

Underwater Discoveries: From Diving Bell to Scuba

Posted on

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People have been diving in Sri Lanka since at least 1864, when Eugene De Ransonnet, the Viennese painter and naturalist, sketched the coral banks outside Galle in a diving bell. His bell was made of plate iron, three feet high by two and a half wide. It had two windows, one on the top to let in light and another in front through which he gazed at the underwater gardens. He was submerged in only one or two fathoms of water. He reports that “the beauty of the submarine scenery is perhaps nowhere greater” than at this moderate depth. It still holds true in Sri Lanka, the most beautiful sea life is in the shallow waters. We are most attracted, now as in De Ransonnet’s time, to the reefs. The corals are in themselves often splendid; in addition many of the most colourful fish and invertebrates are found only in the environment created by them.

Corals need sunlight to grow. They develop best in about thirty feet of water and are almost all found in depths of less than one hundred feet. As the corals die they leave their gritty limestone exoskeletons which serve as substrate on which the colony continues to build.

Over one hundred species have been discovered off the Sri Lankan coast. De Ransonnet painted corals ranging from green Lettuce Corals to pink Brain Corals to star-faced soft corals waving atop slender tubes. In his lithographs and in Sri Lankan reefs today, Staghorn Corals reach up like small trees, spreading out to gather light, shading the sponges and hydroids beneath them.

Over time the limestones formed by the corals become caves, canyons, and boulders. In every corner and cranny some creature is living. Many are hiding from predators, waiting for night in order to search for food more safely. Lobsters, for example, are deep in holes during the day, only their antennae revealing their

presence. A carnivorous red snapper with its dark eyes and up-pouted jaw may be found resting until darkness behind a Fire Coral. Sri Lanka's ocean life is regulated by its two monsoons. One comes from the northeast in about October; the other from the southwest in May or June. Each blows for several months. These vast currents of air are so powerful they oblige the seas to flow in parallel. Thus on the western coast of the island, the only safe time to dive is during the northeast monsoon between the months of October and April, when the shores are protected from direct winds. During the off-season when the winds are blowing on-shore the waves surge in, leaping, overwhelming the black rocks strewn along the coast. Frothing like something gone mad, they carry driftwood, coconuts, styrofoam bits, old rubber sandals, and plastic tops, churning them into the sand of the shore. Salt spray blows a hundred feet inland, dampening, rusting, stinging. From the point of view of the fish the monsoon that raises this veil is their protection. Since it is a time unsafe for man or boat, for six months of every year they are safe from line and net. One week in October the wind slows. It stops. The air stills. Several days later the wind starts up again, blowing steadily from the opposite direction. Everybody notes, 'The wind has turned,' and the fishermen slide their boats into the water, and the divers fill their tanks with oxygen. The snorkeler has access to more of the beauty of the reefs than did Eugene De Ransonnet tied to his bell, and as much as the scuba diver. The scuba diver's advantage is in being able to swim amongst the fishes for longer periods. And of course scuba divers can go deeper and are thus able to visit wrecks found far below the surface. (The British carrier *Hermes* on the east coast is 180 feet down, and the *Malabar* in the south is at 80 feet.) The scuba diver's handicap is having to manoeuvre forty pounds of equipment. Besides the mask, snorkel and fins, the scuba diver has to deal with a weight belt, a buoyancy vest, a tank, a regulator and often a wetsuit. For every diver the ocean holds contradictions. First there is a deep sense of peace, almost a mystical sense of rightness. It is not uncommon for a diver to feel that he is tapping into life just as it is supposed to be, a life inherently at peace. One looks around and ironically feels invulnerable and at one.

The tension lies in knowing that that feeling is inaccurate. We are actually fairly helpless, not being designed for this environment. The longer a person stays in the water the more the density of it sucks the heat from his body; the ocean tries to bring the diver into equilibrium to itself. No matter how bright the immediate surroundings, look down, and the blue fades to black. It leaves a person isolated, alone with his thoughts, unable even to whistle or sing his fears away. Fears seem as if they could manifest in the spectre of a shark or sea monster, rarely seen, but

readily imagined. For some people this is exciting; for others it is scary, but in truth, underwater, death is never far away. The sea holds the magic of the unknown and the unexpected. We are startled by things we have not seen enough to dismiss as familiar. As we dive into these reefs we are drawn by the complicated intertwining and intermixing of reef life. We see the brightness of movement and colour.



Ransonnet's diving bell



The Scorpion fish among the corals under the sea at Hikkaduwa. (Fred R. Malvenna)



The emperor fish against a background of coral formations. (Fred R. Malvenna)

Eugene De Ransonnet as an artist rejoiced in the visual feast. He watched a clown fish, for example, all orange-red, black and white snuggling into the stinging sea anemones. He saw a lionfish. Beware, says the lionfish displaying her bold stripes and outsized fins, with her “antlers” growing from above each eye and below her chin. Get too close and I will sting. She hangs around coral pockets, still, waiting for small fish to pass by.

Perhaps De Ransonnet turned over a rock and came across a sea-slug, sometimes referred to as a nudibranch. It would have been a shape unknown to him before. Perhaps he brought it to the surface and saw its true colours, a flaming red, or a cobalt blue and forest green on black. Near the surface the colours are dazzling and bold. The deeper one descends the more colours meld into a few. First to go are the longer wavelength colours. The reds dull. At about ten feet the oranges and yellows begin to take on a greenish hue. And at twenty feet everything is shades of blue and white. Certainly De Ransonnet saw the constant movement of life in the sea—corals and anemones waving their tentacles in their search for food, and fish that never stop swimming their entire lives. He saw everything emulating the motion of the sea itself, the ebb and the flow, the surging forward, and the retreating back. What De Ransonnet did not have access to was prolonged movement under water.

Today's divers can partake in deeds that were formerly relegated to dreams. We can hover over a deep abyss or fly up a canyon wall. Underwater one feels weightless and able to move outside gravity's demands. Movement feels elegant because it is the long muscles the diver is stretching as he fins.

A diver hears few noises besides the air bubbling from his mouth. Parrot fish can be heard grinding coral as they eat. Filefish have spines they can rub back and forth. Shrimp can often be heard snapping and clicking. But other than that, sounds are rare. One hundred and twenty-five years after De Ransonnet discovered the beauties of the Sri Lankan coral reefs, he would be saddened to know that most of his old haunts have been destroyed. All the gardens he painted have been sacrificed to the tourist and lime industries and to urban pollution. Other coral reefs and gardens still exist in Sri Lanka and he might be gladdened to know that so many people are able to enjoy them with comparative ease. He would probably be relieved that laws have been enacted to preserve them from further degradation.