



# Pascal Bernabé

**A conversation with technical diver and depth record breaker, Pascal Bernabé.**

*Pascal Bernabé has just held a press conference at the Moscow dive show answering questions from an enthusiastic audience about his 330 meter record dive. The soft spoken Frenchman seems relieved to slip out of the uncomfortable limelight on the stage. Having escaped the massive attention for a while, he grabs a chair beside me, and we begin to converse about the meaning of it all.*

*Why do you dive so deep? Is it for seeking adventure, exploration, or developing equipment?*

Actually, it is about all of those good reasons. Above all, I am a cave and wreck explorer, and it was because of the caves that I started diving deeper and deeper. I also happened to work as a safety

diver for the free dive champions, Pipin Ferraras and Audrey Mestre, so there are several factors behind it. It was also a matter of pushing the frontiers. It was exciting to go places where nobody had ever been before. It wasn't out of competitive reasons, in order to be the best, go the deepest, or anything like that. I did it just for my own sake.

*For the exploration?*  
Yes, and for fun—although that record dive did not leave all that much room for having fun—and to be the only one, besides commercial or military divers, that has ventured that deep on scuba.

*But working as a safety diver for Pipin Ferraras and Audrey Mestre is something completely different.*

This goes back a while. The deepest free dives at that time were Pipin's and Mestre's dives to 170m. It took place off Cabo san Lucas in Mexico. But

even before that event, we were working together while they trained for the record attempt. For a cave diver like me, it was something very new and different and also kind of a dream coming true because of the cult movie, *The Big Blue*. Before I went to see that movie, I had never dived. But after I watched it, I wanted to experience the same sensations and kinds of challenges. I then got to meet Pipin, and we developed a very good relationship that has lasted to this day.

*So, it was a mix of sport and challenge?*

You can say that, and it was very different from cave diving. Once, I was also a coal diver in Tunisia. So, I have had a lot of different experiences. But a core issue has always been that I never wanted to be a Kamikaze diver either. I tried to make the deepest parts, where the diver is subjected to HPNS and everything, the safest

# A *talk with* Cool Teacher

Text edited by Peter Symes  
Photos courtesy of Pascal Bernabé  
Peter Symes and Andrey Bizyukin

# profile



*there is like a third of a kilometre back to the surface”?*

My first sensation was fear. This is normal experience also on cave dives. I naturally also had some stress before the dive, but soon all these emotions get replaced by concentration. However, when, on the bottom, one of my instruments, imploded, the fear came rushing back, because I became afraid that I was about to suffer an accident. Aside from that, you become very focused on what is at stake. I did have a few tremors during the dive, but it wasn't much.

possible. I brought lots of gas, much more than was really necessary. I did rapid descents, but very slow ascents. For my first deep dives, I brought an incredible amount of tanks.

*What do you perceive when you are down there? Do you feel clear in your head? Do you perceive that you are 330 meters down and go, “Oh,*

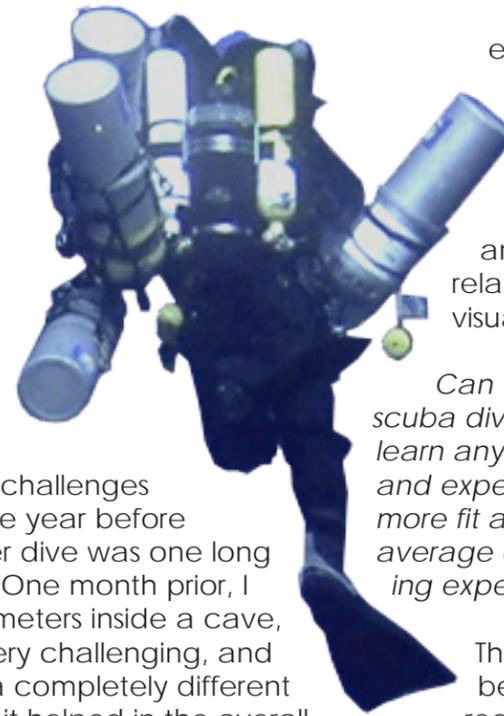
*How do you mentally prepare to go so deep?*



X-RAY MAG's Russian editor, Andrey Byzuikin, assists Pascal Bernabe with translations during the Russian dive expo



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equipment and plenty of tanks. It should also be mentioned that I keep fit through a lot of physical exercising like running, biking and swimming. I also use relaxation techniques and visualisations.

