

# SPORT DIVER

NOVEMBER 2006 £3.60

**TECH DIVING**

## IT'S NOT JUST FOR MEN

Why women should  
turn technical

## An American diver in Egypt

US divers cross the Pond  
to dive the Red Sea

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ALL BUDGETS

## DIVING IN

# ICELAND

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## Swanage Pier

Is this the  
South Coast's  
most-popular  
dive site?

## THE SOUTH OF FRANCE

Not just a  
playground  
for millionaires



# Living the life of a millionaire



The South of France has a glamorous reputation as being the hangout of millionaire playboys and beautiful women, but as Martin Bruce discovered, the Cote d'Azur also boasts some of the best dive sites in the Mediterranean.

Photographs courtesy of **Diamond Diving**



I had been reliably informed the Med would be no match for the Red Sea in terms of the colourful corals and marine life, but then it's strange how not being overwhelmed by an abundance of brightly coloured fish at every turn can be just as satisfying.

In fact, one of the pleasures of diving the South of France is being encouraged to take a step back and spend time seeking out the marine life that is all around you – if you know where to look.

Coming straight from PADI Advanced and Rescue Diver courses in the northern Red Sea, I was looking to build up some

dives in my logbook and gain experience. With each dive I noticed my skills improve in this wonderful environment.

The water here is nice and warm – a balmy 23°C in early July. Being less than a two-hour flight from the UK, this is the closest warm-water diving you can get to home. Wearing only a 3mm wetsuit and 15-litre steel tank, I could ditch the weights and enjoy the freedom and comfort that came with it.

With Alex Diamond as my buddy and guide, and armed with a torch, we cruised around peering into nooks and crannies, under ledges and into dark caves.

**The Cap d'Antibes at the eastern side of Golfe Juan is home to several dive sites**

Gradually, my eyes were suitably opened to the wonders of the Cote d'Azur.

## UNDERWATER FRANCE

Golfe Juan is marked at its eastern point by a peninsular known as the Cap d'Antibes. On one side of the outcrop is Juan Les Pins, the other side Antibes, which has a marina where you can find some truly stunning floating palaces. Half a dozen sites are found on the 'Cap' and a typical itinerary will see one dive here



**Top: Relaxed dives allow time to explore  
Above: Sar bream are a common sight**

and the second at the other side of the bay, marked by a lighthouse where rocks break the surface. Further west are two islands, Les Iles De Lerins, which give further options for diving.

I began my four-day trip with a visit to one of the better-known sites on the Cap – La Grande Boule. It is characterised by a column of rock which plunges to the sandy bottom at 28m. The top is a rocky plateau which comes within 5m of the surface and is covered in a protected

seagrass species called Posidonie. We descended here before going over the edge of the wall and dropping towards 28m. The Mediterranean equivalent of the anthia – so common in the Red Sea – is Sar, a silver bream with black stripes that is plentiful on all dives in Juan Les Pins. Alex also highlighted a moray eel poking its head out from behind a rock. This was a common sight on each dive, but it needed pointing out to me. Without a guide I would have passed by the eel, but learning to take my time, concentrate on buoyancy, and being taught where to look for marine life

meant I got more from the dive, and each subsequent dive as I started to discover interesting marine life myself.

At 18m, on what is probably Juan Les Pins' signature dive, sits a statue of one of the pioneers of scuba diving. The dive site is named La Grotte de Miro, as until the 1980s it was the home of the Spanish surrealist artist's sculpture The Goddess of the Sea. It was replaced 20 years ago by a stone bust of Yves Le Prieur, which sits on the seabed in the grotto and looms out of the depths as divers approach. The grotto is a semi-enclosed cave with three exits and the statue, which is in good condition, provides a useful focal point for exploration.

To get the most out of this dive, it is useful to come armed with a little history. Most divers know about Le Prieur's fellow countryman Jacques Cousteau and the giant strides he made with the development of the aqualung, but few would know the achievements of Le Prieur ten years earlier.

