



*Feeling blue.*

STEPHANIE MEE

# PLUNGES

INTO THE WORLD OF  
FREE DIVING ON BALI.

PHOTOS BY OLI CHRISTEN.

PICTURE this: You are floating on the surface of the ocean wearing just a wetsuit, fins and goggles. You take a few deep breaths using your diaphragm to fill your lungs to capacity, and on the last breath you slip beneath the surface and glide down to the sea floor.

On your way down you pass silvery schools of fish and coral formations, and after a few powerful strokes, you sink softly into the sand. Without the Darth Vader-like breathing sounds of scuba, you are instantly aware of the silence and serenity of the deep, and the lack of bubbles means you have a direct line of vision to the fish and marine creatures at your fingertips. A deep sense of calmness sets in, and you feel both incredibly liberated and deeply connected to the watery playground around you.

This is freediving, and people from around the globe have been practising it for centuries. Yet at the same time it is a relatively new recreational sport to hit the underwater scene in Bali. In 2010 the only freediving school in Indonesia was at Manta Dive on neighbouring Gili Trawangan, but today you can find an ever-increasing number of professional freediving schools scattered around Bali.

Also known as apnea, freediving is essentially diving where you rely on your own breath capacity and control, and it has been described by some as one of the most euphoric experiences you can have on land or sea.

Records show that divers in Ancient Greece used breath control and weights to descend to great depths to collect valuable resources like sponges and coral. During wartime the ancient Romans employed a special group of divers called *urinatores* who would dismantle underwater barricades and sabotage enemy ships. Perhaps the most famous freedivers are the Ama from Japan and Korea, who began collecting deep-water pearls, oysters and abalone over 2,000 years ago and still carry on the tradition to this day.

Freediving as a competitive sport can be traced back to 1949 when an Italian fighter pilot and accomplished spear fisher named Raimondo Bucher made a bet that he could reach a depth of 30 metres underwater on a single breath. His success and that of

subsequent deep-water divers prompted a plucky young lad named Enzo Maiorca to really push the limits, and he went on to break the 50-metre barrier despite scientists saying it was physically impossible.

One of Maiorca's biggest competitors was Frenchman Jacques Mayol, who was the first freediver to reach a depth of 100 metres and an influential force on the evolution of freediving as we know it today. Mayol and Maiorca's friendly rivalry was depicted in Luc Besson's blockbuster film *The Big Blue*, and although it was heavily fictionalised, the film remains a cult classic among diehard divers.

Today freediving is utilised for practical pursuits like fishing, resource gathering, and the scientific study of marine mammals like whales and dolphins. It can also be incorporated into many hobbies and sports like underwater photography, synchronised swimming and surfing. Then of course, there is competitive freediving where divers compete to break records for depth (no-limits apnea), distance (dynamic apnea), or timed breath holding underwater (static apnea).

Ask any freediver what drew them to the sport, and most of them will say it was the Zen-like sense of tranquillity they felt from their first dive, plus the freedom of movement that you just don't get in scuba diving.

Matthew Smyth of Apneista, Bali's first freediving school, says: "In freediving you are connecting with the underwater environment in a more intimate way. Fish and other creatures are not scared off by the noise and movement of scuba bubbles, and you can move through the water in a much freer way making interactions, especially with big fish, much more natural."

Basic freediving techniques include breath work such as training your diaphragm muscles to push oxygen deep into your lungs and relaxation exercises to encourage longer breath holding, plus equalisation methods, proper weighting, and streamlined swimming.

Apneista offers courses ranging from introduction courses for beginners all the way up to a freediving instructor programme.

"Apneista has an individual-focused approach to freediving that is firmly rooted in science. The courses we offer combine techniques



## FREEDIVING SCHOOLS

### Apneista

Located just steps from the ocean in the small village of Jemeluk in Amed, Apneista offers friendly, non-competitive classes based on the SSI (Scuba Schools International) freediving curriculum. Classes focus on technique, comfort, and safety procedures, and they also incorporate yoga routines specifically designed for freedivers. Class sizes are purposely small so that the qualified instructors can adapt each training session to individual needs.

