

14 Feb Bundaberg Day 1 of Open Water One Padi Scuba diving Course

our dive medical is at 8am and we arrive sharp along with 10 other diving hopefuls. eventually by 11 we complete the whole rigmarole which includes an eye, hearing, blood pressure, pulse, and urine tests and finally a consultation with the doctor who pronounces us both fit enough to learn to dive.

Dave is the last one out after being unable to produce the required sample on demand from a rather stern nurse. he drinks copious cups of water (which he hates) and finally manages to do what is required into his special little cup. as he commented, he then spent the rest of the day wee-ing like a girl!

the class consists of 6 men, 2 woman; 1 Zimbabwean, 5 Scandinavians plus 1 English Dave and 1 south African myself. our ages range between 23 and 40. a pretty mixed bag. Our dive instructor is Cedric Petersen and from his accent I immediately glean that he is south African. he has an friendly familiarity about him which makes me feel almost comfortable.

he tells us that he has been diving since 1976 both as a commercial and recreational diver and that he has been teaching PADI courses for 6 years. more comforting news. he then asks us to each introduce ourselves to the group and say why we've decided to do a scuba course (this exercise is remarkably reminiscent of all the social work courses I've done to date except this time i can't say in a semi-apologetic way that i like people and i want to help them). i decide that I'll just say that i like looking at fish, though i guess i could do this for 1 fiftieth of the price at a Chinese restaurant and have some delicious Bombay duck thrown in for good measure.

the rest of the day is spent going through the theory of diving. i am secretly pleased about this because the weather is drizzly, grey and uninviting and i feel on more secure ground with the theory. we cover every thing from the gear that we'll be using and how it works to the relationship between pressure, density and volume and finally how to use recreational dive tables. we learn that the most important rule in diving is never to hold your breath because if you do you may rupture your lungs which is very serious and may result in death. after 7 hours of this my head is swimming. i feel fairly confident about the theoretical side of things but i am still very apprehensive about the practice which will begin tomorrow.

15 February 2000 Bundaberg Day 2 of PADI

we wake up to be greeted by another miserable, wet, steely grey day. unknowingly and unfortunately we have chosen Queensland' wettest season for our dive course.) before we can start the practical part of the course we have to swim 200 metres. as we all swim around the pool like lost lemmings i suddenly hear Cedric shout to Dave "why (on earth?!) are you swimming with your sandals on? Dave gasps back "out of habit!" to which Cedric shakes his head incredulously and i over hear him say under his breath "only a pom could do such a thing." this exchange is the only morsel of comic relief in an otherwise gruelling day.

next its down to the nitty gritty of learning to 'assemble our gear' as its nonchalantly described. this is the first real indication that the

day is going to be even more challenging than i expected. I've always suspected that i am completely devoid of any mechanical aptitude and this session is sure fire confirmation of this. things that everyone else takes for granted like what an o-ring looks like and which way you turn the regulator on and off, are not obvious or taken for granted for me and i very soon start to experience what its like to be the class dunce (even as i write this i wince) and how it feels to complete everything last with everyone waiting for you to catch up. i try to comfort myself with the thought that i am probably performing an important role as the class symptom/problem bearer by making everyone else feel more competent and in control. unfortunately, this is the role that i am stuck with for the rest of the day.

the moment of truth in any scuba course is your first breath of under water air. our rather gungho padi instruction manual describes this as an "unforgettable and exhilarating" experience. for me it is a petrifying ordeal which doesn't become easier as the day progresses. each time i go under my heart pounds furiously in my chest and feels like a mini-death. once we've all gone down under we sit in a higgledy piggedly circle at the bottom of the 3 metre deep pool legs crossed, hands folded in laps, breathing, breathing, breathing, eyes wide and disbelieving looking like a perverse, underwater yoga class.

