

Diving in India: Oceanic Feelings

By Julien Fortin



Natural springs fill the pool of this temple in Rajasthan, and priests believe that a cave is located at the bottom.

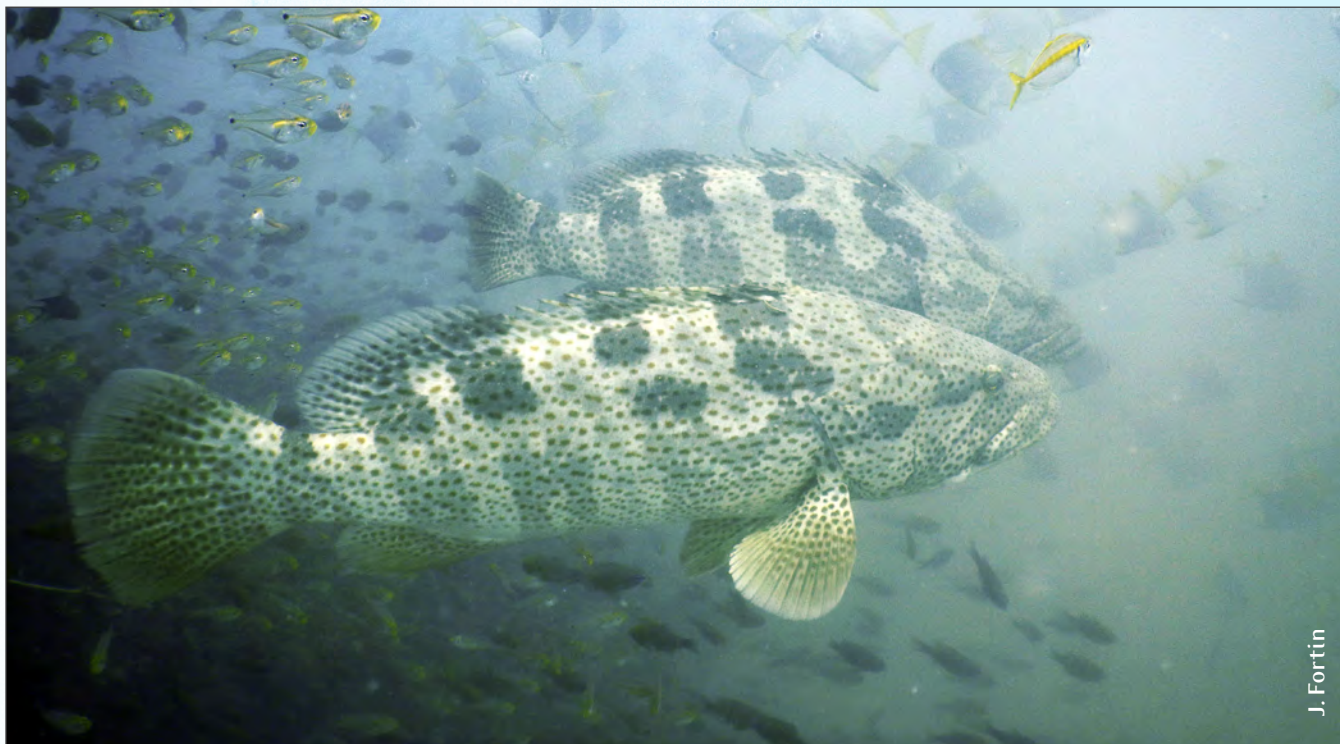
DISCLAIMER

NOWADAYS, most cultural and consumer goods come with a disclaimer by the producer who wishes to avoid getting sued by parents for explicit lyrics or by infantilized adults for predictable lung cancer. This text shall be no exception to the rule: as a consenting victim of the irrational attraction of India, I can't risk luring new divers into its realm without a stern word of warning. I hereby declare being desperately in love with India, and therefore advise extreme caution in reading my wildly enthusiastic and biased opinion about this country even more so because it intersects with my other passion: diving.

CHALLENGES

From the Sri Aurobindo Ashram in Pondicherry to the Andaman Islands along the western coast of Goa, scuba diving has been practiced in India for several decades. The past 10 years have witnessed the clear emergence of a growing dive industry, which is offering a first glimpse of the underwater world to thousands of new divers. While the Indian diving market, as opposed to counterparts like Thailand, is mainly run by Indian dive professionals and caters to the needs of its domestic customers rather than international tourists, it did not avoid the traps into which recreational diving has repeatedly fallen. The increase in the number of divers has not always been synonymous with an





J. Fortin

Malabar Groupers and Silver Moonies off the Coromandel coast in Pondicherry

improvement in quality. Several locations have even experienced a collapse of their continuing education activity as they focus on entry-level, non-certifying programs designed around short-term profit rather than the development of a solid platform based on the pillars of education, conservation, and exploration.

