



# MY BUDDY THE INDOOR DIVER

FEATURE **PATRICK VAN HOESERLANDE** PHOTOGRAPHY **WERNER GRAF**

Diving in the indoor dive centre at TODI – The Ultimate Diving Experience is fun-once or twice a season,  
but could more be too much?



Diving in the indoor dive centre at TODI – The Ultimate Diving Experience is fun once or twice a season, but could more be too much? These are the thoughts amongst a number of divers, and I have to admit that I am one of them. Werner Graf is not a follower of this diving philosophy, on the contrary he will argue against it. If there were a specialisation certificate for indoor diving, he would immediately earn it. To get a better understanding of the attraction of diving in a large aquarium, I meet up with Werner on a very early morning to go and dive inside the dive tank of the old coal mine of Beringen, in Belgium.

With more than twenty dives in TODI, while the repurposed waste tank has barely been open a year to the public, Werner has become a familiar and welcomed guest diver. He knows the smallest details of the reservoir and its inhabitants. In my opinion, it's a rather boring form of diving, but when I think more of it, one can also say the same about diving over 100 times in the lake of Ekeren. Anyhow, my first question for Werner will be to know the reasons why he visits Beringen so often.

Before we enter the changing rooms, I fire my question at him. His answer is quite simple. He wants to perfect himself as a novice underwater photographer in taking 'portrait photos' of fish. The love for photographing animals flows through the family veins. His father also went hiking into nature to photograph fauna, but that was above the water. The quasi-perfect conditions of clear water, no current, and a

sand free bottom, allow Werner to concentrate solely on the animal to photograph. There is also no shortage of models volunteering to pose in front of the lens. Missing an opportunity is not a disaster, after a while another opportunity simply presents itself again. There is no stress, like every dive should be. Why make it hard for yourself with all the distractions, when there is an easier path to improvement? Certainly if you want to master the technique of fish portraits.

Of course, there are other advantages to diving in TODI too. You always have a warm place to change and a hot shower at your disposal. You also do not have to drag heavy equipment to your dive site and the water is always pleasantly warm. Getting into the water is unstressfully easy and it never rains. The weather under a roof is always nice and the pleasure of diving does not depend on the meteorological conditions. Admittedly, driving the long route to the centre in bad weather is not relaxing, but you know you are heading to a dry and warm dive site. After a nice dive, you don't have to drive on further to look for a place to get a bite to eat and drink, because these facilities are right next door to the changing rooms. Diving thus becomes a "Total Dive experience".

Time to test the 24°C warm water with my buddy. It is no coincidence that the water is that temperature. Most fish are warm water species and thus the water must be warm. However, above 24°C, it is obligatory to use chemicals for public health reasons, and neither fish nor divers are fans of those. The

compromise consists of a water temperature just below this limit. A compromise all users find comfortable.

Armed with a camera, an underwater housing and a diving box on wheels, my buddy steps into the elevator. I roll out my underwater video camera and diving equipment. We get our tanks, BCDs and weights, and prepare everything to the side. There is not a lot of people, but we had picked the early hours just for that reason. A short briefing and there we go.

Before we enter the water, my buddy points to a silver Arowana (I have to confess that I looked it up) and tells me that this species is difficult to photograph. They tend to swim away when you get close. While my buddy is checking the seals of his camera, I am testing the shyness of an Arowana. I come within a metre of it and the fish does not move a fin. I have encountered more timid fish.

When Werner asks if everything is OK, I know that from now on I will not get much attention as a buddy. After all, if an underwater photographer has spotted his prey, he or she will completely focus on their subject. Indeed, this beginner is no exception. Cautiously he approaches his victim to the point where his lens almost touches it. Now I understand why the Arowana thinks he – or is it a she – is entering his personal zone. The distance between diver and fish is not expressed in metres, but in centimetres.

We progress very slowly. Werner tries to take



a portrait picture of every fish he encounters. He is a hardcore adaptor of the rules you find posted on a photo booth: look straight into the camera, both eyes open... He wants to capture the soul of the fish and when you see the result, he is not far from his goal. In addition, he does not wish to edit any of his photos. If a picture has to be perfect, it must be taken that way underwater. Electronic make-up is not his way.

I enjoy this quiet and slow dive. My photos do not have to be close-ups, because I want to capture both the photographer and his models. The only problem is that my time for this depends entirely on the two main players. If one of the two thinks it has lasted long enough, I have to start over. Fortunately, the local residents and their visitors are quite docile.

Like every good dive, we have to break it off early. The limited air in our tanks forces us to surface. Totally relaxed, we disassemble the equipment and stow it away. After a chat with a hot cup of coffee, we go off to get warm showers before meeting up again to log our dive.

Nice, warm water, perfect weather, fantastic visibility and plenty of fish. What more can you expect from a dive? Thanks for being my buddy Werner, and sharing the thousands of fish in TODI with me. I leave Beringen and check off another item on my list of possible diving activities within our organisation.

Where will I dive next time? Curious? Me too.



Do you know someone with a unique dive activity that would have me as his or her buddy? Or are you such a diver? You can contact me on email at [patrick.vanhoeserlande@nelos.be](mailto:patrick.vanhoeserlande@nelos.be).



**DIVER:** Werner Graf  
**FIRST DIVE:** 20<sup>th</sup> February, 2004  
**TOTAL DIVES:** Currently 1,061  
**CLUB:** Lagoondivers, Aarstelaar, Belgium  
**DIVE CERTIFICATION:** 3\*D  
**OTHER CERTIFICATIONS:** Rescue Diver, Youth Diving Supervisor, Deep Diver, Nitrox Diver, Divemaster and Underwater Photographer Level 1.  
**EQUIPMENT:** Olympus PEN E-PL7 in a PT-EP12 underwater housing with 2 INON S2000 strobes with accompanying diffusers, dome diffusers and snoots.  
**FAVOURITE LOCAL DIVE SITE:** Zeeland Bridge in the Netherlands, dive sites in Grevelingenmeer, Netherlands, and of course TODI.  
**FAVOURITE DIVE SITE ABROAD:** Wreck dives in the Red Sea, Egypt.  
**MOST SPECTACULAR DIVE:** A shark dive in Palau.