

SCUBA DIVERS GO DOWN

There are three kinds

of sea creatures: scary (anything with gigantic teeth), alien (anything with tentacles), and cute (anything with whiskers). This last type is what lured me to San Diego, where I planned to dive 40 feet to swim with mischievous sea lions—basically, giant puppies with fins. It was also the next step toward getting my certification from the Professional Association of Diving Instructors. After spending 10 hours poring over a textbook and two days practicing basic scuba skills in a gym pool in Boulder, Colorado, I flew to California for my first open-water dive—smack-dab in the middle of sea-lion territory. »



TM

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»» 4 DAYS... SCUBA-DIVING NEAR SAN DIEGO

Text by Megan Michelson
Photographs by Gilles Mingasson



Megan, left, and her diving instructor, Wendy.

ILLUSTRATION / JASON LEE

IN FOCUS YOU CAN DO THIS™

FRIDAY

WH LONG WEEKEND

Running start

After a short afternoon flight from Boulder with my friend Nina (a big scuba fan), we cab to the ultramodern **Sofia Hotel**, near the gallery-and-nightclub-packed Gaslamp Quarter. *WH* gals that we are, we lace up for a 45-minute jog amid the eucalyptus trees in Balboa Park. That night, we head to North Park, a neighborhood dotted with artsy cafés and vintage-clothing stores, for dinner at **Spread**, which serves local organic food. We're set to dive at dawn, so I sip an alcohol-free banana milk shot; our waiter swears a natural sedative in the milk will help me sleep. Though I'm dubious, I end up conking out by 10:30.

40 below

At 6 A.M., we catch a ride with our **Ocean Enterprises** dive instructor, Wendy Pacofsky, to the Mission Bay Marina, about 15 minutes west. At the dock, Wendy hands me a rented wetsuit as thick as the bagel I ate for breakfast and assures me I'll be toasty in the 53-degree water off the coast of the Coronado Islands, 16 miles south of San Diego.

After our bumpy hour-long ride on a 32-foot charter boat, the captain cuts the engine and the six other divers on board—all already certified—start gearing up. I wiggle into my neoprene wetsuit and booties; put on my buoyancy vest, compressed-oxygen



GOING DOWN?

Free diver Tanya Streeter is a master at holding her breath: In 2002 she dove a whopping 525 feet without an air tank. Here are her tips on how to swim more efficiently down under.

Kick with your fins from the hip, not the knees. Your legs and body should be straight, but never locked, whether you're angled up or down.

Keep your arms loose at your sides. Let your fins, which have more surface area, propel you.

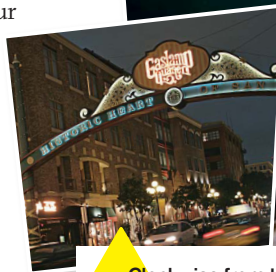
Conserve air by taking long, slow breaths and making calm movements.

Look, but don't touch (or kick) the coral, rocks, or wrecks—for the safety of both you and the marine life.

tank, mask, snorkel, and long, floppy fins; and nervously waddle toward the boat's edge.

Wendy walks over, double-checks my gear, reviews safe ascent and descent techniques, and tells me to step overboard. Swallowing the lump in my throat, I splash into the cold water. Nina and Wendy follow. The three of us bob on the surface for a minute, then Wendy instructs us to deflate our vests and gives the thumbs-down signal to descend. Ten feet down, my focus shifts from my knotty stomach to my head, which feels like it's about to explode. I pinch my nostrils and blow gently, resetting the pressure in my skull.

We reach 40 feet in just a few minutes. I'm awestruck by the view: As a steady stream of bubbles passes in front of my mask, schools of shiny orange garibaldi fish dart in and out of a kelp forest and—oh, man—everywhere, *everywhere* I look, there are sea lions. I glance over at Wendy, who's running her finger across her throat like a knife—the emergency signal



Clockwise from top: Heading into the blue; Megan (in green) carb-loading; the Gaslamp Quarter makes for a fun night out.

that she's out of air. I panic, then realize it's only a drill, an essential part of my certification. I jump into action and, just as I'd practiced in the pool, hand Wendy my backup mouthpiece, attached to the secondary air supply on my vest. She inhales, giving me the OK sign. *Phew!*

For the next 35 minutes,

Nina, Wendy, and I swim side by side, using an underwater compass to navigate. Sunlight shines in from above, highlighting a tangle of slimy green kelp and rough rock walls. As I run through the rest of today's certification exercises, plump sea lions flip and spin around me. After a brief moment of eye contact with a particularly curious fatty, I'm smitten. I feel as if I could stay down here for

SATURDAY

Essential San Diego



Brunch is the bomb at Mission Soma.

Stay
Sofia Hotel *thesofiahotel.com* Rooms from \$159 per night **Tip** The hour-long Vinyasa class at the 24-hour studio in the hotel is worth the \$25 fee.

Eat & Drink
Bandar *bandarrestaurant.com* **Order this** Dolmeh appetizer (grape leaves stuffed with rice, peas, basil, and chives)
Bondi *thebondi.com*
Drink this Boag's lager,

a full-bodied beer, served by authentic Aussies
Hotel Del Coronado *hoteldel.com* **Tip** Swing by the hotel's **Babcock and Story bar** for salty Del margaritas and chorizo flatbread.