Like Cousteau, a French navy captain, Le Prieur toiled with attempts to make the first fully independent underwater breathing apparatus. Cousteau managed it, but Le Prieur paved the way for Cousteau's breakthrough in the 1940s. In 1865, two French inventors, Rouquayrol and Denayrouse, had developed an underwater breathing system which used a low-pressure tank which provided air via a membrane and regulator to the diver. It allowed the diver to breathe on demand, but its major disadvantage was the fact air had to be pumped into the low-pressure tank, tethering the diver to the surface.

Le Prieur took this idea one step further in 1933 when he allowed the diver to break free from the surface support with the aid of a high-pressure tank and specially designed demand valve. Rather than a regulator, there was a continuous flow of air, which was controlled manually by opening a tap. There was a huge wastage of air and only short dive times were possible, but progress was made. Le Prieur's invention was adopted by the French navy in 1935, and a year later, he founded the world's first scuba-diving club, called the Club of Divers and Underwater Life, in Saint Raphael in the South of France. It was only right, then, that Le Prieur was honoured with his own dive in the Cote d'Azur.

That afternoon we anchored off La Fourmigue, a lighthouse positioned on a small rocky outcrop that juts out from the sea. This is home to a number of sites, including La Grotte de Miro. La Fourmigue was a popular destination for



A few buildings at 15m are all that remain of *Le Village*, a film set from the 1960s

the dive boats, where we would find up to three anchored at a time.

There is even the chance to dive a film set at La Fourmigue. *Le Village* is an intriguing dive which comes to life when you descend to around 15m – well within reach of Open Water divers – and happen upon the ruins of the set of a 1960s film called *The Sunken Town*. You have to use your imagination now to picture the



original village, which apparently included shops, a bridge, fort and a church, as the site has been raided by divers. You can make out the buildings, but many bricks are strewn across the seabed. However, the amphitheatre remains defiant against plundering divers and stands intact among the rubble.

A site called Rascoille off the Cap d'Antibes is another shallow plateau leading to a wall. With Alex leading a couple from the UK doing one dive, I had the freedom to explore and encountered

black-and-white doris dalmation nudibranchs, lots of bright orange starfish, and the obligatory moray eel. To round off a long weekend in France, we headed to where we had started on day one – at La Grande Boule off the Cap. It seemed a shame to return to an earlier site with so many other options available, but it turned out to be one of the more memorable dives and, in terms of marine life, the best was saved until last.

Descending above the wall as opposed to the plateau, we set off in a different direction to take in a new area of the site. This was a quiet dive, with few divers on the boat and, as a result, the local marine life seemed more receptive to their Sunday morning being interrupted by two bubble-blowing humans! An octopus lounging on the rocks was quick to shrink into its hole, but a short wait hovering close by saw the octopus show its face again. Moments later we were approached by a grouper, who then backed off nervously. Again, with a patient hover, the two-foot fish regained its confidence and there we remained, looking at each other for several seconds before the grouper got spooked and



Grouper up to two-foot long are some of the larger species off Cap d'Antibes



divers, including the wrecks of the *Relax*, *Togo*, *Poursuivante*, *Donator*, *Grec* and *Rubis*.

The flight to Nice is the only thing that guests have to arrange. Just choose your destination, diving package and your hotel. The diving is taken care of by Alex himself, who will instruct if necessary, act as a dive guide, be your chauffeur from airport to hotel, and to the dive centre in the morning. Weekly stays are available if you want to take a PADI Open Water course, for example. The itinerary for a four-night trip is five boat dives, spread over two-and-a-half days, with a leisurely three-hour surface interval to explore Juan Les Pins and Antibes.

## DIVE THE STUNNING COTE D'AZUR WITH DIAMOND DIVING

There is much on offer in the millionaires' playground of the South of France. You have glorious sandy beaches, walking, climbing and driving among the peaks of the Alpes Maritimes and De Mercantour National Park.

