



go!

VIEW  
FROM HERE

HELEN GARNER

Age: 34

Occupation: Yoga instructor and professional free-diver.

# One breath, one dive

Don't swim beyond your standing depth, mothers would tell their children. Real-life mermaid Helen Garner obviously disregarded this advice. For Helen, free-diving is a way of life, and she holds a number of African records to prove it.



**F**ree-divers aren't like you or me. They talk about spiritual experiences and use the word "transcendental"; they measure out their lives in seconds and, at 150m under the water, their hearts beat slower than ours do when we get up to make a cup of tea. Like astronauts, spinal surgeons and gurus, free-divers are masters of calm in a frantic world.

Helen Garner is one of them. She holds three South African free-diving records and is only truly happy when she's underwater.

"Being in the water is the most important thing in the whole world for me. The fact that I'm good at it is a bonus!" she says.

Helen is also a qualified yoga instructor. She spent nearly a year on the Sinai Peninsula in Egypt, living in the small resort town of Dahab, teaching yoga and practising to go deeper.

"There are only a few places in the world where the conditions are perfect for free-diving, and Dahab is one of them," Helen explains. "The floor of the Red Sea drops very steeply, allowing free-divers to pursue great depths very close to shore.

"I don't really like boats," she adds.

When she isn't in Dahab breaking records, Helen teaches free-diving and yoga in Cape Town.

Jon Minster tracked her down during a brief visit to dry land.

**SUCCESS!** (above). Helen on the surface after breaking the South African record in the constant weight with fins category.

**ASCENT** (opposite). The Red Sea is warm and deep, with visibility usually exceeding 25 m.

**I couldn't find out about free-diving** in South Africa – there was nothing – so eventually I googled "free-diving and yoga" and came up with a dive centre in Dahab, Egypt. I sent them an e-mail, saying I was a yoga instructor who wanted to learn how to free-dive, and asked if they'd be interested? They e-mailed me back the same day with the message: "Please come immediately!" So I thought, "Okay, Universe, if that's the way you want it to be, so be it!"

**I lived in Dahab for almost a year.**

In the Middle East, you are marginalised as a woman, and as a white woman you're often treated like a prostitute. I had days when I was beside myself and I'd think, "Why am I here? What's the point?" Then I'd think of the Blue Hole and I'd tell myself, "That's why."

**The Blue Hole is my favourite place in the world.** It's a vertical cylinder down to 93 m, with an arch at the bottom rising up to about 55 m. To swim through the arch is another 26 m, then you're in the open ocean and the bottom drops off to 800 m. Only 10 free-divers have ever swum down the hole, through the arch and back up again. My goal that summer was just to see the arch. I made it. It was spiritual... the most beautiful thing I've ever seen. You come back up after a dive like that and cry.

**"My goal that summer was just to see the arch. I made it. It was spiritual... the most beautiful thing I've ever seen."**

**I hold African free-dive records** in three categories: constant weight, no fins, which is when you swim breaststroke down and back up again; constant weight with fins; and free immersion, in which you pull yourself down on a rope. My official record in constant weight, no fins is 40 m. In training I've done 42 m, and the world record is 55 m. That's my goal.

**Static apnea, or holding your breath** lying face down in a swimming pool, seems silly, but it's a very necessary discipline of free-diving. Basically, you hold your breath with the least amount of external stress.

The famous French free-diver Jacques Mayol apparently once walked past a world champion doing static apnea and said "Zis is not free-diving!" But the bottom line is that the best free-divers in the world are the best at breath-holding, simple as that.

**I train a helluva lot.** I know what my limits are and how far I can push them. I know at 5.15 minutes I'm nearing my limit. But I need to reach about 6 minutes.

The rule of thumb is that if you can do a six-minute breath-hold, you should be able to do a three-minute dive. The world record that I'm training to break is going to be a long, long dive!

During a breath-hold, you need to remove yourself from the situation. If you suddenly think to yourself, "Oh my God, I'm holding my breath," you're finished, tickets. Your brain consumes at least 30% of the oxygen in your body, so when you have a thought, you're wasting it. That's why free-divers close their eyes when they dive – as soon as you see a fish, your brain starts to analyse and you waste oxygen. We become very greedy about oxygen!