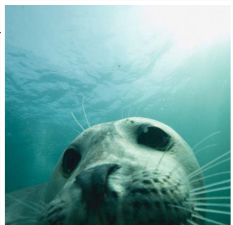
Mission Soma *themissionsoma.com*
Order this The Mission Rosemary (toasted rosemary bread, sautéed tomatoes, rosemary potatoes, and eggs)

Spread *spreadtherestaurant.com* **Order this** Banana curry oatmeal

Play
Hot Body Pilates *hotbodypilates.com* Private sessions from \$80 an hour per person **Tip** Their one-on-one sessions are so popular you'll need to book weeks in advance.
Little Sam's Island and Beach Fun 619-435-4068 Cruiser rentals start at \$6 an hour (includes helmet). **Tip** Bring a

sand-proof backpack, like Mountain Hardwear's Rugged Pack (\$70, *mountainhardwear.com*), for your camera, wallet, and hotel key.
Ocean Enterprises *oceanenterprises.com* Beginner diving classes start at \$195 per person per day (includes a rental wetsuit and oxygen tank). **Tip** Buy your own mask and fins (see "Diver Down" on page 39 for suggestions).

hours—if only my air supply were the size of an Exxon tanker. But Wendy soon gives us the thumbs-up signal, and I reluctantly kick to the surface. Thankfully, she makes us wait only an hour before our second dive of the day. After a turkey sandwich, I'm back in the Pacific surrounded by whiskered faces.



and Beach Fun bike shop and pedal the 15 miles of flat trails through streets lined with beach

homes, occasionally catching views of the San Diego skyline across the bay.

Later that afternoon, I head to the **Hot Body Pilates studio** near the hotel, where I have an hour-long tension-melting workout.



Starving and pleasantly exhausted, I crawl back to my room and wolf down a salad from

the brasserie next door. I'm looking forward to staying in and unwinding before our crack-of-dawn flight.

Fish out of water

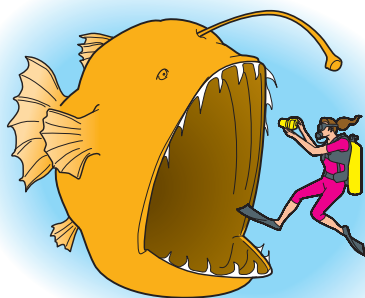
As our plane takes off, my ears feel a burning pressure like the one I felt on Saturday's dive. I squeeze my nostrils and blow. My ears pop, and instantly I get a vision of orange fish and irresistible sea lions. I can't wait to come back for more.

With two open-water dives to go before I'm certified, it won't be long. **WH**



Riding high

After a big brunch near the hotel, we take a quick ferry ride from Broadway Pier to Coronado, a gorgeous, 7.4-square-mile island (different from the islands of the same name from yesterday). We rent five cruisers from **Little Sam's Island**



Snap Fish **Bragging about hanging with sea lions isn't nearly as impressive if you're not flashing photos. Follow these tips from noted underwater photographer Tanya Burnett.**

Fight the fog Before you dive, store your camera in a padded bag toward the back of the boat. Air-conditioning and direct sunlight can cause the lenses to fog. It'll take about 30 minutes to clear up, which means you could miss a great shot.

Charge it Cold water zaps the life out of batteries (low temps slow electrical currents). Use new or freshly juiced ones.

Shoot shallow Take pictures within 30 feet of the sea's surface, where there's

enough sun to capture color.

Get close Start by shooting objects one to three feet away. Look for elements that could form a natural frame for your subject, like kelp or rocks. And try to snap creatures interacting

with each other so the picture tells a story, like catching one fish stealing (or becoming) another's dinner. When you shoot twirling sea lions or schools of fish, focus on a slow-moving member at the center of the group.



diver down

» Look like a frog, move like a mermaid

1 | The difference between coming across as a Bond Girl and looking like a dork in a rubber suit: a curve-clinging neoprene sheath. The **Body Glove EX3 7mm wetsuit** will enhance your figure and keep you warm in frigid waters. Extra stretch in the shoulders and lower back adds mobility. (\$258, bodyglove.com)

2 & 5 | Rental masks can be so scratched up you couldn't spot Shamu if he swam by. And the fins can leave you with toe cramps and blisters. Instead, get behind a

leak-proof **Aqualung Favola mask**. The adjustable buckles fit even petite faces perfectly, and a wide-angle lens will let you scan for sea life from every direction. Then slip on your very own pair of sleek, flexible **Aqualung Blades 2 Flex fins** (over some insulating neoprene booties, of course). (fins, \$120; mask, \$90; aqualung.com)

3 | Avoid a slideshow full of amorphous blobs with the **10.1-megapixel Olympus 1030 SW digital camera**. It'll capture your aquatic sur-

roundings up to 33 feet down. Stick it in a protective case, like Olympus' PT-043 Underwater Housing, and chase the fishies down to 130 feet. (\$400 for camera and \$280 for housing, olympusamerica.com)

4 | The **Luminox 7103 watch** is as crucial to a dive as an air tank. This Navy Seal-approved carbon-fiber watch, water-resistant down to 600 feet, has a 35-mm dial that makes it easy to keep track of how long you've been under so you don't run out of O₂. (From \$225, luminox.com)