A MATTER OF LIFE AND DEPTH

Spearfishing in Barbados can make you feel like James Bond – and there’s even a believable villain down there to do battle with.

The fourth wealthiest person in Brazil (according to Forbes), Carlos Alberto Scipiora, is also a keen ‘spearer’, and appears on his country’s national spearfishing federation website alongside a huge 300kg blue marlin.

The popularity of the sport has spiked sharply in the past six or seven years, says Jerome Gamble, editor of Spearfishing Magazine, who catches on as quickly as anyone could when I explain that I’m calling the office of Spearfishing to ask about spearfishing. ‘It’s where surfing was in the Eighties,’ he says. ‘A lot of people did it, but it wasn’t mainstream.’

Blades of Glory

However, for a novice like me, the wave that spearfishing has ridden, is coursing through my system, and adrenaline is feeding on haven’t worked out what they are or the dangers they pose. In other words, for the lionfish the Caribbean is an all-you-can-eat buffet with free refills. They are over-fed, over-populating and over here, ‘It’s a huge problem that biodiversity,’ he says.

When we pull up at the beach, it’s time to get a get acquainted with the equipment. There are snorkel, low-volume masks (designed to facilitate breath-hold dives without having your eyeballs sucked out of their sockets by the pressure differential) and long, carbon-fibre flippers for maximum efficiency in the water.

Forbes

Daan Verhoeven

THE ENEMY WITHIN

While I was excited to get to grips with this new sport, I had also been wrestling with my conscience. Even if we do eat the fish we catch, there’s something about taking pleasure in killing another living creature that seems, by my metropolitan liberal sensibilities, to be a bit… unnecessary? Insomuch, even. But Alex explains that our primary targets, lionfish, are unwanted interlopers - not native to the Caribbean.

Before the snorkel in me has time to object on grounds of xenophobia, he’s telling me about their existence in their native Asia. They do well enough out there, feeding on smaller fish and protecting themselves with their venomous spines. But in the reefs of Indonesia and the Arabian Gulf, they are also preyed upon – by larger fish such as groupers and reef sharks.

When they were introduced, inadvertently, to the Caribbean in the Nineties, they chanced upon an aquatic Shangri-la. Here, they have no natural predators and according to Alex, the fish that they feed on haven’t worked out what they need to do battle with...
the size of a shoe box and still wriggling as he whips out a small pair of shears from his belt and cuts off the venomous spines. Then, for safe-keeping, he places it on to a hook attached to a small inflatable buoy that we’ve been dragging with us through the water.

As I continue to practise diving down and ‘equalising’ by closing my mouth, pinching my nose and pushing air through my ears, Alex disappears from view for minutes at a time as he goes to much greater depths. He holds the Barbados national record for freediving, having reached 86m at the most prestigious international competition in the world, Vertical Blue.

Until 1967, it was believed that the physiological limit for human freedivers was 64m. But the modern freediving community has disproved this, pushing to the edge of human performance, and sometimes beyond; several freedivers have died in recent years. The increase in recorded depths – dives of more than 120m are possible for the best in the world – is partly down to improved understanding of how the human body reacts when submerged in water and exposed to increased pressure.

A few days later, when we practise freediving without the distraction of spears or fish, Alex will tell me that it is possible to ignore the urge to come up for air when you’re holding your breath and simply keep going – first, through the burning sensation you feel in your chest, and then even as your diaphragm contracts and your body tries to force your lungs into action. Hard as this is to believe, when I follow his instructions and lower my heart rate, I’m able to hold my breath for almost three minutes. That’s about three times as long as I would have expected, but no threat to the current world record of 11 minutes 35 seconds.

JACK HIT

After a few abortive attempts and missed shots on my first spearfishing sortie, I return to the water on the second day with renewed determination. We’ve barely been in the water for five minutes when Alex points out a silvery predatory fish about a foot long, a jack. I take a breath, dive down and stalk it for a few seconds before squeezing the trigger. The spear flies out of the gun, the line unspools and the fish begins to spasm. Success – and my first confirmed kill.

Not long after, we spot a rock that looks like a prime hiding place for a lionfish. Alex dives down to investigate and, sure enough, there he is. But after an exploratory dive of my own, I realise it’s at the limit of my range. I’ll have to be quick and efficient if I’m to spot my prey, steady myself, spear it and then make it back to the surface without feeling as if my lungs are about to explode.

This is when my chest tightens and everything starts to seem more complicated than it should be. But I go for it, find the target and let off a shot. It’s a palpable hit, but the fish isn’t skewered, so Alex goes down to finish the job. He breaches the surface and offers some consolation: ‘You pretty much got it.’

By the time we’re done for the day, there are half a dozen or so fish on our hook. Alex fillets them on a chopping board that he keeps in the back of his car and sends me on my way with instructions to make a ceviche (which is delicious) and another invitation, to take part in the freediving course that he’ll be running over the next two days. It turns out to be fascinating. More importantly, though, the skills I learn should mean that the next time I come face to face with a lionfish, it won’t get a second chance.

Half-day tours with Spearfishing Barbados are available from $110. A two-day certified AIDA freediving course costs $250 (spearfishingbarbados.com, freedivingbarbados.com, +1 (246) 230 8580). Spear’s was a guest of the Crane Hotel (thecrane.com). British Airways flies from Gatwick to Barbados daily during the summer and 12 times a week during the winter. Return flights start from £571 (britishairways.com)