I did scuba-dive once, in Egypt, to help out at the dive shop I was working at, but I try to avoid it because it messes up your dive reflex. The dive reflex is an automatic human response to being underwater – your heartbeat slows and blood is redirected from your arms and legs to your vital organs. When you're free-diving, you need it to kick in as fast as possible. We're all born with a dive reflex, but in some people it is stronger than in others.

A scuba-diver dives into the ocean, but free-divers dive into themselves – when you free-dive, you aren't a spectator, you're an inhabitant.

I was the free-dive instructor in a mostly scuba-oriented dive school. Occasionally I'd walk past the scuba students and whisper, "Walk to the light; walk to the light!"

I grew up on a farm in KZN, and my favourite place was our swimming pool. I was talking to my mom the other day about what we played with as kids and she remembers my older brothers' stuffed toys and Dinky cars, but she couldn't think of any of my favourite toys. Apparently I just swam all the time.

I've always been kind of eccentric. I think most people expected me to turn out like this.

At an ashram in India, when I was training to be a yoga instructor, I learnt about *kumbak*, which is described as the perfect moment. As you inhale, there's a moment before you exhale, and that moment is *kumbak*. They say it's perfect because the world waits breathlessly for you.



STATIC APNEA (above). Helen prepares to turn over and hold her breath during the AIDA Free-diving World Championships in 2006.

MASBAT BAY (right). Dahab's beachfront promenade.

BACK FROM THE DEEP (below). During a 'no limits' dive, free-divers descend using a weighted sled and return to the surface using a lift bag filled with air.



In Japan they talk about *reiki*, in yoga they talk about *prana* – which means vital energy. And what vital energy means is oxygen. We only use one third of our lung capacity; with yoga we try to oxygenate as much of the body as possible.

My friend Peter is the world champion in dynamic apnea, which is swimming as far as you can underwater in a pool, and he always claims he doesn't need yoga. But when I watch him warm up before a dive, he does the yoga poses. He doesn't know what they're called, but he's doing them!

You're never obligated to go to the bottom of the line; it is, however, a prerequisite to come back up.

My favourite fish is Nemo. People joke but free-diving isn't about looking at fish, your eyes are closed most of the time.

My worst day was at the Blue Hole. All day before the dive, my skin was on edge and I didn't feel right. The two guys I was diving with each had a "samba" when they surfaced, which is a loss of motor control just before a blackout. It's called that because it looks like you're dancing – they recovered quite quickly, though.

I was next, but when I looked at my dive computer it had stopped working. So, for the first time ever, I pulled out of a dive.

Afterwards, I was sitting on a rock when I saw bubbles in the water. The next thing, a technical scuba-diver

with three tanks on his back shot out of the water. I asked if he was okay but he didn't respond. Eventually I reached out and scooped him up. He looked at me, then his eyes rolled back and he died right there. He was a Russian, diving alone, who had surfaced without a break from 180m. He didn't stand a chance.

The tattoo on my wrist says "Know thy worth". Yoga breathing made the pain bearable!

I played other sports at school. My coaches would say, "How did you get so much grace in the water when you have nothing on land?"

I make more sense in the water.

In a survey on extreme sports, free-diving was voted the most extreme, above base jumping and big-wave surfing. It's a popular misconception. For the other sports, you need adrenaline and an increased heart rate, whereas with free-diving you need to be calm and relaxed, with the slowest possible heart rate. It's got nothing to do with adrenaline.

