

33X FREEDIVING WORLD RECORD HOLDER HERBERT NITSCH SHARES HIS BEST FREEDIVING TIPS



© herbertnitsch.com

Each time I think I've reached a limit.. there is a door.. it opens.. and the limit is gone.

Gutentag, I am freediver Herbert Nitsch from Austria. Although I am born in this land-locked country, I am not often home in Vienna, because I enjoy traveling the world to freedive in remote and exotic locations. For those of you wondering what freediving is: Well, it's just diving on a single breath of air.

How and why did you get into freediving?

On the way to a scuba-dive trip on a live-aboard in Egypt in 1999, the airline lost my luggage. For ten days or so, I was stuck with some basic snorkeling gear, which I borrowed onboard. Luckily, I had an underwater camera in my hand luggage. I was in the water all day and "snorkeled" longer and deeper each time to get pictures, without realizing I was actually "freedive" training.

At one point, a friend asked for how long I could hold my breath and how deep I could dive. I had no idea. I borrowed a depth gauge, and dove past the divers. Once back home this friend called me and told me that I had been diving only two meters short of the Austrian record in freediving. He told me to get some decent fins and beat that record. I questioned him: "What is freediving?" I had no idea at the time there was such a sport. But instead of an Austrian record, I went straight away for a world record. An interesting footnote is that I never got a scuba dive license, and still don't have one to date. I always got away with just



© herbertnitsch.com

showing my dive log. And I don't possess any freediving licenses either.

I've always practiced a lot of sports since I was a kid. I was a fanatic windsurfer, water-skier and hobycat-sailor. My father was into big sailing boats so I learned to sail those too. Actually, any sport on or below the ocean's surface will do for me. On land, I enjoy biking and inline skating.

I believe freediving is not particularly difficult, or that any other sport is for that matter. What is difficult is trying to get the best out of your performance and seeking your boundaries. Pushing your limits, fine-tuning your skills, and understanding your body and its bodily functions in this pursuit is the most challenging part of any sport. It will set you apart from others and it is also the part that intrigues me the most. After surpassing certain depths in freediving, that at first I had perceived as impossible, I wondered how elastic my boundaries really are. And when I keep going deeper and deeper, I realize that even the seemingly impossible is possible. And when this pursuit results in yet another world record, I see it as a positive by-product of my personal journey in search for my limit.

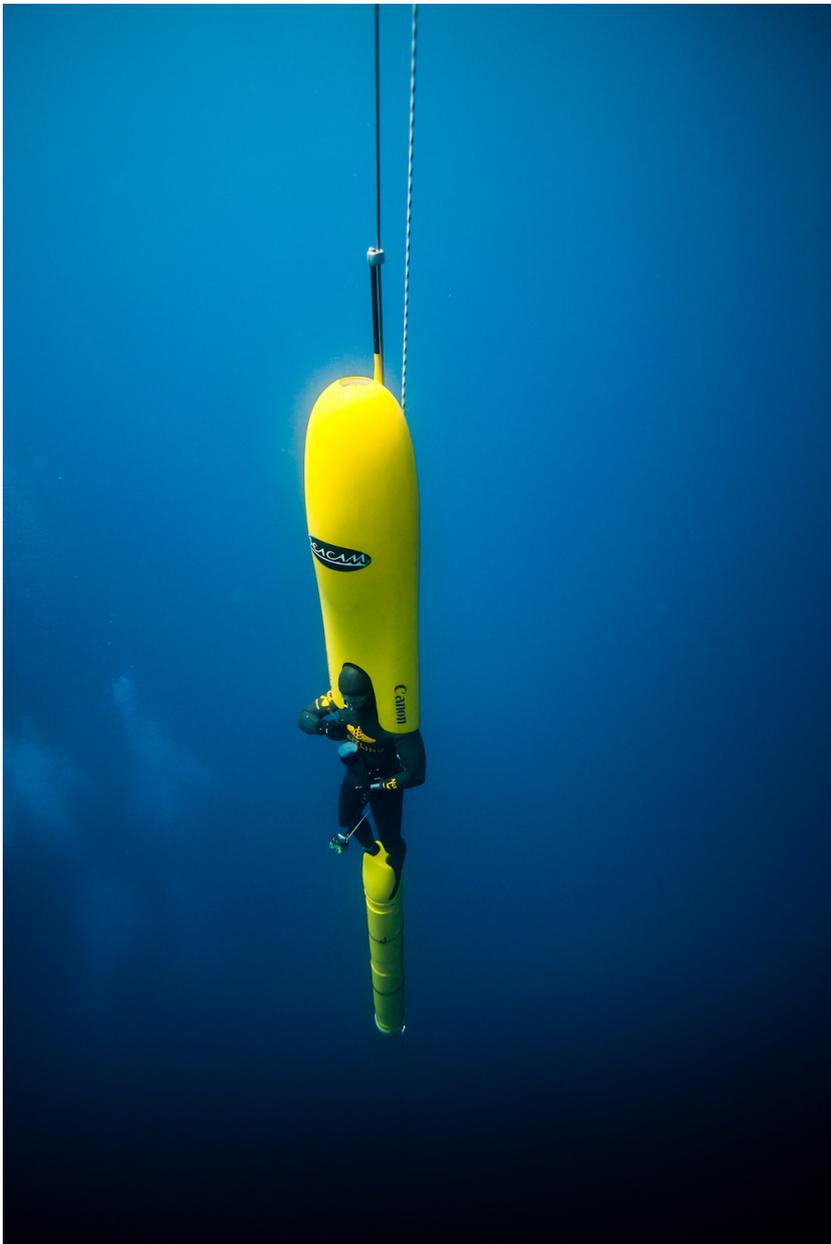
How do you finance your freediving?

