



That sinking FEELING

What is it about potential near death experiences that make you feel so alive? I ask myself this as I sink into a warm, placenta-like, bottomless abyss.

WORDS Aaron Smith IMAGES Wes Skiles

THREE CARIBBEAN REEF sharks materialise at my side. One of them, two metres in length, drifts so close I can see the glint in its black, primeval eye.

With a flick of its tail it disappears again into the blue.

Out of sight they will continue to circle us as we descend into the world's deepest underwater sinkhole. Jacques-Yves Cousteau rated the Great Blue Hole of Belize as one of the world's top ten dive sites. A near perfect 300-metre diameter circle, 400 metres deep, it sits inside a small reef atoll some 96 kilometres from the Belize mainland.

At the 40-metre mark we stop.

In front of us lies the blackened mouth of a cave. Pillars of limestone stalagmites and stalactites look like the teeth in an ancient maniacal grin. We switch on our torches and enter my first cave dive.

Cave diving has come a long way since 1936, when Jack Sheppard explored a flooded cave in Somerset, England. Back then his air supply was fed to him from the surface using a modified bicycle pump and a tobacco tin.

Today however it is a highly technical sport that is a hybrid of both caving and scuba diving. The need for specialised equipment, proficient dive skills and technical knowledge means it is limited to

an elite group of experienced divers.

So what's the appeal of jamming into cold, dark, tight places underground and underwater? A sense of adventure and venturing into unexplored territory is definitely part of it – similar no doubt to the motivation behind James Cameron's recent expedition to the ocean's deepest point in the Marianas Trench. But for cave divers it also provides a form of escape.

British cave diver John Garvin explains, "It appeals to different people in different ways. Personally, I find it's an environment where you become very, very focussed on the tasks at hand. It's almost a form of meditation down there. There is only the sound of your breathing and a very thin



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Florida 2009, shooting the "Agnes Milowka Project" TV series.

beam of torch light, I do it to relax – it gives my brain some time out.”

Cave diving since 2001, John's experiences inspired him to co-write, with the late Australian cave diver Andrew Wight, the James Cameron movie *Sanctum*.

For pioneering American cave diver and award winning filmmaker Jill Heinerth, cave diving feels like, "I am swimming through the very veins of Mother Earth. Within those passages and tunnels flows the lifeblood of our planet. In the darkness of the doorways, I get to go where no person has even been before."

Over the past 19 years, Jill has dived deeper into caves than any other woman on the planet. She has explored hundreds of caves from inside Antarctic icebergs, to caves in Siberia, Bahamas, Bermuda, Mexico and beyond.

However, cave diving is certainly not without its risks.

On 27 February last year, Australia lost one of its rising stars in the cave diving fraternity, Agnes Milowka. By just 29 years of age she had received accolades and broken diving records, including the longest cave dive by a woman in Australia. Unfortunately her international career lasted less than a decade. She drowned in Tank Cave in Mount Gambier, South Australia. She was diving solo, 'laying line,' exploring uncharted territory and securing a guide rope intended to lead future divers

safely back to the surface.

We will never know exactly what went wrong for Agnes.

Agnes had worked with both John, as a stunt diver on *Sanctum*, and with Jill, under whom she mentored in Florida. Both described her as a great asset to the sport and one that will be sorely missed.

In fact John's first cave dive nearly ended in disaster. He and a friend wanted to test a myth that Cottage Ponds, one of the many uncharted sink holes in the Bahamas, was bottomless.

"We inadvertently descended through a very narrow fissure. It was obscured by nearly zero visibility as we passed through a layer of water thick with sulphur. Then all of a sudden we entered the top of an incredible underwater, cathedral-like dome. Upon ascending we realised our guide line had snagged in a narrow crevice and we became disorientated. After I surfaced, I threw up. I actually had three of the most intense experiences of my life in that 20 minute dive. The exhilaration of shining

my torch where nobody has been before, followed by the gut-wrenching fear of knowing that I had screwed up, followed by the relief of seeing blue sky again. After that I was hooked," he said.

Abandoning his guide line, John was lucky to survive.