*Can 'normal' recreational scuba divers and holiday makers learn anything from your insights and experiences. Would being more fit and eating right give the average diver a much better diving experience do you think?*

It depends on the type of dive and what kind of challenges lie ahead. The year before the 330 meter dive was one long preparation. One month prior, I went to 150 meters inside a cave, which was very challenging, and while it was a completely different type of dive, it helped in the overall mental training.

*So, it is essentially all your training and getting acquainted with your equipment that instills confidence before a deep dive?*

I also try to get the best possible

The idea should always be to make every dive, regardless of depth, the safest and best possible experience by all possible means. Every dive comes with some level of risk. So, be fit and use the best possible equipment you can afford. In my case, I applied these principles to move my limits. But, in essence, there is no difference.

## Who are Francisco “Pipin” Ferreras & Andrey Mestre?

Ferreras was born on the northern coast of Cuba, and began to practice free-diving at the age of five. “Pipin” was his nickname from childhood. Little is known about Ferreras' life in Cuba before his freediving career. From the late 1980s and onward, he made a name for himself in the so-called “no-limits” discipline of freediving where he established his first known world record of 112 meters (367 feet) depth in November 1989. Shortly hereafter, he defected to Italy and later migrated to Florida, United States. Through the 1990s, he established a long series of world records, often in close rivalry with Italian Umberto Pelizzari.

In 1996, he met French-born Mexican-national Audrey Mestre who turned out to be a natural freediver herself. In 1999, they married, and quickly the two became a regular record-breaking couple in the sport of freediving, dividing men and women's records between them.

On 12 October 2002, Mestre died in an attempt to break the no-limits world record (this attempt was a bid to break both the men's and women's record) in a setup that was widely criticized within freediving circles. Much of the criticism went to Ferreras who had organized all of his and Mestre's record attempts for years. ■

SOURCE: WIKIPEDIA



X-RAY MAG's publisher Peter Symes with Pascal Bernabe



# profile

All dives should be made as safe as possible.

*What other knowledge do we gain from deep dives? Do we learn something new about physiology or technology?*

The circumstances of a dive seem to change significantly around the 250 meter mark. Down to this, everything usually feels okay to me.

*Is there something like a barrier at that particular depth? And why 250m?*

At this point, there is a huge increase in the amount of equipment needed. Even if you dive rebreathers, also if you have a double rebreather, it is my opinion that you also need open circuit. At these extreme depths, the breathing performance of rebreathers can be quite poor.

*They get hard to breathe?*

You might recall the sad accident that happened to David Shaw in the cave of Boesmangat in South Africa a couple of years ago (see *X-RAY MAG* issue and the YouTube video on our *X-RAY MAG* website). This was a tragic example,



but we really don't have so many options to choose from. At a certain depth, you just need so many tanks. Also HPNS starts to become an issue, which you will then have to find ways to manage. I have also taken a closer look into dive profiles and experiences of other deep divers such as the late John Bennett, Jim Bowden, etc., and from the logged stats. It seemed to me, once dives went past the 250m mark, the

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occurrences of problems and cases of DCI seemed to spike.

*So, pretty much all the factors, from equipment, physiology, mental aspects, seem to change at that same point?*

Yes. It does not feel extreme until 220-230 meters. But after that, you have the sensation of pushing limits in every aspect and being in a game of Russian Roulette.

