

# DEEP UNDER

About breath-taking underwater worlds  
and diving into endless deepness

BY JASMIN HUMMEL

**No goal seems out of reach, no victory is enough for him. Always on, always better, always more. This dive made Herbert Nitsch the 33-time world record holder in freediving and the Deepest Man On Earth. Thirty-two of these records are set in all eight recognised disciplines – unparalleled achievements in freediving history. He exceeded his own record in the no-limit discipline several times, reaching a depth of an incredible 253 metres. A man who fascinates and goes to his personal limits and beyond for victory.**

**Herbert, for how long can you hold your breath?**

My longest documented breath hold is 9 minutes and 4 seconds. That was a world record in the discipline of static apnoea. I have never measured it since, simply because it is the most boring of freediving practices. But breath holding at the surface is not compatible with breath holding while fun freediving, or when diving very deep in a competition. A whole lot of different body functions get involved then, which makes even a short breath hold at depth a serious challenge. When I am freediving recreationally I am very ac-

tive, because I swim underwater, and thus use more oxygen. I then keep my dives to between four to five minutes and I do not dive very deep, max. 40-50 metres. My freedives during a competition or world record attempt last about five minutes. But then I go deep, and only make one dive.

**How does it feel to be in the depths of the oceans?**

When I freedive for fun, I thoroughly enjoy interacting with marine wildlife or exploring caves and shipwrecks. The underwater arena is magnificent, because it is so different from moving about on land. The three-dimensional awareness and agility we have under water gives me the ultimate feeling of freedom. During a record or competition, the experience is totally different, because it is introspective. I have my eyes fully closed and focus solely on the task of the moment. During some of my deeper dives, there is only blackness around me anyway. There is nothing to see down there. It is a very private and personal experience within the confines of my own body and mind.

**When and how did your passion for freediving develop?**

I've got to thank Egypt Air for instilling the passion for freediving in me. They lost all my luggage during a planned holiday on a live-aboard, including all of my scuba-diving gear. I was forced to snorkel with a borrowed mask and little gummy fins. Luckily, I had my underwater camera in my hand luggage, and while the others were scuba-diving, I was snorkelling the entire day. Without realising it, I was going deeper and deeper, and stayed underwater longer and longer. When one of my friends at the end of the holiday asked me how deep I could dive, I had no idea. I took a dive gauge, and dove to thirty-two metres. Once back home, this friend called me and told me that I was only two metres short of the Austrian record in freediving. 'What on earth is freediving?', I asked him then. Once he explained to me that this is an actual sport, he told me to buy some decent fins and set a new Austrian record. Instead, I went straight for a world record. **As an extreme athlete, you keep pushing yourself. You have broken 33 world records. Where do you get the motivation from and what drives you to such "deep" performances?**

I have always been curious about seeking the limits of the human experience. No matter what sport I practiced before. With freediving, it became even more of a motivation because of the vast improvements you can make. Did you know that any beginner can double or triple his/her breath hold time within one week with some simple exercises? That is incredibly motivating. Soon I realised that limits are flexible, and that boundaries that seem far away at first suddenly come within your reach. And thus, the aim to go beyond continues. Each time I think I've reached a limit there is a door, it opens and the limit is gone.

**Is there a special moment in your career or an unforgettable experience?**

I cannot think of one moment, but of many. Such as freediving with playful dolphins, or being grabbed by a big octopus that did not want to let go of my finger, or being attacked by a bull shark, or diving in an underwater cave full of mammoth skulls and bones. I have no particular special moment related to world records, other than that each record confirmed to me that we have not reached our human limits yet.

**In which areas of the world do you mainly dive? Is there a place that has a special meaning for you?**

For fun freediving I love French Polynesia and the ocean around Palau, Micronesia. Simply because these areas are nice and warm, and are not polluted or overfished yet. Marine fauna and flora are beautiful there. For competition diving I enjoy Dean's Blue Hole on Long Island in the Bahamas. It is a natural sink hole just off the beach. There is no current and it feels like a magical wonderland. For no-limit freediving, which falls outside of competitions, and which goes a lot deeper than any other freediving, I prefer the waters around various islands in Greece that are very deep and protected, such as Spetses and Santorini.

**You are strongly committed to the protection of the seas. How did this engagement come about?**

During my many travels around the world, I have noticed the increasing pollution of the ocean including coastal areas, and the destruction of marine habitats. The incredible amount of plastics that find their way into the ocean is staggering. On the surface all may look beautiful, but no matter where I dive on the planet, there is plastic to be found at any depth. According to a study from the Ellen MacArthur Foundation, there will be more plastic than fish in the ocean by 2050. Furthermore, there is a serious and underestimated problem of overfishing. It doesn't matter that there are supposed to be fishing quotas and regulations, they are hard to implement and control. Thus, the enormously destructive fishing methods continue at an alarming rate. These methods destroy entire habitats and coral reefs in the process. Mix into this cocktail the ongoing pollution, and the result of this madness are large death-zones in the oceans and coastal areas. And all this concerns me greatly. I am therefore very proud to be on the Advisory Board of the Sea Shepherd Conservation Society. They work together with local and federal governments to protect our oceans, marine life and marine habitats around the world.

**What are your goals for the future?**

Enjoy life to the fullest, and breathe once in a while.

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#### HERBERT NITSCH

*The Austrian Herbert Nitsch is a pioneer, adventurer and innovator. His unique freediving career began in the late 1990s. Today, he is a 33-time world record holder. His freediving techniques, equipment and training methods are innovative and controversial, but have proven to be very effective and efficient.*