there's no time to become gently acquainted with this new sensation/deviation of underwater breathing. once we've been under once its time to begin to learn all the skills we'll need to pass the confined water part of the course. for each new skill i have one internal stock reaction "you can't be serious. I'll never be able to do that!" Cedric has the patience of job and the sternness of an army sergeant (a good combination for teaching survival skills) despite some of my pretty florid protestation by 3 o clock we still haven't had a break or lunch and i am shivering, miserable and hungry. at last we're given 45 minutes, and then have to don our soggy gear again and we're back in the wet for another 2 hours.

at last Cedric announces that we've reached the last exercise. i can hardly believe that I've survived the first day and i feel almost exhilarated that its over and that I'll never have to look another scuba unit in the O ring again. (unreal feeling of being in a ruthless sicko private benjamin movie without the happy ending, just endless lagging behind, humiliation and incompetence).

At the end of the day we must all sit a multiple choice test, based on what we're all supposed to have learnt so far. all pass with room to spare, apart from the guy from Zim who only scraped through with a score of 78 ... the pass mark being 75! Dave of course scored 98% making him top of the class - what a swot, tho' i must say i didn't really notice him do any swotting at all.

16 feb 2000 Bundaberg Day 3 of PADI Dave wakes me up with a cup of sugary tea and I'm immediately aware of that horse kick in the stomach feeling of leftover dread and the knowledge that i have to face day 3 of PADI.

we start the day by pairing up with our buddies, descending the 3 metres to the bottom of the pool, and supposedly rescuing each other. Dave and i somehow seem incapable of getting off the floor and crawl around with all the panache of mating semi sentient sea cucumbers. when we eventually surface Cedric comments on our abysmal performance which

wasn't very flattering!!

the day gets marginally better (it doesn't have a choice) and i manage to do a few of the exercises without needing to gasp to the surface for breath every 5 minutes. we learn a bit more about how to make ourselves completely weightless in the water and swim around feeling like astronauts on the moon. we also have to learn how to survive divers' worst possible scenarios like running out of air, air free flowing, losing one's buddy, getting caught in a net and having to remove and replace your scuba unit, losing your mask. each situation is simulated and each one of us has to demonstrate that we are able to deal with these emergencies. i go last each time, perhaps because Cedric thinks I'll be able to learn from everyone else's mistakes or perhaps out of compassion for the rest of the class!

somehow i manage to get through each ordeal and the interminably long day and once it's all over Cedric tells me that I've managed to pass the confined water part of the course. everyone gives me an encouraging clap, the prerogative of the dunce. i feel a mixture of incredulity and relief tinged with the dawning realisation that i now have to face the choice of whether to do the open water part of the course. will it never end?!

17 February Bundaberg

i am afraid i whimped out today. i won't give you all the boring reasons. lets just say i woke up this morning and couldn't face the gear, the wet, the deep and my fears. Dave set off on his own and i lay in bed reading my Marie Claire mag and feeling like a truanted school kid, guilt and glee and a healthy dose of adult self recrimination all rolled into one uneasy experience.

2 hours later Dave returned disappointed. the sea had been too rough to do any diving. some of them had gone in knee deep but it was soon obvious that it would be a waste of time. this is a real bummer because it means that Dave (and possibly I) will be unable to finish the course with the same instructor and class. the rest of our dive class has already disbanded and gone their separate ways and it would be foolish for us to waste any more time in Bundaberg in the faint hope that the weather eventually clears up. so we've decided that we'll travel further north tomorrow and hopefully (weather permitting) get to see some of the Great Barrier Reef. we'll have to wait until we reach New Zealand or Western Australia to complete our scuba course. (An anti climatic end to the week.)