*How do you feel after such an experience? Do you get the sense of having achieved or conquered something?* It is funny, because after all my biggest cave dives, I just felt happy. During the decompression stages, I felt elated and relieved of stress. However, after the getting out of the water, I would also feel exhausted, have headaches and feel a bit empty. As a cave explorer, your purpose is not to break records, so when someone tells me that the record dive was sort of a stupid thing to do, I can understand where that comes from. I am actu-

ally not quite sure myself as to why I wanted to make that dive. It was only much later that I started appreciating the dive more, and that was for a number of other reasons, too. It helped in getting sponsors, which is not very easy to get when you are a cave diver, as many sponsors do not want to get into that area. Having set that record has given me new opportunities, for example, to do master classes and get equipment for my next projects.

*What would you want to do with fame, now that you got the recognition?*

Pretty much the same. Explore caves and wrecks. There are some



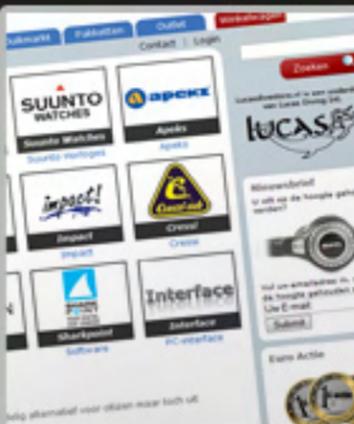
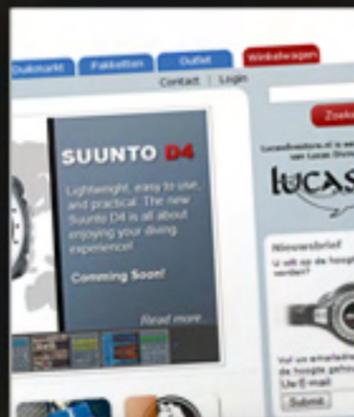
### What's HPNS?

High pressure nervous syndrome (HPNS) is a neurological disturbance that may result from breathing a high-pressure mixture of helium and oxygen—such as trimix or heliox—under high pressure for an extended amount of time, putting a physiological limit on deep technical dives.

"Helium tremors" were first described in the early 1960's by among others, Royal Navy physiologist, Peter B. Bennett, who later founded the Divers Alert Network. The term high pressure nervous syndrome was first used by Brauer to describe the combined symptoms of tremors, electroencephalography (EEG) changes, and somnolence that appeared during a 1,189 foot chamber dive in Marseilles.

Symptoms of HPNS include tremors, visual disturbances, nausea and dizziness, and decreased mental performance. It is not likely that HPNS can be prevented entirely, but there are effective methods to delay or change the development of the symptoms. Slow rates of compression, or adding stops on the ascent, have been found to prevent large initial decrements in performance. Also, the levels of nitrogen or hydrogen in the gas mix seem to play a role in preventing the onset of HPNS. The susceptibility of divers to HPNS depends on the individual. ■





