

MY CHEST IS TIGHT, adrenaline is coursing through my system, and I'm sucking more water through my snorkel than air. Unfortunately, none of this helps with the task at hand: lowering my heart rate enough to take a breath, dive 25 feet underneath the surface of the Caribbean and shoot a spear into my fishy foe before it can stick me with its venomous spines. That, theoretically, will be our dinner.

Just a few months earlier, I had barely heard of spearfishing – a sport in which participants take a single breath at the surface, dive dozens of metres below and use a harpoon-like spear gun to skewer fish that can weigh hundreds of pounds. But, quite suddenly, it is proving popular with a certain type of jet-setting, thrill-seeking person.

There's Loic Gouzer, a specialist in contemporary art at Christie's whose inventive approach to themed sales has made him a celebrity in the art world. When he isn't selling Jeff Koons sculptures or hanging out with close friend Leonardo DiCaprio, Gouzer likes nothing more than taking a spearfishing trip to the Bahamas or swimming with sharks. Then there's Sheikh Hamdan bin Mohammad Bin Rashid al Maktoum, the Sandhurst and LSE-educated Crown Prince of Dubai, who posts pictures of himself on Instagram dressed in a special ocean-camo wetsuit and holding up some impressive leviathan as a trophy.

The fourth wealthiest person in Brazil (according to *Forbes*), Carlos Alberto Sicupira, is also a keen 'spearo', 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 Jeromy Gamble, editor of *Spearfishing Magazine*, who catches on as quickly as anyone could when I explain that I'm calling the office of *Spearfishing* from *Spear's* 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.' The wave that spearfishing has ridden, though, is the proliferation of cheap, high-quality underwater camera equipment that, along with the rise of YouTube and Instagram, has revealed this subaquatic world like never before.

Gamble, who lists Kevin Costner and Tiger Woods among spearfishing's burgeoning roll call of celebrity fans, says the waters off the coast of Southern California, Mexico, Panama and Bermuda are among the best spots for hunting '300lb bluefin tuna' and other 'monsters'.

However, for a novice like me, the warmer, calmer and, crucially, shark-free waters of south and west Barbados seem like a more sensible place to start. So when I get an invitation from Alex Davis, a 28-year-old British-born Bajan citizen who set up a spearfishing and

Spearfishing is growing in popularity among ocean-going thrill-seekers

freediving school after relocating seven years ago, I leap at the chance. Having agreed to show me the ropes, he swings by my hotel shortly after 6am on my first morning on the island in his Suzuki 4x4.

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? Immoral, even. But Alex explains that our primary targets, lionfish, are unwanted interlopers – not native to the Caribbean.

Before the snowflake 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 almost no natural predators and, according to Alex, the fish that they feed on haven't worked out what they

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

by Edwin Smith – a freelance writer and editor



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 for biodiversity,' he says.

When we pull up at the beach, it's time to get acquainted with the equipment. There are snorkels, low-volume masks (designed to facilitate deep 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.

BLADES OF GLORY

However, the main attraction is the weaponry. The spear guns in the back of Alex's jeep look like the sort of thing that Sean Connery's Bond used to dispatch the scuba-diving henchmen in *Thunderball*. A thin spear is placed into the top of the gun, then loaded when two heavy-duty rubber bands are drawn back behind it. When it's fired, a cord attached to the tail end of the spear unspools and can be used to reel it back in.

Alex also carries a pocket-sized guide with pictures of all the fish we might encounter. He points out the poisonous stonefish and the silvery tarpon, but glosses over the unimprovably named 'slippery dick'. As I concentrate on keeping a straight face, his next piece of advice catches me off-guard: 'Shoot first, ask questions later.' Fishermen using nets kill fish indiscriminately and in huge numbers, he reasons. 'You'll only shoot the wrong fish once. I'll let you know.'

With that, we wade into the water and dip our masks below the surface. Almost immediately, brightly coloured clownfish flit by. A little later, a ray the size of a car bonnet glides past. Then there's a turtle. 'We don't shoot turtles,' deadpans Alex. But soon we see public enemy number one.

The lionfish is lurking under a rock, but once Alex has spotted it, it doesn't stand much chance. He dives a few metres under the surface, steadies himself and then lets the fish have it. 'Aim for the face,' he'll tell me later when it's my turn to try. He emerges from the depths with the fish skewered on his spear. It's about >>



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. **S**

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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)