There are seven freediving disciplines that you can compete in (two horizontal distance disciplines, one static apnea, three depth disciplines, and a traditional Greek discipline of "stone diving" or Skandalopetra). Some are with fins, some without. Competitions are organized by different freediving federations around the world. The main costs involved for participants are the drug tests, gear, accommodation and travel. I stopped participating in competitions in 2010 to focus solely on the No Limit discipline, which falls outside of competitions. There is no money in winning freediving events.

During most of my freediving career, I was an airline pilot which allowed me to "sponsor" myself for competitive freediving. Outside of competitions there are two disciplines that use a sled to descend called, "variable weight" and "No Limit". These require additional safety features, and are therefore more complex and pricy to organize. The freediver has to organize a record event him or herself, with or without a freediving federation.



© herbertnitsch.com



© Francine Kreiss

“No Limit” is by far the deepest and most extreme of all of the freediving disciplines. It is also the most expensive. My last three No Limit world records were partly sponsored, the first two I paid for myself. Even though I achieved world records in all of the nine freediving disciplines, the last No Limit dive took the biggest hit on my bank account, as it cost a quarter of a million euros, of which I paid half.

Since 2010, I no longer fly airplanes. I lecture world wide for mainly corporations, medical events, and universities, but also for classrooms full of curious kids. In-between, I also have gigs for TV, documentaries, interviews, print-media, and so on. And I am a proud member of the advisory board of the **Sea Shepherd Conservation Society**. They’re a direct-action, non-profit organization with its mission to end the destruction of habitat and slaughter of wildlife in the world’s oceans in order to conserve and protect ecosystems and species.

How do you eat and sleep?

My diet has changed dramatically over the past years. It is now purely plant-based. I eat as much fresh and organic foods as possible, and do not consume any processed foods, white flour products, or refined sugar containing products. I love spicy foods, and am a big fan of Indian and Thai cuisine. The only supplements I take are dried, ground fruits, plants or seeds (such as camu camu berries for its vitamin C, seaweeds and algae for vitamins and minerals, and several ground up dried plant-seeds for their protein). And I am very fond of Rawbite® bars. They’re snacks made of 100% bio nuts, berries, seeds and dates, and have no sugar or chemicals in them. I could live of those for a few days if necessary.