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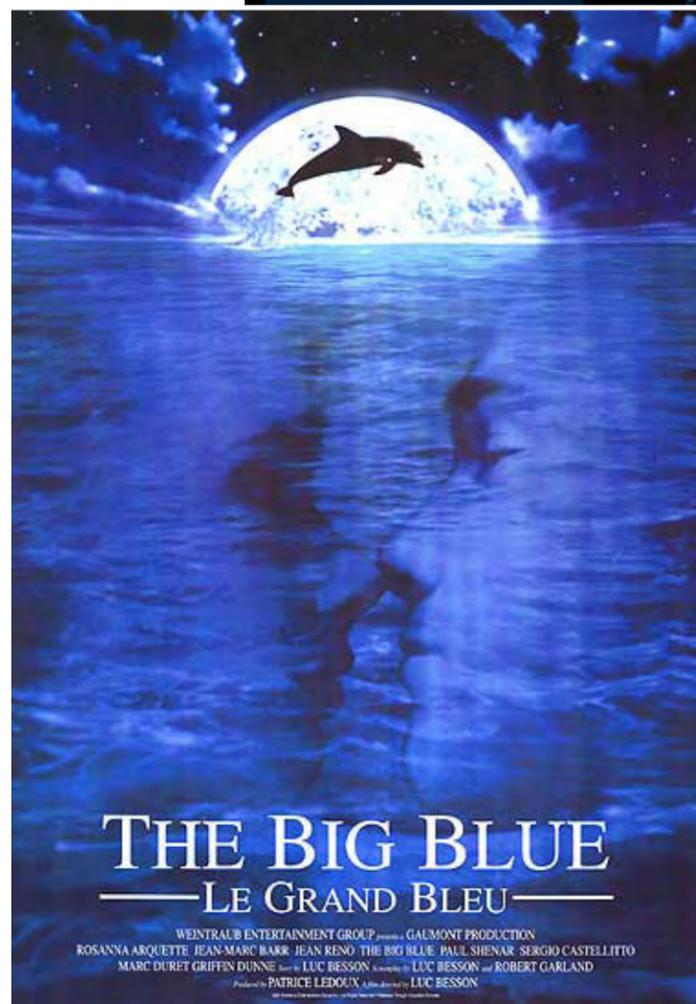
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good wrecks in the Mediterranean that I can now explore, since I have now found a sponsor for a rebreather and other equipment. I like caves the most, but I would also like to explore the wreck of *Kirk Pride* that rests at a depth 238 meters off Grand Cayman. It is deep, but the conditions there a good. It will, however, require a lot of equipment. I also want to do a number of projects with Jim Bowden, the deepest cave diver and dive legend.

*How do you define which risk levels are acceptable, and how do you manage risks?*

I am not sure, that just because you dive deeper or penetrate further into a cave, that your risks are necessarily greater, or you are forced to accept higher risks. I have had friends that died unnecessarily, because they did quite stupid dives. They didn't have to die. If you take a closer look at some of the decompression software that is around, you will see that you can choose conservatism and risk levels for i.e DCI. You can't completely remove all risk, but you can minimize it to an acceptably low level. So, you have to put some thought



The movie, *Big Blue* (1988) by French director Luc Besson, has inspired a lot of divers. While it became a cult movie Europe, the film was a commercial failure in North America

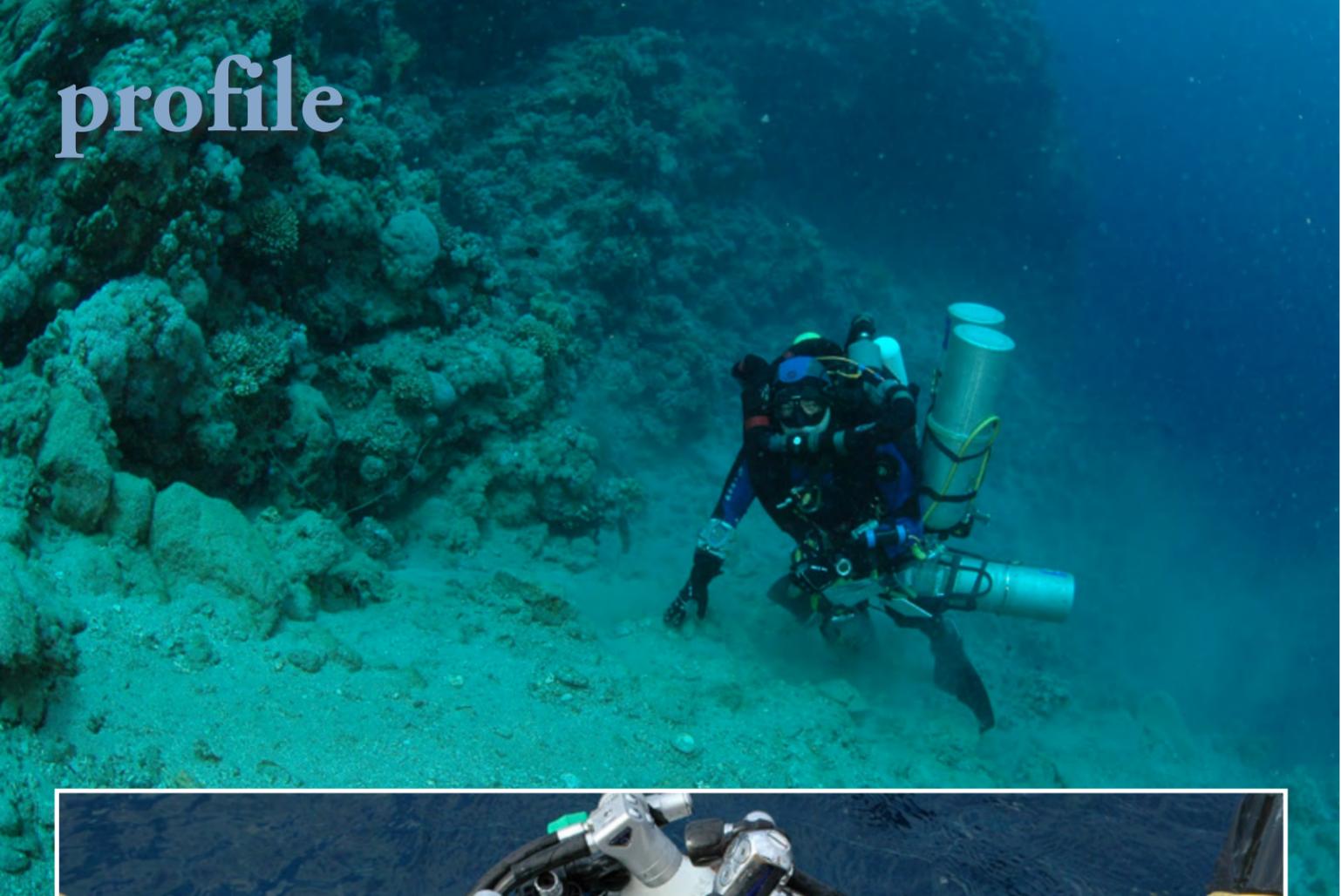
bringing backups. Experience, good planning, and organisation are also essential contributions towards reducing risk.

