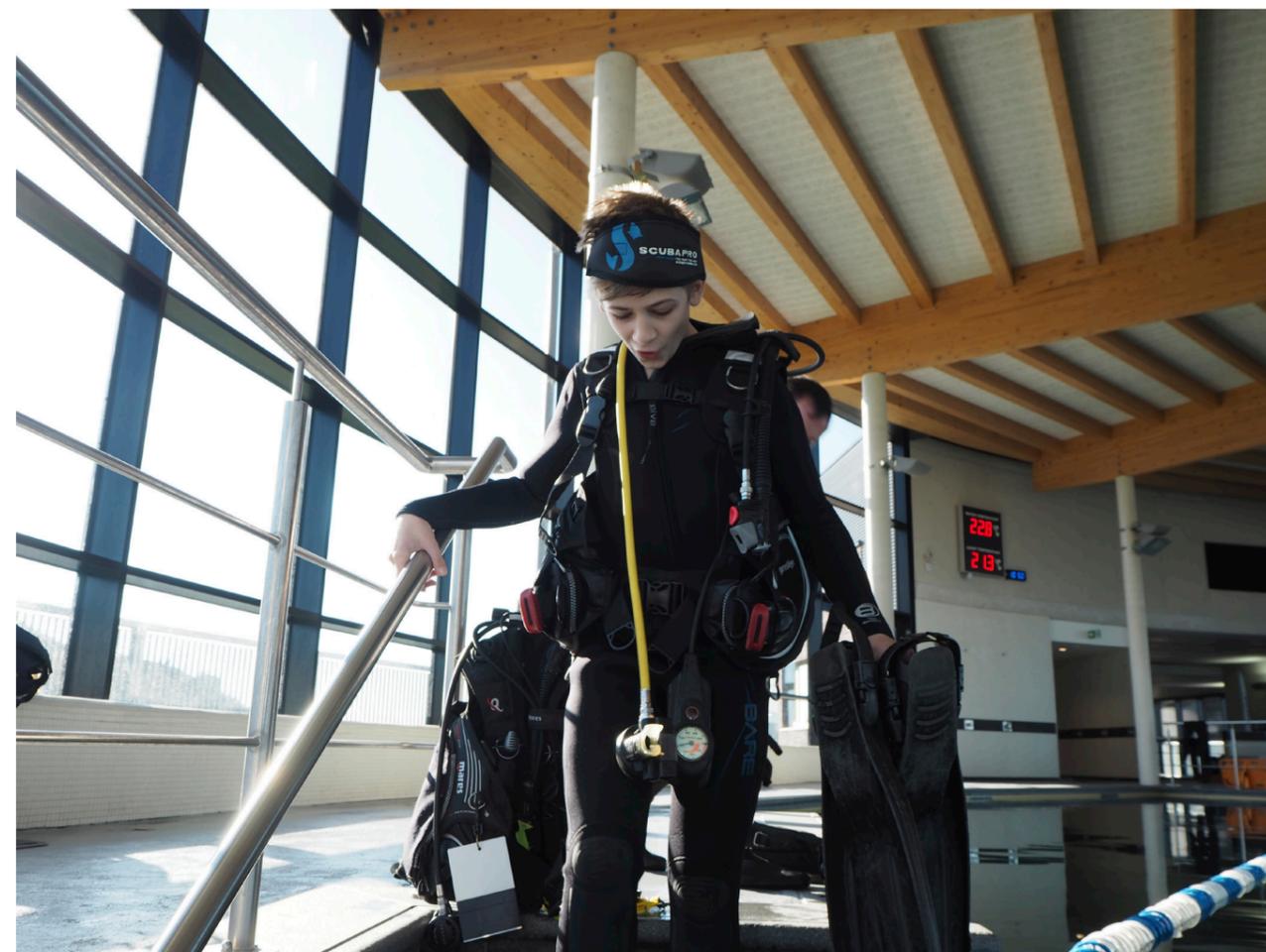
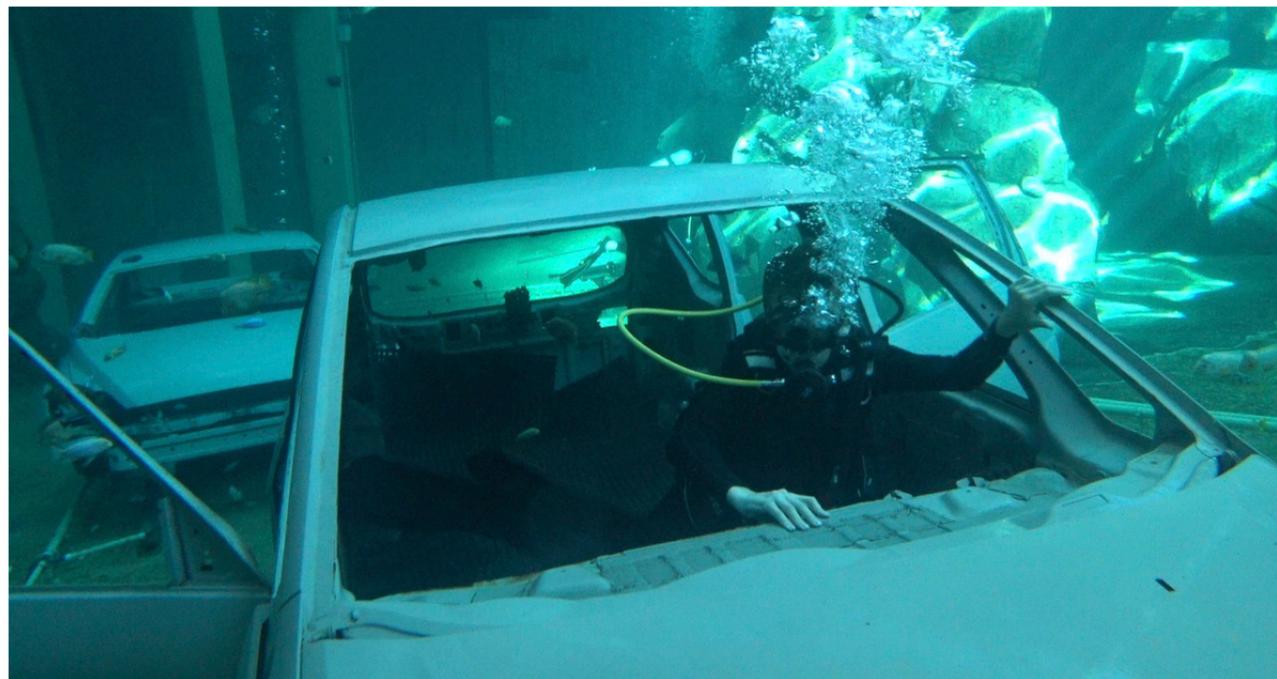