Its now 9 pm and we've just arrived back from the Mon Repos turtle rookery which is a conservation area only a few Kilometres outside of Bundaberg. we arrived at 7pm along with a beautiful expectant moon and about 50 other curious and hopeful visitors. the evening began with a rather prosaic slide show about the history of the rookery research centre and a brief summary of the life cycle of the turtle. the interesting things we learnt are that only 1 out of 1000 hatchling turtles reaches full sexual maturity which is 35-40 years old.

the rookery research centre was set up both to protect and research turtles because they were becoming a threatened species due to the presence of huge trawler fishing boats which caught pregnant turtles on their way to lay their eggs on the beach. we were told that because of the Rookery these trawlers now have very restricted activities along the

coast.

just as we were starting to yawn our way through the show one of the rangers came to call us because he'd discovered a nest of overdue hatchlings. we were tightly herded along the moonlit beach until we reached the nest which the ranger had kindly dug up so that the hatchlings could escape. he explained that because of the recent heavy rains the soil had become too compacted to allow the babies to burrow/dig out naturally so they needed a bit of assistance, a bit like the turtle equivalent of a caesarean.

we were allowed to gently stroke the wriggling hatchlings as they were picked out of their hole (.5 metres deep). they seemed naked and vulnerable and it was easy to see why some of them don't ever get to experience the first lick of a wave. we then formed 2 perpendicular lines all the way down to the sea and watched them take their long ungainly journeys to the sea the closer they got to the water the quicker and more confident they seemed to become. and finally once the last awkward stragglers reached waters' edge and underwent the instantaneous transformation from clumsy land creature to graceful swimmer, it was time for us to head back to the research centre and then home. definitely a worthwhile excursion and even worth missing Seinfeld for!

18 February 2000 Bundaberg to Town of 1770 to Bundaberg

Today has been a washout. We drove all the way to the town of 1770, a two and a half hour drive with the intention of booking a boat trip to the great barrier reef only to discover that no boats are operating until Tuesday (3 days time). This is because of the stormy weather in the area. to cap it all we were told that the most likely place to catch a ferry to the GBR is now Bundaberg!!!

the only redeeming experience in an otherwise wasted day was spotting 5 young kangaroos grazing nonchalantly on the roadside. they even posed for a few photos before hopping off towards the nearby bushes. so at last we've managed to spot some kangaroos and celebrated by singing remnants of Kangaroo songs all the way home. Skippy skippy skippy the bush kangaroo....tie the kangaroo down sport (not sure if these are the right words though!)

we couldn't face returning to matilda's motel and explaining the reasons for being back so we've booked into the stupidly named Chalet Motel and ordered pizzas and garlic bread to accompany The nanny, neighbours and seinfeld on tv.

19 February 2000 Bundaberg today we splashed out and paid the 110 dollars each for a ferry ride to lady musgrave island which is on the southernmost tip of of the great barrier reef. the first surprise of the day was how huge the ferry was, a double decker catamaran that can comfortably seat a couple of hundred people. the second surprise was discovering that Dave suffers sea sickness. this was news for Dave too. luckily the crew were well prepared for such eventualities and generously handed out sick bags to all and sundry and collected the lumpy parcels once they had served their purpose. Dave managed to fill about half a dozen bags in the time it took to get there. i was pleased that we hadn't had time for a full English breakfast this morning.

we arrived at a pontoon which is built about 300 metres from the island

itself and this is where the ferry was moored for the day. everyone was provided with snorkelling gear including flotation vests and complimentary sunscreen to complete the neat package deal. naturally, we had our own posher stuff. we flopped into the water like undignified ducks and waded around trying to keep within the snorkelling demarcation area and at the same time find some free space away from everyone else. i spent a frustrating half hour trying simultaneously to sort out my leaking mask, get used to my brand new flippers and avoid other peoples kicks and jabs and pokey bits. in desperation i went out as far as was allowed and soon discovered the best part of the snorkelling area: a pristine deep water lagoon with stunning phosphorescent corals teeming with life. within minutes of discovering this spot it was time to go back to the boat for a smorgasbord lunch of roast chicken pieces, the usual selection of salads and inedible frozen crab limbs.