[www.apneista.com](http://www.apneista.com)

### Freedive Flow

Freedive Flow is based in Sanur, and they offer AIDA (Association Internationale pour le Développement de l'Apnée) courses. AIDA oversees championships and world record attempts, and they create international standards for safe and efficient freediving techniques. The courses hold a maximum of four students per instructor in open water sessions, and each session is taped on HD-video, so you can analyse your dives together with your instructor. Freedive Flow can also arrange deep-water courses in Amed and Tulamben.

[www.balifreedive.com](http://www.balifreedive.com)

### Fusion Freediving

Founded in 2011, Fusion Freediving offers courses that range from intro classes for absolute beginners to advanced classes for experienced freedivers. The courses follow the SSI and Pure Apnea curriculums, and they take place in Fusion's state-of-the-art freediving centre and in the water in Amed, or at their secondary location in Sanur at the Rip Curl School of Surf water sports centre.

[www.fusionfreedive.com](http://www.fusionfreedive.com)

### Apnea Bali

The professional freediving classes at Apnea Bali utilise the SSI and Apnea Total systems, and the centre also offers personalised one-on-one training sessions, competition preparation, and workshops on specific freediving skills. Each of the experienced instructors here is fully certified and comes from a water sports background, and they work closely with students to tailor the classes to each student's unique abilities and goals.

[www.apneabali.com](http://www.apneabali.com)

### Manta Dive

Gili Trawangan's favourite dive operator, Manta Dive, was the first in the country to offer freediving courses and they are still going strong. The comprehensive classes here include an intro freediving course, static apnea training, and advanced freediving, and each class includes theory sessions, breathing techniques, depth training sessions, fun dives, equipment, and course materials. ●

[www.manta-dive.com](http://www.manta-dive.com)

from competitive freediving with insights from meditation and yoga," Matthew says.

"Students can expect to learn the science of the breath and the body in water, the mechanics of moving fluidly in the water, and the huge importance of the mind in everything we are and do."

Controlling the mind is an important facet of freediving, as it can be easy for panic to set in when the body is deprived of oxygen. But what many people don't realise is that the human body actually has an amazing built-in mechanism to adapt to the underwater world.

As soon as your face is immersed in cold water, a reaction called the mammalian diving reflex occurs, which slows your heart rate down by about 10 to 20 per cent. This helps to preserve oxygen by reducing oxygen flow through the bloodstream.

Moreover, as you dive deeper, your body shifts blood from your limbs to your vital organs like your brain and heart, and your lungs temporarily fill up with blood plasma to prevent them from collapsing under the pressure. This is why freedivers can reach great depths and stay underwater so long without causing irreparable damage to their bodies.

With such a profound effect on the entire body, freediving may seem like a particularly physically demanding sport. However, like scuba diving, the sport is accessible to anyone with the desire to give it a go.

Oli Christen of Freedive Flow in Sanur says: "Freediving as a competitive sport is a marginal occurrence. There are very few people who actually train to gain numbers and titles. The majority of freediving happens on a recreational level for the fun of it, or applied as a training form, as in modern surfing."

"The only requirement to enrol in a course is to be able to swim. So, yes, the out of shape smoker is just as welcome

to freediving as the Olympic swimmer. The first few miles under water are all about relaxation and technique anyway, performance comes later... much later."

When Oli set up Freedive Flow in 2011, he saw mostly backpackers signing up for the courses, but today he sees a broad spectrum of students.

"I get requests from whole families, or by dive centres, surf schools, or even business schools asking how to implement freediving in their programmes," he says.

"One of my favourite jobs is to train surfers to their maximum breath hold capacity. Surfers are, by definition quite well trained athletes, and it's fantastic to see their progress from entry-level to breath-hold-pro in an amazingly short time."

Apneista also sees the full gamut of first-time freedivers. Matthew says: "We get all levels; from people with a fear of water to experienced spear fishermen who already dive deep; from very fit to not very fit at all. And from all walks of life from CEO's of oil companies to striptease artists and professional soldiers."

According to the Apneista team, Bali is the ideal spot for freediving for its warm waters, easy shore access, varied dive sites, rich underwater life, and friendly dive community, which may explain the dramatic increase in interest over the past few years.

For those who have not yet tried freediving but are curious to take the plunge, Oli says: "Freediving is a very honest teacher. You learn how to relax 'on demand', but get your butt slapped immediately when you try to cheat or get cocky. That being said, it's impossible to explain the bliss of being underwater on a breath hold. The experience truly starts in the first moment you try for yourself." ●