



By Tom Rossi

The clean, fresh, vast Atlantic coastline of the Outer Hebrides is a mecca for vibrant underwater activity. The water is crystal clear, and it's this incredible visibility which makes the Hebrides one of the best places in Britain to go snorkelling.

If you've never snorkelled before, never fear – there's very little to worry about.

Basically, the snorkel and the mask work together. The mask gives you a wide, comfortable field of vision, allowing you to see what's going on beneath the surface of the water. It can be a fast-changing environment – a passing shoal of glistening mackerel can take you unawares, or you could be confronted with the sight of a long-awaited scallop, perhaps!

This is where the snorkel comes in. With its aid, you can keep your head beneath the surface of the water and not miss out on a thing. It allows you to breathe with ease and to really relax, enjoy and become one with the water.

If you choose to progress from snorkelling to freediving, a new experience awaits. Going deeper brings you into a brand new environment, another world to explore – and it makes for a thrilling sensation.



There's so much happening and going on beneath the water which you'd never imagine when viewed from above. When underwater, we wear fins to gain maximum propulsion and ease of movement with minimal effort; this helps to conserve energy, allowing us to relax and enjoy the experience.

When you're underwater, freediving, your snorkel fills with water but nothing flows down your throat. On returning to ▶

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the surface you blow out, and then easily expel the water from your tube using a short, sharp blow. The water shoots out from the top of the tube, allowing you to keep on breathing whilst finning along at the same time.

Another method of clearing the tube whilst underwater exists, which can be a great progression once you're feeling ready. Like a silent infiltrator rising from beneath, when just a metre from the surface you confidently tilt your head backwards so you are now looking directly upwards; then - placing all of your trust in this technique - unnaturally breathe steadily outwards from your mouth! The tube, which is now facing downwards, displaces the water and creates an air block. On breaking the surface you bring your head forwards, and then just smoothly re-instate your breathing. This method - apart from being impressive and neat - does serve an additional purpose, in that it can afford you perhaps another few seconds underwater; and it allows you to relieve your breath-hold earlier, which makes for a more comfortable ascent.

You can have a slow, steady and easy snorkel with a few dips up and down whilst mainly finning along on the surface; or you can choose to have a more intense underwater experience: duck-diving, weaving, sifting your body through underwater kelp forests and eel grass, pushing yourself and your mind into uncharted territory.

If the thought of this activity excites you, then you'll need a good wetsuit! The most important thing about wetsuits is the fit: the suit needs to be truly skin-tight in order to really work effectively. Wetsuits made from neoprene rubber trap a very small layer of water next to your skin, which your own body heat warms very quickly. It's this thin layer of water held in place by the tight suit which keeps you nice and warm. If a



wetsuit is not skin-tight, then 'flushing' occurs: this is when this layer of water is able to flow freely around and exit your wetsuit - replacing itself with cold water which then needs more of your valuable body heat to warm it up.

I would always suggest that in these waters you should also use a rubber hood, socks and gloves with your wetsuit to really keep all your heat in. When fully kitted out from head to toe, you will feel super-confident and will really be able to enjoy the visual wonders of jellyfish close up without any fear of being stung.

I often like to come out of the water to have a climb on the little islets that you find amongst the coves here. It's a great feeling to travel by your own means to these rocky outcrops, and then heave yourself up onto their grassy summits - it's just like your very own little discovery. Sometimes, I'll even strap a Thermos full of tea to my back, and enjoy it while looking out over the Atlantic from one of these green island gems.

No matter what the weather is like around these islands, you can enjoy exploring under the sea. Even when the wind is howling and the cold rain is horizontal, you will be able to find an excellent sheltered spot to snorkel. As with any sport, there can be hazards. I'd always recommend that you remain in close view of someone who can quickly offer assistance. If you're in any doubt about your abilities, stick to shallow calm rockpools. These always hold a few surprising delights, and beautiful seahorses are often known to rest there.

There are lots of different underwater and surf-fuelled adventures to have - and every time you go out, something different and unexpected happens. It may be that you see lots of abundant fish and crabs, spot some magnificent sea urchins or giant starfish, or swim through a forest of seaweed. Just holding onto some rocks whilst getting thrust around by the waves is also great fun. Other experiences - perhaps more intense - occur from time to time; encountering a seal, for instance, or finding a life-encrusted pontoon. These are the experiences which propel a fun, relaxing freedive into a really special experience. □

Tom Rossi is a Balivanich-based personal trainer who also hires out snorkelling equipment and wetsuits - along with a bit of company in the water! Tom uses his dive bus to get to lots of fantastic snorkelling locations, and it doubles as a great place to have a welcome snack afterwards. He has a large supply of wetsuits, masks, snorkels, fins and weight belts, all stored within and hired from the bus. Prices start from just £15 per person. For full details see his website, www.freedive-uk.com, or give him a call on 01870 603 324 or 07950 251620.