As for logistical considerations, issues and delays can only be weathered patiently if one believes in rebirth and considers today's mishaps as a preparation for the next life's dives. Organizing equipment import, standard gas mixes, and diving authorizations hinges on the relative youth of serious diving in India. Proper diving vessels are virtually nonexistent in most of the country, and it has not been uncommon on some exploratory dives for a diver to knock on random villagers' doors to find a local fisherman willing to take a team of divers to a dive site. Supply chains and mechanisms for obtaining oxygen and helium have to be managed in a non-diving context, where industrial or medical suppliers are not always used to the high quality but low volumes required by a dive operation. I've had to design fill-whip adapters on a napkin to have them custom-made in local workshops, and was once asked to breathe tanks in front of a police officer to prove I was not transporting anything dangerous. Local authorities, like fishing associations, legitimately require in-depth explanations and discussions to ensure fishing and diving can peacefully coexist and mutually benefit from each other, for instance through the creation of fish aggregation devices or the renting of existing facilities. In areas where diving is a new concept, these steps require significant patience, respect, pugnacity, and motivation. Negotiation tools range from high-level discussions on ecology with local

decision-makers to drunken threats involving macho men waving machetes and urinating on a boat.

If we add to this balance sheet variable water conditions where the visibility can change in a week from "I can see Sri Lanka" to "Only a Hobbit could see their own fins," one might wonder why I felt the need to offer a disclaimer in the beginning of this text, professing my everlasting love for India in general, and for diving in the country in particular. Why would someone want to dive in a country where conditions are challenging, logistics are complex, and the emerging diving industry is threatening to go down the path of quantity rather than quality?

OPPORTUNITIES

The answer to this question is: Ganesha. The elephant-headed god, whose portfolio ranges from protecting writers and salesmen to students and bus drivers, is not just the Swiss Army knife equivalent of deities. Depending on historical accounts and holy texts, he is either the creator or the destroyer of obstacles. Problems and opportunities are thus two sides of the same coin, and the above-mentioned shortcomings can be turned into a new El Dorado for dedicated divers.

With 7,500 km (4,660 miles) of coastline and 7 million hectares of inland water bodies, India is an untapped reserve of Aqua Incognita much like the old maps of the ancient world that sported huge expanses of Terra Incognita. Most diving operations concentrate around a handful of well-known natural or artificial dive sites, leaving immense opportunities for keen explorers.



J. Fortin

Who knows what lies at the bottom of this centuries-old holy site?

Using coastal survey maps as well as information from the local fishing community, we've been able to locate numerous new dive sites along the east coast. In mid-September 2018, an exploratory dive with my former student-turned-friend and dive buddy C.K. Rajan resulted in the discovery of a previously unknown reef at a depth of 48 m (157 ft), with a density and variety of

fish life and soft corals seldom seen at shallower depths due to extensive trawling.

A large area of whip and fan corals that is home to torpedo rays and malabar groupers constitutes an excellent site for the first Project Baseline in India, and could provide valuable data regarding the species and ecosystem that could potentially be restored by appropriate conservation measures. The now-existing infrastructure that allows divers to mix helium-based standard gases would allow for safe and efficient surveys and assessment, and provide an incentive for local divers to increase their skills so they can be a part of such projects.

As for overhead environments, the question is not whether underwater caves exist in India but where. Karstic landscapes are present, as are dry cave areas. If enough efforts are put into connecting cave divers with local authorities, landowners, and the scientific community, India has the potential to become a playground with unlimited research and exploration potential.

Tough conditions mean that divers who have learned to dive here and persevered to do so might not be shying away from challenging dive conditions beyond tropical blue water reef diving. One of my students, who did his open-water training five years ago in safe but challenging conditions with substantial currents and limited visibility off the Coromandel Coast, is now a trained cave diver and recently did a dive with me at Jailhouse Cenote in Yucatan, Mexico. We found a broken line in a restricted area close to the exit in zero visibility but my buddy followed his training and remained calm as we faced the issue as a team. I am not naïve enough to think that this was a direct consequence of his training in India, but it might very well be a tribute to the concept of beginning with the end in mind.

