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Breathe in and go down. Spearfishers dive up to 30 meters.

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SPEARFISHERMEN

They dive without air-tanks into the deep and wait on the sea bed to spear their prey. Spearfishing is a dangerous enterprise which sometimes doesn't end up deadly just for the fish.

Metamorphosis into a fish starts kind of slimy. Damir Đerek takes his trousers off, his shirt and underpants also. He takes a bottle of shower gel from underneath a steering wheel and rubs himself from head to toes. Like greasy sculpture he stands on his ship's stern, and then it's time for the fishlike skin. Slowly he glides into a custom made 7mm thick neoprene wetsuit, welded together with almost no stitches. Wetsuit is hand made in a manufacture in Rome, camouflaged to resemble Croatian Adriatic sea bed colours. Green patches over brownish patterns painted over black neoprene. Resembling a shark Đerek will lay down on the sea bed and await for his victims.

He is putting a belt with weights on, his hood, socks and almost meter and a half long carbon-made fins on his feet. His mask is camouflaged in similar colours as well. Then he blows a huge red buoy, attaches himself to it and takes almost 2 meters long speargun made of teak wood, especially designed to be completely weightless and afloat when submerged.

Then he jumps into crystally clear Adriatic.

He is not wearing any air tanks. How long can he stay down on his breath solely?

“Two-three minutes depending on the depth and my current shape“, he says.

How deep does he go?

“Twenty meters, sometimes thirty, I'm not a pro.“

We drove for half an hour from Split with his speed boat alongside green islands whose peaks were sticking out like shades from the water. The sea was becoming more and more blue until we arrived to the southern bay of island Šolta, anchored the boat and switched the engine off.

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Breathing break on the surface. Spearfishermen often swim alone hundreds of meters from the coast.

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Well camouflaged hunting for their fat prey. Abundance of fish swims along rocky terrains, birds reveal huge fish shoals.

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(Below the picture)

They reach bays with boats and often jump into open waters.

Hunters don't give up on their catch. Numerous have been dragged for miles out in the open water by huge fish.

The boat floats like some white nutshell on a petroleum coloured sea. While mid April sun shines outside, sea temperature near the surface is almost 17 degrees Celsius. Where Derek aims to go sea temperature is significantly lower. Below thermocline on 9 meters temperature is around 13 Celsius. Deeper than that it gets even colder.

With constant strokes of his fins Derek swims following the coastline and looking down through the water. Soon the depth grows with sea bed changing from sand patches to rocks, cliffs and seaweed which swings over the blue-green soundless world.

Then he holds his breath and rushes down, a shadow disappearing in the depth. On 14 meters he leans motionless behind the rock. His weight belt and water pressure have taken all the buoyancy he had. From the surface he is almost invisible. 30 seconds, 50 seconds, 1 minute, 1 minute and 30 seconds. After 2 minutes he stretches up as some predator fish and swims vertically back up to the surface. His upper body emerges out of the water as he takes the air in again. There is no one else around. The only thing noticeable amidst the deserted bay, rocks, Croatian sun and blue water is the lonely spearfishermens head.

Spearfishing for fish, cuttlefish, lobsters and crabs is a thousand year old tradition. Ancient hunters used bow and arrow made of tendons in shallow waters to kill sea creatures. Of course back then this was not a sporty adventure but a quest for food and survival. Spearfishing in Mediterranean was noted in the beginning of the 20th century. Hunters were using simple masks in order to have a better visibility below the surface. Especially Italians developed the equipment more and more professionally. They had developed masks and fins as well as underwater breathing systems. Spearfishermen have always been a driving force which helped the development of diving industry and modern diving equipment.

Today there are numerous international associations which set the rules, organize competitions and supervise the records. The divers use boats, canoes and kayaks to reach distant bays and rocks. Others dive from the shores and ports, some in the oceans to kill huge predators like Tunas or Marlins. They swim in strong currents below huge waves, jump into lagoons and cold waters.

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GOOD TO KNOW

There are no special licenses for spearfishing. It is advised to take some of the available courses where you can obtain more information on allowed spots, whether you are obliged to have a license or not, how big are the quotes, which species are strictly forbidden to shoot, are there any seasonal restrictions etc. Laws and quotes can differ from country to country, even among different regions.

Camouflaged neoprene wetsuit handmade and painted in Italy costs from 200€-450€.