I sleep approximately 8-10 hours a day. I keep my body fit with year round endurance, muscle training, and very specific flexibility training for the lungs and diaphragm. Then about ten days



© herbertnitsch.com



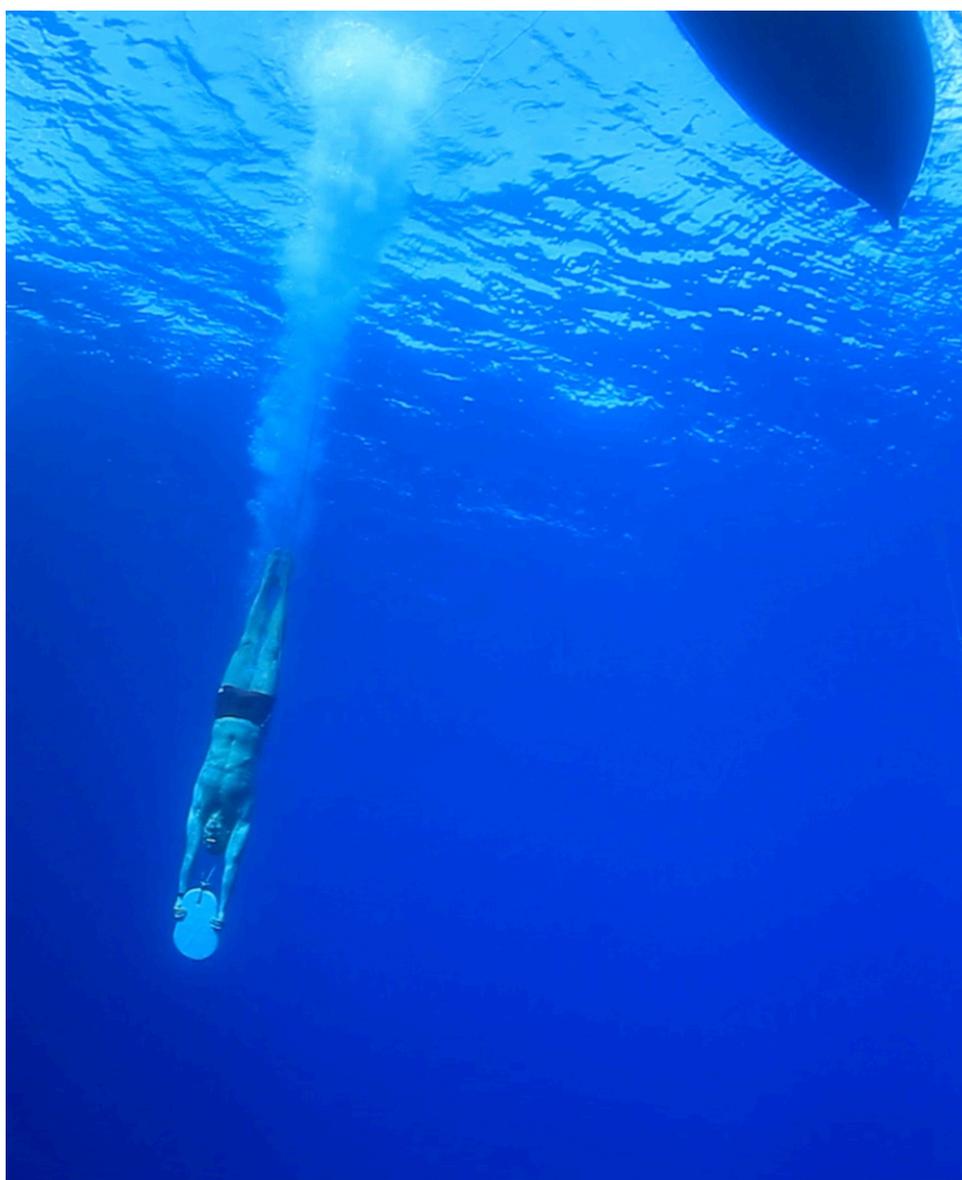
© Francine Kreiss

before going to a competition, world record attempt or freedive-holiday, I do dry breath hold training on the couch (my so-called infamous “couch training” in front of the TV). This is followed with particular in-water training for a few days. After that I’m fully freedive-ready.