While entry-level dive sites and conditions should be carefully chosen to match the level of skill and experience of students, introducing early the idea that a wide array of dive parameters and conditions exist, and that procedures and methods should





Cuttlefish mating season off the Coromandel Coast in Pondicherry

be as uniform as possible to create well-rounded divers, is undoubtedly a key point of any high-quality dive education. If dive operators in India show divers that factors like visibility, currents, temperature, and surface conditions can quickly change and must be taken into account in dive planning and execution, the country can establish itself as an excellent location for diver training.

Finally, the growth of a local dive industry, despite its imperfection and focus on entry-level divers, mathematically creates a dynamic where a small but significant number of Indian divers are given enough tools to realize the need for serious training beyond usual standards. Enthusiastic divers who successfully transform their initial curiosity for the underwater world into a long-term passion and commitment will sooner or later encounter conditions, situations or projects requiring a different approach to diving; they will want to shift to a more solid system of training and dive execution. In a country with 1.3 billion people, the small percentage of individuals who pursue dive training translates into a substantial pool of highly motivated divers and it has been my full-time pleasure to be directly involved with this segment of the diving population for several years.

Roshan, a successful lawyer at the High Court, Neela, a talented and dedicated classical dance practitioner and Indology scholar, Chandini, an enthusiastic underwater archeologist, Rajan, a professional manager in the logistics industry with a never-ending supply of learning and fighting appetite. All of them have three things in common: enthusiasm, intelligence, and a desire to improve their diving.

A giant unexplored area, a growing community of divers who are used to tough conditions, and a nascent awareness of the need for serious dive training: these three factors alone should be enough to motivate both GUE divers to discover India and a local GUE community to emerge. But there is at least one more key element that should be mentioned here: the culture.

CULTURE

Régis Airault, a former psychiatrist at the French Consulate in Mumbai, once argued that there were only two types of trips to India: the pathological and the pathogenic. I believe many foreigners who set foot on the subcontinent appear to develop some kind of craziness due to the Freudian "oceanic feeling" triggered by an incredibly diverse country. India exposes us to so many contrasts and to such intensity on the emotional, cultural, intellectual, sensual, and aesthetic level that one might find oneself sinking in an ocean of thoughts and sensations, while simultaneously experiencing a perceived "oneness" with the world. What better place to dive than a country that generates oceanic feelings?

Beyond its geographical and cultural diversity, India offers mind-boggling time-travel opportunities to both foreigners and its own people. While the country is home to innumerable world-class IT companies, excellent universities, and sends satellites into space, some of the temples dotting the cultural landscape transport us several millennia into the past. Diving, in my book, is a tool to both fuel and satisfy my curiosity and appetite for the world; what's beyond that hill, under that ocean surface, beyond that cave entrance? Diving in India, like anywhere else,



On a fisherman's boat in the waters of Chennai

brings me to corners of the country I might not have visited otherwise, but unlike anywhere else, each of these corners offers some historical significance. How could it be otherwise in a nation whose history spans millennia of continuous human occupation, and where most past cultures, instead of disappearing, evolved to reach us changed, but alive and well?

A couple of hours after a trimix dive on Rajan's Playground, I can meditate at the Samadhi of the Sri Aurobindo Ashram. A week later, on the way to the Mahabalipuram Beach to load a bunch of tanks on a fisherman's boat, which will take us to ancient underwater masonry structures, I can stop my Royal Enfield motorcycle on the side of a busy street and enjoy a cup of tea next to the gigantic stone sculptures of Arjuna's penance. In the temple of Rameshwaram the following month, I can see the same holy stones and fossilized coral pieces that are found underwater a few kilometers away, where Monkey-God Hanuman built a road to invade Lanka and recover Rama's wife. Diving in India is plunging into both space and time simultaneously, connecting the dots of the subcontinent's past with its bustling present, and indulging, in other terms, in an oceanic feeling.

CONCLUSION

Diving in India has numerous challenges but challenges are what motivated the birth of GUE. Developing globally effective tools, procedures, and mindsets that allow divers to grow as individuals and as a community to tackle complex diving environments is the essence of exploration, along with the healthy curiosity that pushes us all to see what lies beyond the limit of our current vision. What is there not to like about a country with unlimited and unexplored underwater territories, a vibrant culture and history, as well as a small but enthusiastic community of motivated divers? We organized the first GUE Fundamentals course in August 2018, and imported the equipment needed to dive according to GUE principles; the adventure is just beginning. In India, nothing is easy, but everything is possible.

