

Taking The Plunge

When Lynn Taylor went to Mombasa to cover the wide range of water sports that Southern Cross Scuba offers, she didn't think she'd be the one donning the tanks and dropping down to the Ocean floor. Here she surprises herself with how easy it all was ...

Alien equipment that weighs a ton...the whole bizarre concept of breathing underwater... and let's face it even Claudia Schiffer would have a tough time looking sexy in a wet suit! I squirmed and wriggled into the tight rubber sheath and once the zip was up I felt like I was in a strait jacket – just as well because I was clearly certifiably insane. I was going to jump into a swimming pool, lie on the bottom of it and breathe.

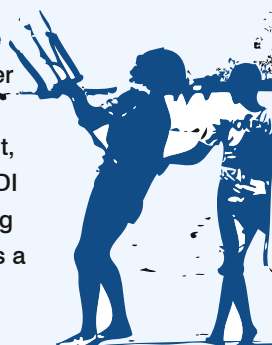
I had come to Mombasa to see what Southern Cross Safaris was all about. They are one of the oldest owner managed tour operating companies in Kenya; and Southern Cross Scuba (SXScuba) is their water sports branch.

"Excellence through experience" is their motto – something that they apply to every aspect of their operations from equipment to staff to training the likes of me.

UNDER THE SEA

After staggering to the pool (and I wasn't even carrying my own tank – just my weight belt, a pair of fins, a mask, a dive jacket and various assorted breathing pipes) I gingerly let myself into the water. Immediately all the equipment felt weightless.

My dive instructor was a young guy called Salim Mwabweni and he couldn't have been more patient and encouraging. We went through the safety procedures and a whole lot of theory regarding scuba diving (see box on page 45 about PADI). I had to learn underwater sign language and how to read my air tank gauges. Even though SXScuba always checks their equipment, I had to learn how to do it for myself too. This is a PADI requirement and actually makes sense – it's you going under the water and so double checking everything is a good idea.





Finally we were in the pool and I was hooked up to the breathing pipe. My first 20 minutes underwater were not encouraging. I felt claustrophobic with all the pipes in my face and the air bubbles in my ears. I was breathing too fast. I just about managed a minute underwater before popping up with a “question” for Salim – really nothing more than an excuse to come to the surface.

So we stayed in the pool with me making gradually longer descents to the bottom, where Zen-like we sat making “OK” signs at each other, checking our pressure gauges and air levels and slowly practicing all the sign language I’d just learned.

But we weren’t going anywhere in a hurry and Salim has the patience born of teaching many people with worse nerves than me (or maybe he just made that up to make me feel better).

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I knew I was over the panic when I started making movie gestures, four words, sounds like ... charades has never been more fun. I had to come to the surface or literally drown in laughter. After my rather shaky start I don’t think Salim had expected this. I like to think it made up somewhat for the boring task of lying at the bottom of a swimming pool teaching someone to breathe.

Salim has been diving for five years, been an instructor for three years and has 1,200 open water sea dives under his weight belt. My little sortie to the deep end of the swimming pool is something that he does on an almost daily basis, teaching clients the fundamentals of safe scuba diving.