Make sure that you exercise enough. That does not necessarily mean twice a day, but at least make sure you have the sufficient fitness for the dives you plan to do.

*What are the best experiences diving has given you?*

I have many good ones, in many different areas—especially with cave diving. It is not the biggest dive projects, but the ones where everything just works perfectly. Discovering a 50 or 100 meter gallery in a virgin cave ranks up there. After such an experience, I

into it and make some choices. You can go on an extreme dive and experience no problems, and then have an accident on a shallow dive just because you didn't think. As regards to equipment, it can fail, but you reduce risk by



can walk on clouds for a couple of months. I also appreciate all the great people that I have met through diving, and the friendships I have made. I value the conversations we have had and the opinions I have heard. The coral diving I did in Tunisia was in a place where there was nobody else around, and the underwater mountains there were of magnificent beauty. Diving with Pipin and Audrey was also special. I like people.

*So, you like teaching, too?*

My main profession is actually being a primary school teacher. So, yes, I like it. I like teaching cave diving, too. There is nothing like seeing the happy expressions on the faces of your students after they have completed a cave dive.

*What do you tell your pupils in the school where you teach? Do you tell them about all your exploits and adventures?*

They know already. They bring me magazine articles about it. But they are very natural about it. I can sense a little admiration, but they also make jokes about it.

*It must be a cool thing to have a teacher who is a famous diver and record breaker. Do you encourage the kids to take up diving?*

Not at all. They are too young and will have to arrive at making their own decision and only much later. I have an 11-year-old daughter myself. She has tried diving a couple of times, and if she wants to pursue it, it's up to her. I don't want to push her. It

is not a sport where one should push at all. It is about enjoyment and having a good time.

My general advice to all divers is to enjoy the experiences that diving can give you and don't make matters too complicated or serious. Last year, I spent time with my team doing a series of nor-

mal recreational dives not going under 40m. We had a marvellous time, where we relaxed and were able to enjoy a couple of beers in the company of good friends after the dives.

Enjoy it! ■

Pascal Bernabé's latest title—so far, just in French