Spearfishing is popular in South Africa, Australia, UK, USA and Caribbean but Mediterranean is the most developed region considering this sport. In almost every dive shop on the coast throughout Italy, Croatia, Spain and Greece it is possible to buy equipment-camouflaged wetsuits, long fins and spearguns powered by powerful rubber bands or air-pressured systems. Outside in the bay Derek swims further clapping his fins. Already hundreds of meters further from the boat he goes up and down, 10-20 meters below. He looks under the rocks, glides along the cliffs trying to find lobsters, cuttlefish or breams hiding below the rocks.

“The fish is very cautious“, he says when his head came out on the surface. “Some fish curiously swim towards the hunter, some nervously swim their own course. You must be very silent on the sea bed, no movements or air bubbles until you're out of breath.“

There is a knife attached to his foot so he could get rid of the fishing nets if he gets tangled, he doesn't have much time below without a fresh breath. After 2 hours Derek still has no catch. As he calmly swims through silver-blue sea he looks like a Murray Eel. He climbs back to the boat, prepares some tea and eats cookies. Derek is 39 years old now and he started spearfishing when he was 20. Croatia ended up in the war which was followed by economical crisis. “We didn't have enough money for expensive equipment and a lot of divers switched to spearfishing. Besides that, spearfishing requires way less equipment than scuba diving, it's possible to spend a whole day in the water and most of the time we could catch a dinner.“ Today in Croatia there is about 15000 spearhunters, and probably over 100000 in the Mediterranean basin. They meet in different clubs and internet forums where they discuss techniques and spots convenient for fishing and post pictures of their biggest trophies.

“We have been hunting fish this way for more than hundred years, in Croatia it's like a national sport“, says Derek. Often these people are faced with intense criticism. In Germany spearfishing is forbidden. Spearfishers are thought to be vicious killers who devastate the sea. Some diving associations have launched campaigns to prohibit such hunting practices. Critics say this a pointless and ruthless fish slaughter instead of simply enjoying the dives.

Derek has felt some of this himself, sometimes locals pierce tires of the spearfishermen when they park in distant bays. This is probably due to the fact that some spearhunters used air tanks to shoot fish which would help them in killing huge fish amounts. In some regions fish survival is seriously threatened, some of the species are almost entirely wiped out. Nowadays spearfishing with scuba tanks is strictly forbidden. A person spotted by the authorities has to pay a fine of up to 2000€, and all his equipment is immediately confiscated.

Spearhunters think that spearfishing is way more fair towards the fish than all other forms of fishing like using nets, traps or hooks. To hold ones breathe and dive down is a risky venture. Chances of actually catching something are considerably lower than using other fishing tools. Often spearhunters go home empty handed. “We face the animal eye to eye“, says Derek. There are hunting quotas everywhere, in Croatia it is allowed to shoot 5 kilos max + one trophy fish that weighs more than 5 kilos.

Professional fishermen can catch thousand times more in a single day. “For them we are just a joke.“

James Hamilton-Paterson says that underwater hunter is disabled due to alien environment and equipment he has to use, this a huge drawback. He is a member of Royal Geographical society and for long time he has been living in the Philippines where he used to spearfish himself. “There is a huge difference between fishing from the surface and moving through same hostile environment in which the pray lives“, says James. “You see and feel the animal and all it's efforts when fighting for life if hit by the spear.“

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(Below the picture)

A dive into small deep eternity, some hunters remain submerged for more than 3 minutes.

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Out in the bay the boat is still on the anchor. Derek often hunts throughout the whole day, he dives 4-5 hours and in the meantime takes rest on the boat. He talks about recent World Spearfishing Championship in Finland, freezing cold waters with barely a meter visibility. He mentions stars like Picasso or Giorgio Dapiran who hunt huge 30-40 kilos fish.

Such strong animals should be shot dead with a single shot. The spear has to aim either for the brain or the spine. Otherwise the fish swims frantically

and tries to get rid of the spear, often tangling the lines around the rocks are breaking the spear or the line. "When you hit a huge fish it's like hitting a train", says Derek. 24 kilos amberjack dragged his colleague 2 miles out into open sea. Spearhunters do everything in their power not to lose their catch.

Every year some of the spearhunters tragically die, mainly trying to pull big fish out the rocks or during the so called "Waiting Technique". The hunter lays motionless down on 20-30 meters, they have to stay still until fish eventually arrives. As they dive more often the natural reflex and need for breathing decreases, they don't feel the urge to breathe so often and forget that it's time to hit the surface. "Limit in this sport varies, sometimes you feel like you can stay down forever, you forget that you are human", says Derek.