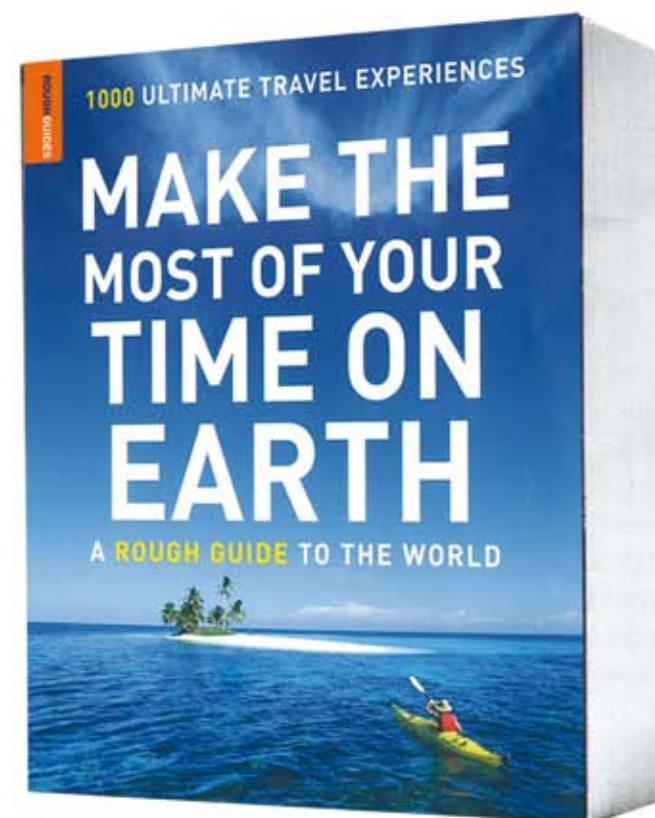
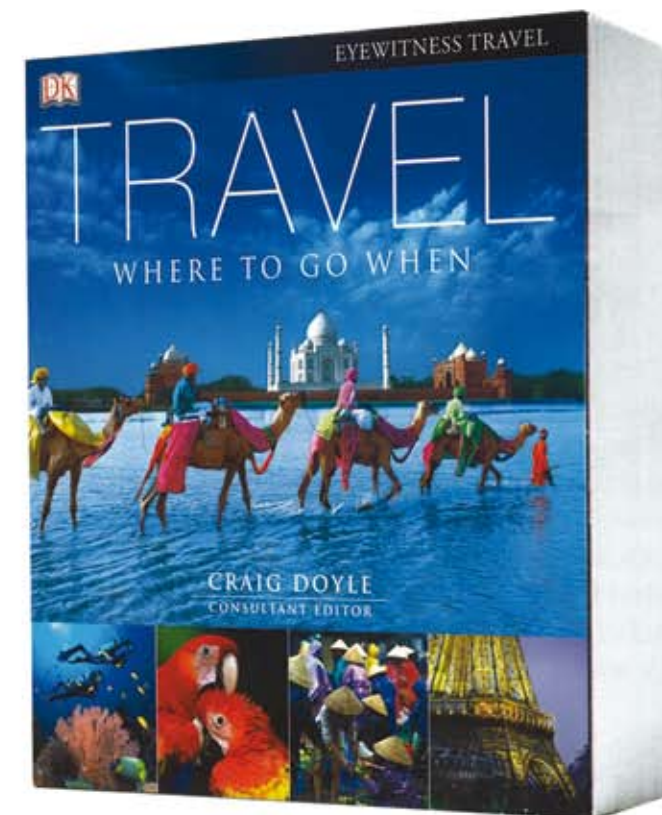
I listen to the soundtrack of *The Big Blue* on repeat; it's my favourite. You don't need to ask me what my favourite movie is!

Some free-divers are very regimented in their routines, whereas I take each dive as it comes. Sometimes they'll say to me, "You look like you're having so much fun!" Well, that's the point, isn't it? ☑



# DREAMING OF YOUR IDEAL GETAWAY?

Brazil in February  
China in September  
Tuscany in October  
Venice in November  
Sydney in December



Intrepid adventures  
Perfect places to stay  
Spectacular festivals  
Amazing wildlife

AVAILABLE AT ALL GOOD BOOKSTORES



Penguin Group (SA)

For your chance to be the lucky winner of a hamper of these books simply email your first name and surname to [competition@za.penguinbooks.co.za](mailto:competition@za.penguinbooks.co.za) with the words GO TRAVEL in the subject line. Join our FREE monthly e.newsletter, register at [www.penguinbooks.co.za](http://www.penguinbooks.co.za)