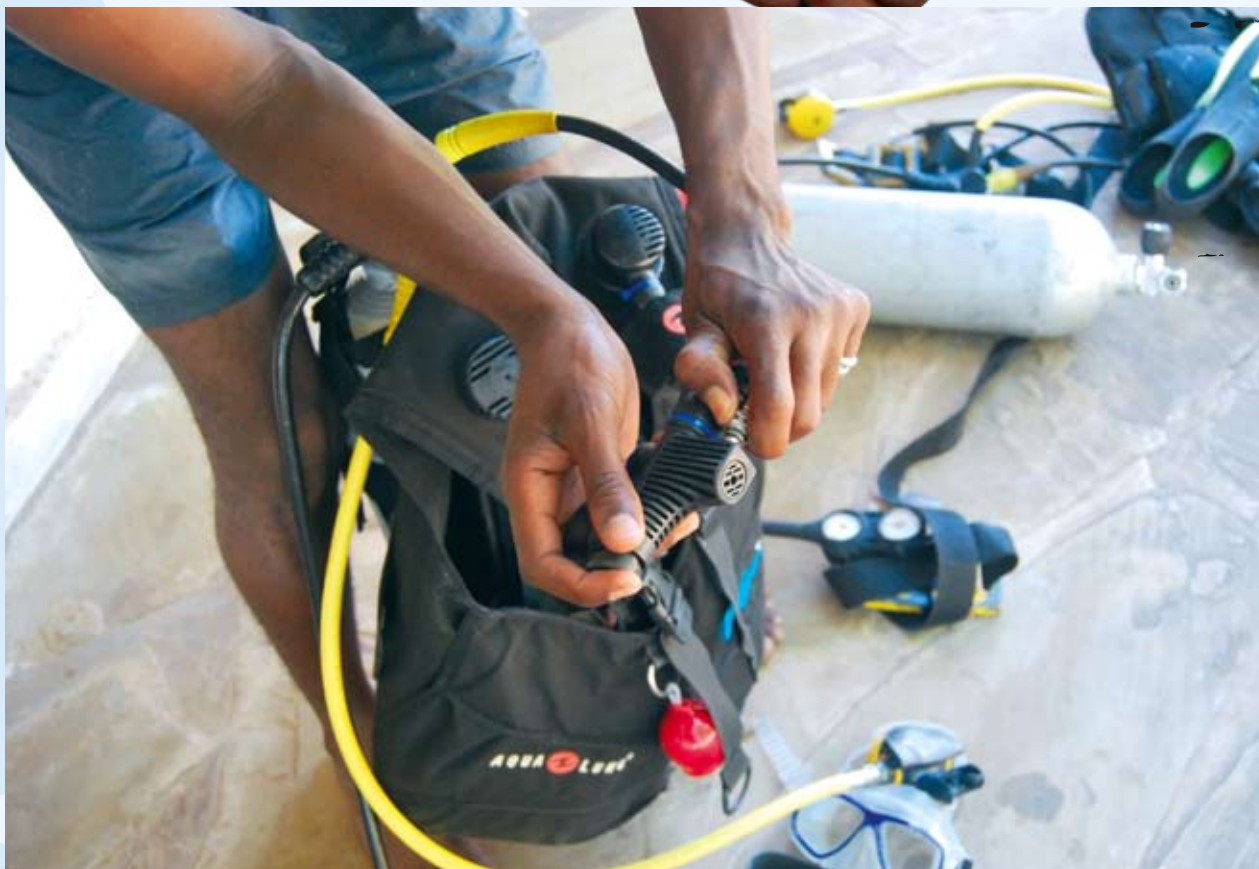
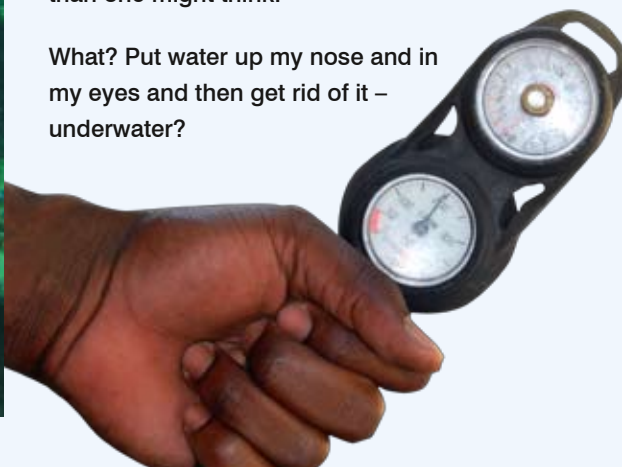
PW flies to Mombasa five times a week



“Yes it isn’t as fun as being in the sea,” Salim answered my question. “But the thrill of taking someone into the ocean for the first dive is great. And before that they have to learn to be safe. That’s why we’re in the pool.”

After a while of (almost normal) breathing underwater, we started doing practical and safety lessons. Filling up the face mask deliberately with water and then blowing the air out of your nose to flush the water out of the bottom of your mask underwater. Let me tell you, this is a lot trickier than it sounds and a lot more daunting than one might think.

What? Put water up my nose and in my eyes and then get rid of it – underwater?