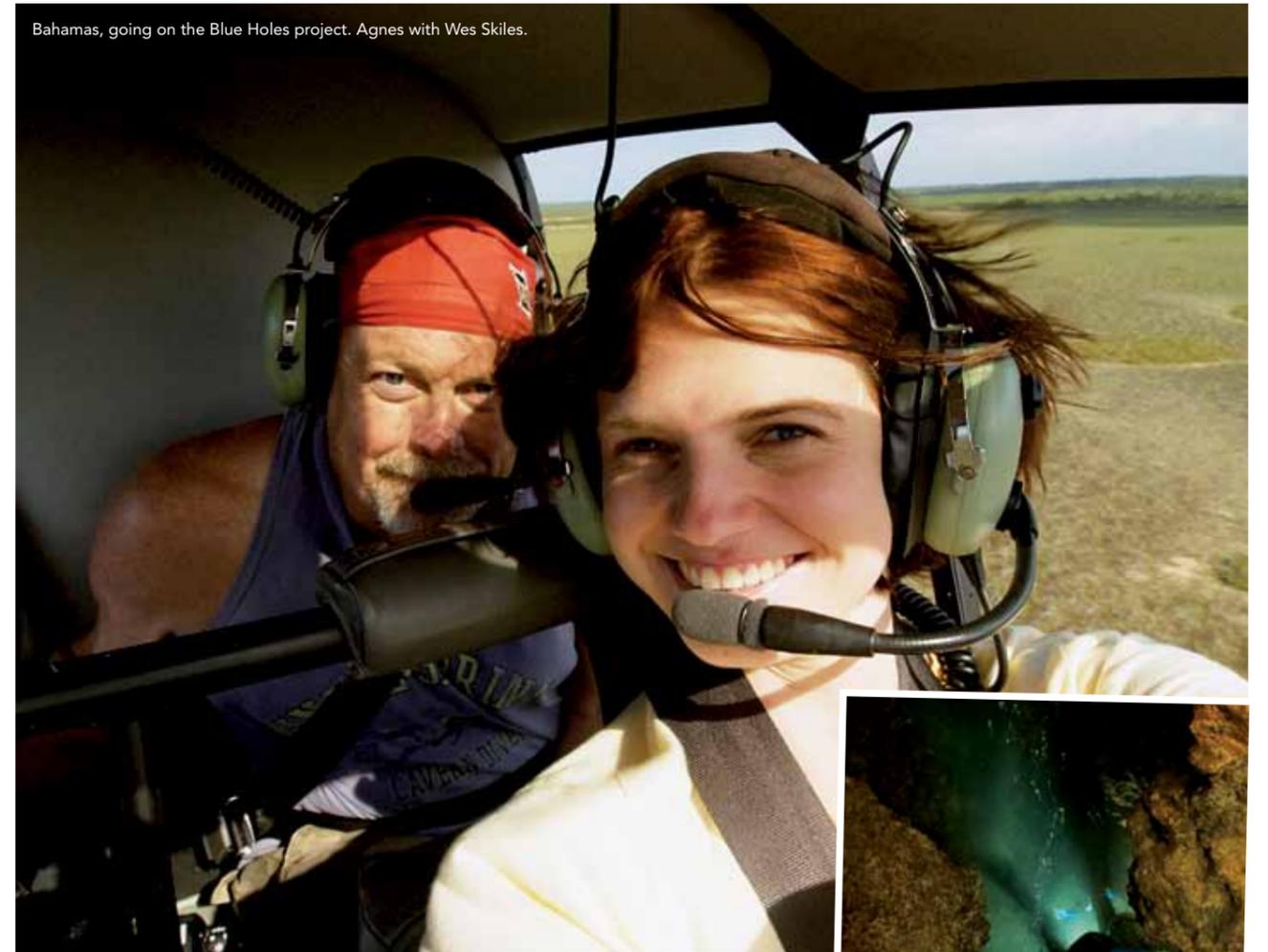
"That was a real wake-up call for me. The reality of cave diving is that with proper training it is a very safe sport. But if something does go wrong it goes wrong very quickly. There should always be butterflies in your stomach before every single cave dive. A little bit of apprehension keeps you sharp," he said.

Veteran American cave diver Brian Kakuk lives and works in the Bahamas, he has 26 years experience from more than 3000 dives. He is still inspired to cave dive because it provides him with opportunities for exploration.

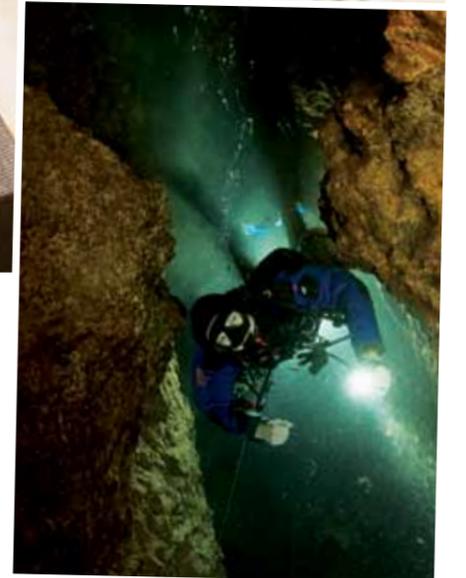
"Where else in the world today can you 'fin' your way into new territory. It's also a knowledge, as well as a conservation opportunity," he said.