MY BUDDY

THE BRONZE YOUTH DIVER

FEATURE **PATRICK VAN HOESERLANDE**



After a lot of nagging, we finally gave in and allowed our daughter; then 10 years old, to go diving. It did not last long before I too was in the pool during the pool training sessions with the rest of the youth divers. Shortly thereafter I followed the youth diving specialisation and established a successful youth diving school. In the meantime, our youngest family member Seighin is heading towards becoming a 14 year old and is about to switch to adult SCUBA diving. This is a good reason to take him on a dive as a buddy and to put youth diving in the spotlight.

The open water season is much shorter for youth divers than for us, adults. Indeed, the metabolism of a young diver is different. Unlike us, they do not feel the cold coming, but their core temperature can suddenly drop, and they can get cold in an instant. Also, they are less resistant to cold itself and can only dive if the water is warmer than it actually is. And even that is on the limit. Usually, we wait until the thermometer passes 15. In short, this means that a youth diver can dive no more than five months a year: Including, the few weeks of mandatory inactivity due to exams. Fortunately, there are three Belgian dive tanks to dive from which slightly stretches the open water season.

Today we are going to dive in TODI to close

the season. The "real" open water is already too cold, so we are diving in the warmer, indoor aquarium. We will not be alone, because this excursion takes place within the framework of the youth diving department of the dive school Amfibie. As always, both the youth divers and the cadre are enthusiastic. Fortunately, as a youth diving school, we do not have to worry about the time limitation. We are exempt from the usual two hour limit for adult divers. Youth diving always happens in a stress-free atmosphere, we avoid time pressure, even in an indoor environment.

It is not the first time that we have dived together, and here too, we were a buddy pair. We don't know all of the dive site, but it is no strange place. Because the buddy is central to this kind of diving, I let Seighin decide what we would do. Not unexpectedly, he asked if we could go 'moon walking'. A few lessons ago we practiced it in full diving gear on the bottom of the pool. This diving method looks very similar to that of astronauts walking on the moon's surface. Now he wanted to try it out in TODI.