PREVIOUS PAGE

RIGHT: Kite Boarding is an exhilarating way to fly
LEFT: Practising breathing in the swimming pool with Salim Mwabweni

THIS PAGE

TOP LEFT: The Coral Reefs are made up of a many different structures, plants and animals

TOP RIGHT: Checking the gauges

BOTTOM: Putting the dive jacket together

To my immense surprise it can be done – and I did it, several times. I also had to lose my breathing pipe even though there was no chance I was going to let that happen. The lockjaw bite I had on it would have done a crocodile proud. I also had to fill and empty my diving jacket with air for upwards or downwards buoyancy.



TOP: Wet suits keep you warm at the cooler depths of the ocean

BOTTOM: The essential breathing pipes

BOTTOM RIGHT: The "Okay" sign

These basic lessons are of course essential to safe diving. And, by the end of my training I hadn't lost my breathing pipe even once, but I did need to clear my mask several times, and controlling your ascent and descent are fundamental to open water diving.

Towards the end of my training, I went for about 20 minutes without surfacing. Salim could clearly read that I was more comfortable with the equipment and we spent the time clearing up the leaves from the bottom of the deep end of the pool. He would point them out. I would have to come up or down in the water (controlling my weight and the air in the diving jacket), swim to a fixed point (the leaves), and then place them in the filter grid. Silly stuff really, but it gets you using all the equipment – sometimes all at once, and surprisingly, with all that going on, I forgot about the claustrophobia and breathed almost normally.

The euphoric high of doing it lasted the rest of the day – I was now part of the diving culture and had been cleared for an open water dive in the sea the next morning.

I floated into the dive centre – one of the *in people*. A couple were standing at the reception looking through the brochures. I told them (unasked) that they would love it! That they *must* do it!

They listened politely. I'm embarrassed to say they even listened to my rave report enthusiastically. While I was putting my diving equipment back on the shelves they filled out the indemnity forms and arranged times to go diving. John was a PADI diving instructor in Scotland. And his lovely wife, Lou, was no stranger to the underwater world herself having done her open water course right here in Kenya. In fact right here on Diani Beach with SXScuba. Whoops!

The next day couldn't come fast enough for me. Salim and I geared up at the dive centre and carefully checked all our equipment before loading it onto the boat. I wasn't going to be going very far, just to the first coral reef. Because it would be my first open-water dive in the sea, I wouldn't be diving very deep – just six to eight metres. The day was warm and sunny. The sea was crystal clear and completely calm, perfect conditions for diving.

The euphoric high of doing it lasted the rest of the day – I was now part of the diving culture and had been cleared for an open water dive in the sea the next morning.

We made another final check of equipment and zipped up our wet suits. Feeling less like a strait jacket (but still not at all sexy) the rubber wet suit was hot and uncomfortable in the sun. However Salim assured me it would be cool under the sea – even at our relatively shallow depth – and I would be thankful for the warmth of the wet suit. Jackets and bottles on, a last check of breathing pipes and pressure gauges and we were ready to go.

Salim sat on the edge of the boat with his back to the water and showed me how to flip over backwards into the sea with all the gear on. This was a new twist we hadn't covered in the swimming pool and I wasn't at all sure I was going to do it successfully. Still – everything else Salim had told me to do I had managed. I listened carefully to the instructions and trusted his experience.

Holding my face mask on with one hand and breathing as normally as possible through the pipes, I flipped backwards over the side of the boat and entered the ocean.





The coral forms a complex network of crevices and caves; and algae, sponges and sea grasses grow riotously around and in-between the skeletons and niches of the corals. Through this seemingly chaotic landscape swim thousands of different fishes, crustaceans, sea snakes and turtles.

We gathered on the surface and Salim gave me the “OK” sign. I signed back that I was, but I was nervous I would have a repeat of the claustrophobia of the day before and my heart was speeding up. I concentrated on slowing my breathing and copying Salim as he checked his gauges again, checked his mask and started deflating his dive jacket. He had told me to use the boat’s anchor rope to follow him down to the sea bed – probably three metres underwater.

I pulled myself hand over hand down the bright orange rope, releasing the air in my dive jacket as I went. When we reached the sea bottom Salim again asked “OK” and gave me a few minutes to collect myself. I wasn’t panicking; I was breathing normally; my heart had slowed down to a regular thud in my ears; and

the bubbles I exhaled were rising to the surface in a regular stream. All good so far and my spirits soared. I really was going to be OK and what’s more I was going to enjoy this!