time was becoming increasingly precious. after lunch we took a glass bottom boat to lady musgrave island and wandered around its beaches, listening to the incessant buzz of the insect life. large trees were strewn along the beaches, smoothed and abandoned by the sea and now the receptacle of countless bird nests. as we strolled along the periphery of the island my eye was caught by a familiar wriggling movement, i focussed and to my amazement saw about 50 loggerhead hatchlings clumsily making their way towards the sea. Dave and i stood astounded wondering how this could be happening in broad daylight. we watched for ages as they inched forward. we chased away the beady eyed seagulls that cawed greedily from the sidelines and upturned those that ended up helpless on their backs.

it was amazing to have this experience entirely to ourselves without being field marshalled around with crowds of other people. once the last few hatchlings had taken to the water like greased lightning we rushed back to our drop off spot to make sure that we didn't miss the last boat of the day. once back at the pontoon there was no time for a second snorkel and barely enough time to gather all our goods and get back onto the ferry before heading back to the familiarity of Bundaberg. overall, a fantastic and memorable day!!

20 February 2000 Bundaberg to Toowoomba

memory failure! I'm writing this a few days after the fact, never a good idea, and realise that Toowoomba has made absolutely no impression on me. Dave has tried to jog my memory by giving me banal/mundane pointers..."remember we had a choice of three rooms and we chose number 18 on the ground floor rather than number 21 upstairs. "don't you remember that we went to the Cafe OLifant for breakfast and you used that newspaper voucher for a free cup coffee!' oh, now its all flooding back...it was a delicious cup of 'flat white' coffee wasn't itand I'm afraid that that is all i can tell you.

21 February 2000 Toowoomba to Poziers

from Toowoomba we drive many miles through unspectacular, dry hinterland. despite the notable lack of interesting sights it is a friendly enough experience with most petrol stations advertising free tea and coffee. we fill the car up a few times because the petrol is the cheapest we've come across.

poziers is a fruit farming area in the middle of nowhere, though not quite in the outback. it is where my aunt Elizabeth and uncle Eric live

and grow apples. i haven't seen them since i was ten years old and feel mildly apprehensive about the prospect of a long lost family reunion. we follow the bold strawberry signs and arrive at their home earlier than expected. there is a typical tongue and tooth wooden farm house which is framed by a beautiful, flowering garden. further out are huge iron farm sheds which house tractors and trucks and cars and countless crates filled with red apples. cousin johno (who i don't remember ever meeting and who clearly doesn't know me from a bar of soap) greets us and tells us that his parents will only be back at 6 'o clock because they've been delayed in Brisbane. he gives us the house keys and we let ourselves in.

we (or rather i snoop around) for a few minutes trying to pick up clues about my long lost relatives. the house is spotlessly clean and tidy. there are lots of books about South Africa in the book case; Andre brink, Nadine gordimer so perhaps they still have a strong attachment to South Africa - unless they are merely discarded or unread gifts. the only thing that i remember vividly from my visits to them as a child is a huge life size painting of eric's 6 children - 12 big questioning eyes staring out at you.

the family reunion is remarkably effortless and there's no pressure to try and catch up on 20 years of lost time which is a relief. Elizabeth, Dave and i prepare a hearty dinner of t - bone steaks, vegetables and mash potatoes and we wash this down with a great bottle of Brown Brothers red. we chat about their experiences of emigrating to Australia and the things that they miss about south Africa; family, a strong sense of community, similar sense of humour etc. Eric tells us about making the transition from cattle farming which he was doing in south Africa to apple farming. they regale us with tales of weird and wonderful apple pickers that they've had to stay on the farm; backpackers, "ferrals", 'dole scroungers' and only a handful of reliable hard workers.

we tell them a bit about our travel experiences and our intentions to go back to South Africa and settle there. the evening draws to a pleasant, drowsy close. its now bedtime and i can't tell you how good and nurturing it feels to go to sleep in a home with people and pets instead of the impersonal functionality of another motel.