Sometimes it happens that hunters faint during the ascent, just below the surface. One Croat was diving out and just 3 meters below the surface he lost his consciousness, soon he drifted helplessly down because of the weight belt. His friend quickly went down and had to shoot him through the leg to pull him out because he was already too deep to be saved without endangering his own life. He pulled him out and saved his life. Others got stuck or lost in the caves. "A spearhunter should always dive 20% less than he actually can", says Derek. "You have to train your body to perfection to know each signal your body sends."

In the afternoon he went diving again, the sun was still high, showering the sea with bright light. Vertically over his head glides Derek into the deep, bending his body with undulated movements. 10 meters down he is almost invisible, on 14 meters he disappears in the blue, no fish is trying to cross his path.

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Often it happens that they don't catch a single fish during the whole day but that's not important here. Spearfishing is a philosophy of moving through water with minimum means-no air tanks, no regulators, no diving vest. "You become one with the sea, the sound of your breathing stops, only pure tranquility remains. It's like meditation." But for sure with time the ancient hunting instinct arouses.

How often has Derek dived in his life? Too often-in winters, summers, year out, and in all kinds of weather conditions. Because of constant pressure equalizations he's build some bone matter near his right ear drum so he can't hear high pitched sounds anymore.

He caught 2 fish this afternoon, 1 kilo Amberjack and smaller Gold Line fish. He speared them when he was swimming near vertical cliff. Their mouth opened, bodies jerking. Then he pierces them through with another line attached to his weight belt for transport.

We cruise back to Split between shiny mid Dalmatian islands. Derek ties his boat securely in the harbour, carries his equipment to the car and puts fish

in the plastic bag. He stops in front of the small diving shop between palm trees near small marina. There surrounded by fins, neoprene wetsuits and spearguns stands 43 years old Mislav Čalo. Mislav is one of the best Mediterranean spearhunters, 7 times Croatian champion.

Huge like a cabinet with his strong muscular upper body and short dark hair, he started spearfishing when he was 15. He was a teenager when the war in Croatia started, there was not much else to do except to go on the water and he sometimes sold fish to survive. Since then he has never deterred from this sport. It was beautiful outside on the water, in the realm of peace and silence.

In some years he spent 300 days a year below the surface. He knows every rock on the islands, where and when each species swim, where to hunt.

“You have to know how each fish species behaves, where do they swim, how they behave. Otherwise you have no chance. It's like having 50 different programs installed in the computer, you have to master each one.“ The biggest fish he caught was 44 kilos grouper. Bloody fight deep below the surface on the last molecules of air. It is on competitions where hunters push their limits. Spearfishing is such a venture that would leave scuba divers dumbfounded.

Čalo used to prepare for competitions for weeks, he would thoroughly dive all over the coast, study the fish and check each rock on the way.

Competitions last for 3 days and on each day hunters can dive up to 200 times. They go down 30-40 meters and stay up to two and a half minutes below the surface. They sneak between the rocks where the sounds are scarce, the light is lower and surrounding pressure is 5 times greater than on Earth's surface. When in good shape he needs just 2 minutes on the surface. Deep breaths and like a shark he rushes back down.

“Spearfishing is a world on his own“, says Čalo. “At a certain point your mind stays in the water, it's like you are not diving out at all. I have no idea if this is dangerous, I don't think about it anymore.“

Him and Đerek stand on the promenade and talk about the hardness of the spears, water temperature and currents around Brač island. It's a warm night in Split while the sun sets down over the Riva. Then they both go to a nearby restaurant around the corner, sit on the porch and give the bag with fish to the cook. Of course the cook is their friend, he smokes, laughs and asks them questions that only Mediterranean understands.

Yes Miljenko, it was a lovely day.

It's peaceful outside.

No, the buoy near Šolta has not been fixed yet.

Not a lot of fish today but enough to eat.

Wine arrives at the table, as well as bread and olives. Miljenko disappears in the kitchen and after 10 minutes shows up with fish skilfully served with rice and some lemon juice. It doesn't last long until 2 big fish had eaten 2 smaller fish.

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COURSES

In some countries it's possible to master spearfishing in the school. It is advised that no one should go alone on the water, dive alone and shoot fish without previous knowledge. Safety measures are explained, hunting techniques, good hunting spots, fish species, laws etc. Physical and psychological aspects of this sport are also elaborated.

DIVING IN CROATIA

Croatia is one of the best spots for scuba diving and spearfishing. The water is amazingly clear with fantastic visibility. Damir Đerek is one of the rare people that takes guests out to spearfishing. His trips leave from Split to one of the nearby islands. In the evening he grills the catch with his guests on the beach. Full day is roughly 400€ for 4 people max. (equipment, food, boat ride included, HD video included).

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