We set off slowly under the sea, following the coral ridges. From the first minute it was entrancing and I forgot about everything except the magical underwater world drifting past my eyes. The coral reef is made up of many different structures, plants and animals. There are hard and soft corals in different colours: some soft pastel pinks and creams, and others iridescent yellows and vivid purples.

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Photograph: Ellen Claessens



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I couldn't believe the beauty of this strange other world. A vividly green tropical fish swam up to my mask and then darted into a cave. Salim touched a pretty pink mushroom of Coral and it immediately bristled into an evil looking red ball of spikes. Scarlet starfish clung to the flatter coral overhangs and a bright blue tube turned out to be one of the long limbs of another breed of starfish.

I smiled in pure delight. A bad move, of course, as my mask immediately filled up with water. Using my oft-practised nose blowing technique I quickly cleared

the water and managed an "OK" sign for Salim. He indicated "what did I think?" and was somewhat stunned to see me do a jiggle and jive victory dance right there under water!



Photograph: Ellen Claessens

A FEW POINTERS FOR NEW DIVERS

I'm not sure you could enjoy this activity if you can't swim. Knowing that I could kick for the surface, tread water and breathe normally made a big difference to me.

Don't be put off by the early feelings of panic. They pass. Take it slowly. Stand up in the pool when you can't take it any more. Let yourself stay underwater for longer periods as and when you feel comfortable.

The noises can be quite alarming at first. There is the heavy rush and noise of the bubbles of your exhaled breath as they pass up the side of your head. And the Darth Vader air sucking of your inhaled breath.

Breathing only through your mouth is disconcerting.

The unfamiliarity of the pipes and pouches and gauges; the cumbersome dive jacket and weight belt; the heavy bottle on your back: take time to learn what everything is for.

Persevere and hope that you get an instructor as patient as Salim. Because I could take my time in becoming acquainted with the bizarre activity of breathing underwater – one minute, then three, then ten minutes, then longer – I built up my confidence and tackled the open water dive with relative ease.

Only go diving with a PADI or SSI registered company like SXScuba.

SXScuba takes groups of a maximum of 4 people and keeps families together to go diving – all adding to your trust in your Dive Master and your confidence and safety.

I found I was most comfortable travelling along at Salim's side, but just slightly behind him. This way I could keep him in sight and he could point out everything that I might have missed as a novice. We took many turns through the sweeping reef and travelled over beautiful patches of clear white sand and waving fields of strange green sea-grass. We were going gradually deeper and I could feel the water temperature getting cooler.

We came to a fairly large cave with a broad overhang. Salim motioned me to wait and he looked inside before calling me forwards. A weird-looking fish stared back at us. It had the face of a lobster, and the most amazing array of feathery wings surrounded its body – a Scorpion Fish – as I discovered later on the boat.

I was so entranced with this delightful creature that I forgot what the rest of my body was doing. My legs drifted downwards onto the coral. A burning pain scorched my ankle and I jerked back from the cave in surprise. I had to get out of there and for a minute I thrashed in the water trying to rub my leg and kick for the surface - now far above us.

RIGHT TOP: Learning how to handle one of the large kites used for kite surfing and beach boarding

RIGHT BOTTOM: Parrotfish are just a few of the beautiful creatures to see underwater
ABOVE: Different corals

Salim grabbed me by the shoulders and held me still. I waved frantically at him that I wanted to go up but he still held me, making motions with two fingers that I was to look into his eyes.

I finally stopped kicking and realised that he was trying to make me calm down and think about it for a bit. When I was calmer, Salim indicated the question: did I want to go up? I didn't, and the pain was already subsiding. I pointed to my leg and then to the grasses and corals that it had rested on. Salim scrubbed his hand fairly vigorously over my leg and asked again if I was "OK". I was. We went on exploring.

Thinking about it afterwards, rationally and calmly, and after being able to chat to Salim about it, I realised what a good dive instructor he was. We weren't deep enough for me to get the "bends" or anything dangerous at that level, but I would have had an awful headache if I'd gone straight to the surface as I wanted to. I would also have probably been too nervous to go down again – a great pity and something I would have regretted, I am sure. Instead, he calmed me down, kept me safe and we carried on enjoying our dive.