Florida 2009, Hart Springs System - one of world's longest underwater caves.



Bahamas, going on the Blue Holes project. Agnes with Wes Skiles.



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Originally a US Navy diver, Brian has worked as a cave dive guide, teacher, government advisor, conducted research cave dives throughout the Bahamas, as well as having worked in the film industry on projects such as Pirates of the Caribbean 2 and 3.

With dive site names like Stargate, Brian describes the Blue Holes of the Bahamas as the ‘Everest’ or ‘K2’ for the sport of cave diving, with the most beautiful and intricately decorated caves in the world.

Stargate looks like a nondescript rock pool on the surface, but underneath the crystal clear water, drops 100 metres to Gothic

chambers are kept in perpetual darkness until illuminated by a diver’s torchlight. Here moonscapes are inhabited by bizarre, transparent, blind, alien-like crustaceans.

Brian met Agnes Milowka when she was working for Jill Heinerth in Florida. He said unlike Agnes’s accident, a lack of training is the number one reason a diver gets into trouble. He also believes there both are appropriate reasons to become a cave diver, such as self-growth, as well as inappropriate ones, such as ego. “There is very little room for mistakes in this environment and the wrong mentality can easily turn into a fatality,” he said.

Brian also thinks cave diving has something to offer the wider community.

“I spend about half on my underwater/ underground time working for scientists, whether it be archaeology, geology, hydrology or palaeontology. We haven’t really tapped into the full potential these environments offer yet,” he said.

In 2009, Agnes worked with Brian in the Bahamas on the Sawmill Sink Project, where she assisted a National Geographic Society film crew. The researchers involved claimed it was the greatest fossil discovery in the West Indies.

Dr Kenneth Broad, who led this multidisciplinary team, said the most exciting thing about the expedition was the interaction between explorers and scientists pushing different frontiers of research. “It’s rare you can jump into a muddy hole and come out with samples in so many different fields,” he said.

An environmental anthropologist, Kenneth was the 2006 recipient of a National Geographic Society Emerging Explorer Award and an associate professor at the University of Miami’s Rosenstiel School of Marine and Atmospheric Science.

An avid cave diver since 1988, Kenneth said, “It’s the only place where I can put

ultimate concentration in and block out all the mundane, annoying aspects of the real world, like cell phones and emails.”

Kenneth thinks these environments have much more to offer other than just a unique diving experience. “Because of their water chemistry, many of these underwater caves are like time capsules. They are modern day analogues of what ancient life was like, the earliest microbial life on the planet some 3.5 billion years ago. There all sorts of unique, extremophile creatures that can live in these harsh environments. By harsh I mean no oxygen, no light and high hydrogen sulphide concentrations. Some of this water chemistry may also be similar to water that may be found on different planets. Also the stalagmites are detailed recorders of environmental history which allows us to reconstruct past climates at high resolution,” he said.

Devastated at the loss of Agnes, Kenneth said, “She was extremely talented and extremely good fun and was well on her way to becoming one of the best cave divers in the world.”

Diving alone, as Agnes did on her fateful final dive, is frowned upon in wider diving community, but is common practice in cave diving. “Although it may seem counter-intuitive, it is sometimes safer, especially in confined spaces or to avoid guideline entanglement,” said Kenneth.

Despite improvements in training, better gear and a statistically lower fatality rate, cave diving often still receives a bad rap. Jill Heinerth said, “Cave divers used to be perceived as adrenaline sport junkies that took huge risk for self-satisfaction, but many cave divers make significant contributions to our understanding of our planet and specifically our fresh water resources. Understanding how and where our water flows within the earth [hydrology] helps us protect it as the precious resource that it is.”

Ascending safely towards the surface, rays of sunlight increasingly illuminate the Caribbean Sea and the palette of colour returns from a deep blue to the full spectrum of the rainbow. I am filled both with an adrenaline rush and a sense of inner calm. I remember the last piece of advice my dive instructor told me years ago when I was first certified, something I remember on every dive: “The most dangerous thing in the ocean is you.”

IN MEMORY OF AGNES

IN RECOGNITION OF Agnes’ legacy, The Agnes Milowka Memorial Environmental Science Award has been established for schools in the area of science, marine studies and exploration. For more information go to: <http://www.agnesmilowka.com/index.php/awards.html>