Within a 90-minute drive inland, you can be at 1,600 metres among the stunning scenery of the southernmost point of the Alps. In Juan Les Pins and Antibes, there are stunning hotels, great restaurants, bars, nightclubs and casinos to spend your cash.

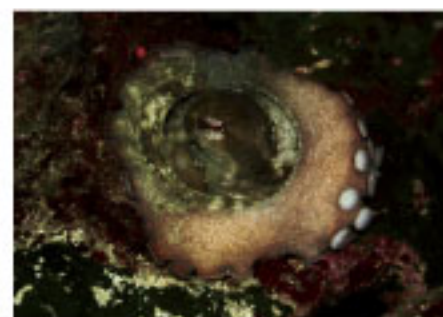
Cannes, and its world-famous film festival, is a ten-mile journey. Head east and you come across Nice. Motor-racing fans can pay a visit to Monaco, and if you continue for another few hours you reach the border with Italy.

Diamond Diving is the brainchild of Alex Diamond, a PADI MSDT and MF1 French-qualified instructor who, in partnership with dive centres and hotels in Antibes/Juan Les Pins, Nice and St Raphael, can offer the best in Cote d'Azur diving for UK divers.

Sainte Maxime and Le Lavandou have recently been added to the list of destinations. These will appeal more to wreck and technical



Above: Moray eel were seen on every dive  
Left: Octopus hide in nooks and crannies



darted for the shadows. We were joined on our safety stop at the plateau by handfuls of rainbow wrasse, or Girelles, who crowded round to feed on algae we had disturbed from the rock surfaces.

The underwater topography is certainly impressive. Each dive was characterised by a steep drop down a wall to around 25-30m, where I could turn and cast my eye up the sheer rock face to the surface, partially hidden by shoals of colourful fish. What you will not find is delicate coral reefs susceptible to stray fin kicks, or a seabed too precious to touch. What this environment leans towards is an ideal training ground for PADI Open Water divers or the Advanced Open Water course. Alex is qualified to instruct PADI Wreck, Deep, Nitrox, Underwater Photography (film), and Drysuit specialties. Alex's fluent French removes the complications of a language barrier by ensuring you won't miss a dive briefing. This is the easy way to dive the South of France, and you will be guaranteed a personal service. The relaxed atmosphere topside filtered beneath the surface, and diving was a pleasure.

As a great place to learn, develop your diving skills or underwater photography, in a warm climate and temperate waters, it makes an obvious choice. Add the wealth of topside attractions, and think all this and more is less than two hours' flight from the UK. The itinerary makes for an ideal Bank Holiday trip – it sure beats being stuck in traffic for two hours on your way to the coast on a car-choked motorway! I know which I prefer... ■

## HOTEL ALEXANDRA



The Alexandra is one of two hotels offered by Diamond Diving in Juan Les Pins. It is located a few streets back from the seafront and a ten-minute walk from the town centre, where most of the bars and restaurants are found.

The hotel has 12 rooms and seems quiet even when full. Its trump card is the garden restaurant, which is also open to the public for evening meals and is a great place to take breakfast. In summer, the chef cooks on the barbeque, while the indoor restaurant is available in poorer weather. The owners pride themselves on the traditional Provençal cooking, which should do the trick at the end of a day's diving.

## TRAVEL FACTS

### FRANCE JUAN LES PINS



#### WHERE IS IT?

Mediterranean Cote d'Azur, southern France, 20km from Nice.

#### HOW TO GET THERE?

There are regular flights from London and regional UK airports to Nice, many using budget airlines. The flight to Nice from London takes around one hour 45 minutes.

#### VISAS

Valid passport needed.

#### WHEN TO GO?

Summer is a good time, with the warmest land temperatures, but diving is good all year. The water temperature touches 23°C in summer, and drops to 16°C in winter.

#### LANGUAGE

French.

#### CURRENCY

Euro (£1 = €1.5).

#### TIME ZONE

GMT +1.

#### HEALTH

No jabs needed.

#### CONTACTS

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