery and futility of keeping cetaceans, especially orcas, in captivity, and for the Coral Reef Alliance which works to promote awareness of our global reef systems."

Tanya graduated from Brighton with a degree in Public Administration and French and immediately after graduating

worked in the city of London and as a social secretary to the governor of her native Cayman Islands.

Now freediving is her life: it has allowed her to test her endurance in ways most of us would never dare and enabled her to help protect the oceans she loves.

Her final word? "Someone once said that scuba divers descend to look around themselves, and freedivers descend to look within themselves. It's true. I've learnt much more than just how to kick and breathe."

"Walking alone in London is scarier than sharks!"

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