A green turtle bustled past us in busy fashion and we immediately turned and swam after it. It was a magical moment – the graceful beast flying through the clear blue sea like a bird - scarcely moving his paddling limbs to turn and twist through the corals.



TOP: The dive sites along the Kenyan coast that Southern Cross Scuba recommends
BOTTOM: One of the Wave Runner jet-skis
FACING PAGE: Juma Gude finally had me balanced and going forwards on the windsurfing board



The next big excitement came with the sighting of a yellow-bellied sea snake with its series of black stripes and spots. I don't really know what these slickly smooth creatures do underwater, but I knew enough about the ones on land to want to stay well away from it. In good cowardly fashion I stayed well behind Salim and observed the snake's activities from a safe distance.

A green turtle bustled past us in busy fashion and we immediately turned and swam after it. It was a magical moment – the graceful beast flying through the clear blue sea like a bird - scarcely moving his paddling limbs to turn and twist through the corals. He was soon out of sight, but I can picture him as clear as ever in my mind.

We swam through swarms of tiny blue dottyback fish, the striking vivid yellow and black angel fish, gorgeous butterfly fish and garish parrotfish. Dozens of Nemo fish that have been made famous by Disney, become a reality around the extensive coral reefs. Featherstars undulated in the faint currents below us alongside sea anemones; and a porcupine fish floated harmlessly past us.

All too soon it was time to go back to the boat. I guess this is another aspect of being a good Dive Master – keeping an eye on the time. For me, I could have



stayed down there for hours. The tropical splendour and abundance of this underwater kingdom was fascinating...so many new and exciting things to see. Salim had guided us on a circuitous route so that we had gradually come up from the deeper water on our return to the boat. We were there and the most amazing hour was over.

ABOVE THE SEA

For anyone who likes the water – SXScuba are the people to go play with in Kenya. They have a series of Dive Centres along the coast and offer a wide range of water sports that can be done by young and old, fit and unfit alike.

Kite Surfing is one of the newest crazes to hit the beach, and for anyone who like to skate board, Beach Boarding is a cross between that and Kite Surfing, and



WHAT IS PADI?

PADI – is the Professional Association of Diving Instructors and is the world's pre-eminent scuba diving association. Formed in the 60's by two keen divers, it has grown into the largest body serving scuba divers worldwide. The courses it offers and ratifies are considered the world standard, and PADI also offers its members a huge database of certified schools, instructors, charter outfits and advanced diving methods. With more than 130,000 PADI Professionals and around 5,700 PADI Dive Shops and Resorts operating in more than 180 countries and territories, you will likely find a PADI Scuba Instructor who can speak your language and offer you a comfortable learning experience. To serve the needs of divers worldwide, translations of PADI materials are available in at least 26 languages.

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is enormously fun and easy to do. Once you learn the principles of controlling the kite, both of these sports can give you an adrenalin rush with very little effort on your part.

Slightly harder work and involving a lot more control and balance is Wind Surfing. Once again I had a great and patient teacher in Juma Gude and soon knew the difference between the mast and the wishboom and when to take elephant steps to turn the sail.

ON THE SEA

For those less inclined to physical activity there are glass-bottomed boats that offer an easy view of the coral reefs. A little more exercise can be taken with the pedalos and sea kayaks, while also enjoying being out on the sea.

Deep Sea fishing along the Kenyan coast is a must for any keen angler. Off Mombasa lies the Pemba Channel - world renowned fishing grounds where sailfish, dorado, king mackerel, wahoo and marlin abound.

IN THE SEA

Not willing to try out Scuba Diving? Snorkelling is the next best option for seeing the extensive coral reefs and the magical tropical fish that abound here. An easy lesson and a short boat ride are all that are needed to get started with this sport, and the great thing is that you do not need to be very fit as you mostly float along with the gentle currents.

SXScuba has a vested interest in The East Africa Whale Shark Trust (see page 52) and actively promotes marine conservation. SXScuba hopes that through education and sharing the joys of the underwater world along their coast with their guests, they can change attitudes and help keep the coastline alive.