I’ve had some broken bones, stitches, bruises and bumps from biking, waterskiing and inline-skating. I have been very fortunate to have had little to no scratches stemming from freediving. However, I have had a serious bout with decompression sickness in 2012 after my last No Limit

world record (253.2 m / 830.8 ft). DCS always occurs afterwards, and in my case it started some ten minutes after the completion of the record. It showed its full colors a few hours later when I arrived comatose at the hospital. This case of severe DCS resulted in multiple brain strokes (due to nitrogen-gas building up in the bloodstream). I was totally f*#@ed up, my brain was like that of a goldfish and I was no longer able to walk, manipulate objects, or even sit without support. The prognosis was that I would remain a wheelchair-bound care-dependent patient for the rest of my life.

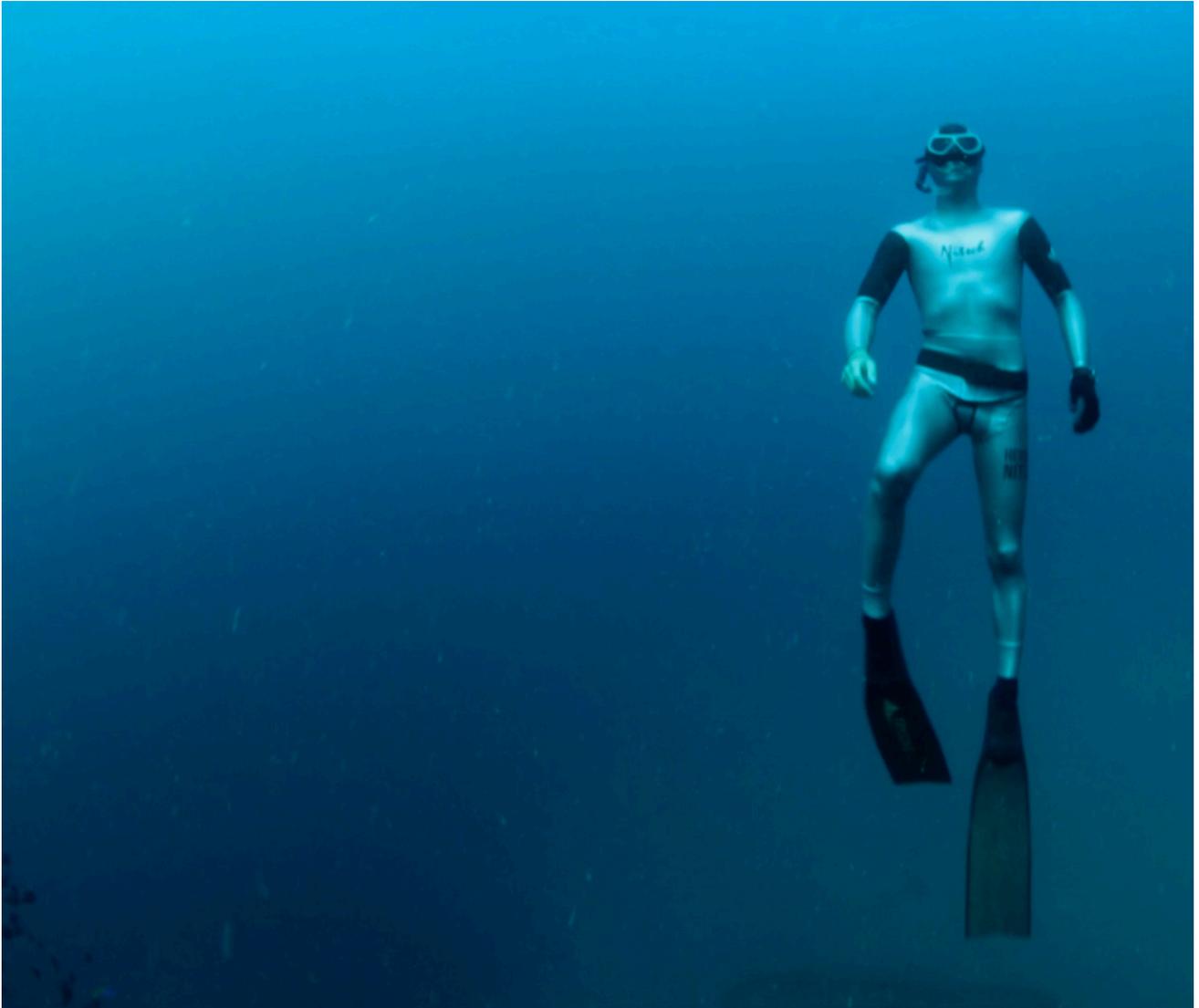
Once my brain got a bit re-wired, and once I realized the terrible shape I was in, I refused to accept my predicament. Not getting any answers as to why I was popping so many pills, I stopped taking all medication (without informing the medical staff, of course). And because the physical therapies I received were geared towards senior citizens with strokes, and not adapted to athletes, I left the rehabilitation center to take care of my self, against everyone’s advice. Two years later, I was fit and deep freediving again. Miraculously, my full memory came back completely after a year or so. On land, I still have some balance and coordination issues, but below sea-level it is as if nothing ever happened. I guess water is my medium.