Just to be sure, I checked with the safety personnel to see whether this would be accepted. And it was. So, I couldn't refuse his wish, and why would I? In this case, we needed to take extra weight down with us. I adjusted my briefing accordingly. After all, it is important

that my buddy does not drop uncontrollably down to the bottom. We needed to take the extra necessary precautions. Seighin took his action camera with him to film everything.

We prepared ourselves quietly and then excitedly headed out to our starting point. A final check and we were gone. As we made our gradual descent, we motioned that we were going to explore TODI in a large circle with the intention to walk along the bottom. Due to anatomical reasons, clearing ears is not easy for the youth. A quiet descent is an important factor for a relaxing dive. When we touched the bottom, we removed our fins as agreed. During our exploratory round, I discovered a nice place where we could leave our fins without them drifting away.

One last check and off we went. We calmly began our strange walk in this underwater environment. We first tried to walk a few steps until we were feeling comfortable enough to start jumping. It felt as if we were in a strange world. Our perspective of this underwater environment differs a lot from the one as a diver. As a buddy pair, it's as if we were astronauts (or aquanauts), exploring another planet for the first time. We were completely unaware of the fact that we were 'just' divers in a tank. I saw that my buddy felt right at home and was enjoying it, so all was good!

Our locomotive abilities improved by each minute and so we ventured to jump from rock to rock. A few divers swam past giving us some strange looks. In contrast to what I expected, none of them joined in. Did they not see that we were enjoying ourselves? Or was this way of moving underwater outside of their comfort zone? My buddy clearly didn't think that way.

While we attempted to overcome all underwater obstacles, we also tried to approach the fish. However, they made no distinction between a diver with or without fins. We remain temporary large and noisy creatures to them. And of course, they are right about the temporary aspect. The air supply Seighin carries on his back is many times smaller than mine, and he was the first one to give the "half-pressure" signal. That was the sign for us to walk back to the place where we had left our fins. We still had some time left so we didn't have to rush and we continued to enjoy the view. After waving to the spectators behind the glass, we quickly transformed back into 'normal' divers.

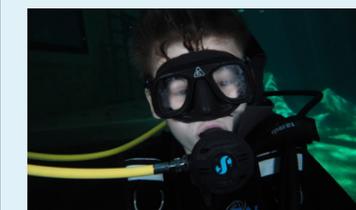
We did one more tour of the obstacles along the bottom before we started our return trip to the surface. We swam quietly from one point of interest to another, until we stuck our heads above the water. This was a strange but fun dive. It may be an atypical youth diver

profile, but the fun before, during and after the dive is typical. Doing something crazy in a safe way is always fun.

I find youth diving one of the nicest disciplines of diving. There is little that beats transferring knowledge and skills to interested young people. Youth divers are also energetic enthusiasts who turn your diving into unexpected fun. Some of these young divers I consider even better divers than myself, and better than many other adult divers I know. Despite my multitude of dives, I will never feel like a fish in water unlike some of these boys and girls. It's just a bit of a pity that being a youth diving instructor results in a logbook filled with shallow dives.

I cross off diving with a bronze dolphin from my list. I know that there are other facets of youth diving that could lead to an article in this series, but that is for another time. Now I am looking for another surprising discipline in our sport. Where will I dive with my next buddy? And what will I discover? Curious? I am, and a little more with every edition.

Do you know someone with a special interest in diving who would want me as his or her buddy? Are you such a buddy? If so, please contact me via patrick.vanhoeserlande@nelos.be. I look forward to your suggestions.



Youth Diver: Seighin Van Hoenserlande
First Dive: 2012, the day after I turned 8
Total Dives: 15
Club: Diving School Amfibie, Turnhout (Belgium)
Certification: Bronze Dolphin (the first level of youth diving).
Other Certifications: Not applicable, omitting the various certifications of youth diving.
Special Equipment: My dive equipment specifically designed for youth divers, an action camera and a rubber duck.
Favourite Dive Site: Ekeren (Belgium)
Favourite Dive Site Abroad: l'Escala (Spain). There are nice places to dive from the shore, but it is also fun to dive from a boat.
Most Spectacular Dive: Playing the part of Skubba in daddy's movie from his stories.