© herbertnitsch.com

How do you balance normal life with freediving or training?

My normal life is focussed around the ocean and all that is related to it (freediving, lecturing, traveling, filming, ocean preservation, sailing). My wife and I enjoy our life. We often travel last-minute somewhere for fun or for a project. We have no children by choice, even though we enjoy hanging out with youngsters. And I have great admiration for people with full time jobs and kids, I don't know how they do it.



© herbertnitsch.com

How do you bring your gear with you?

I usually travel with one big IQ® dive bag for most of my gear, and a home-made box for my fins. I have a Roadster® dry-backpack. It keeps all my other toys safe and dry, such as my laptop, camera, phone, drone, etc.

How do you organize things in your bags?

Hah! That's a good question. For years, I was a last-minute packer and just threw some essential stuff together. But since I am sharing my life with a lovely woman this is miraculously done for me. My lady likes to have bags and boxes well organized, and prepares things well ahead of traveling. So she beats me to my game of messy packing. I haven't packed a bag in years (I am such a lucky man!).

How do your bags and gear hold up?

I would absolutely love to have a properly designed, sturdy, travel case that fits both one monofin and a pair of bi-fins. One day I'll have to make one myself, as it does not exist.

What has been your best sport purchase below \$100?

All of my dive gear, except for my mask and snorkel, is either custom made, or designed and built by myself. My fun-freediving mask and snorkel are non-brands that I picked up somewhere on a trip. I change wetsuit every year or so, and the other equipment when necessary. Some of the best gear-purchases I have made were the two non-brand scuba masks that I bought at least a decade ago. They're having some wear and tear, but I swear by them for fun freediving. I think I paid no more than twenty bucks for each of them. As for a snorkel, I found a purple & pink one on a beach somewhere and used it for ages. I ended up trading it with another freediver for a transparent one, as it looks better in pictures!

An important piece of equipment for any freediver is a good, snug-fitting, super-flexible wetsuit. I therefore have all of mine custom made, as they should have no air-pockets in them. They're relatively expensive, but worth every penny. I have not worn an "off the rack" wetsuit for over 15 years.

What is your best advice people new to freediving?

I am known to be very unconventional in my freediving techniques and training routines. I had no example to go by, being from a land-locked country. So I observed and listened to everyone from old foxes to young guns alike, and then implemented my own routines. I also became an expert of my own body, and learned how to fine tune it, and how to influence certain body functions. I strongly believe that there is not one magic formula for being a good freediver. Best is to find your own methods that work best for you. I also believe that everybody is a potentially good freediver, because it is innate to hold our breaths underwater. Babies are freedivers too, and our bodies have the dive reflex that kicks in when freediving just as it does with marine mammals. We just have to re-adapt and re-learn to be holding our breath underwater again. Did you know that everyone can double or triple their breath-hold-time within a week of "couch training"?

What will the future bring?

The future always brings wonderful surprises and new things to do and learn. I'm about to finish my autobiography, which was the most difficult and tedious project I've ever done in life (try sitting still and writing with the ocean in front of you!). I also hope to realize my dream of building my own sea-going boat one day to roam the seven seas with my woman by my side.

