

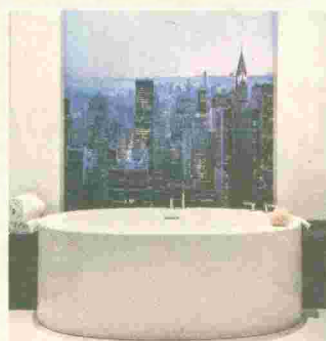
NEW STRAITS TIMES

# LIFE & TIMES

*Live it up on Saturday*

## SHOWERS IN THE SKY

LIVING PAGES 4&5

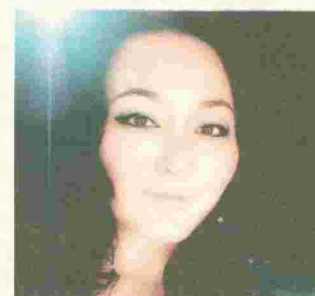


UP CLOSE WITH **ROLF DOBELLI**

MEN PAGE 7

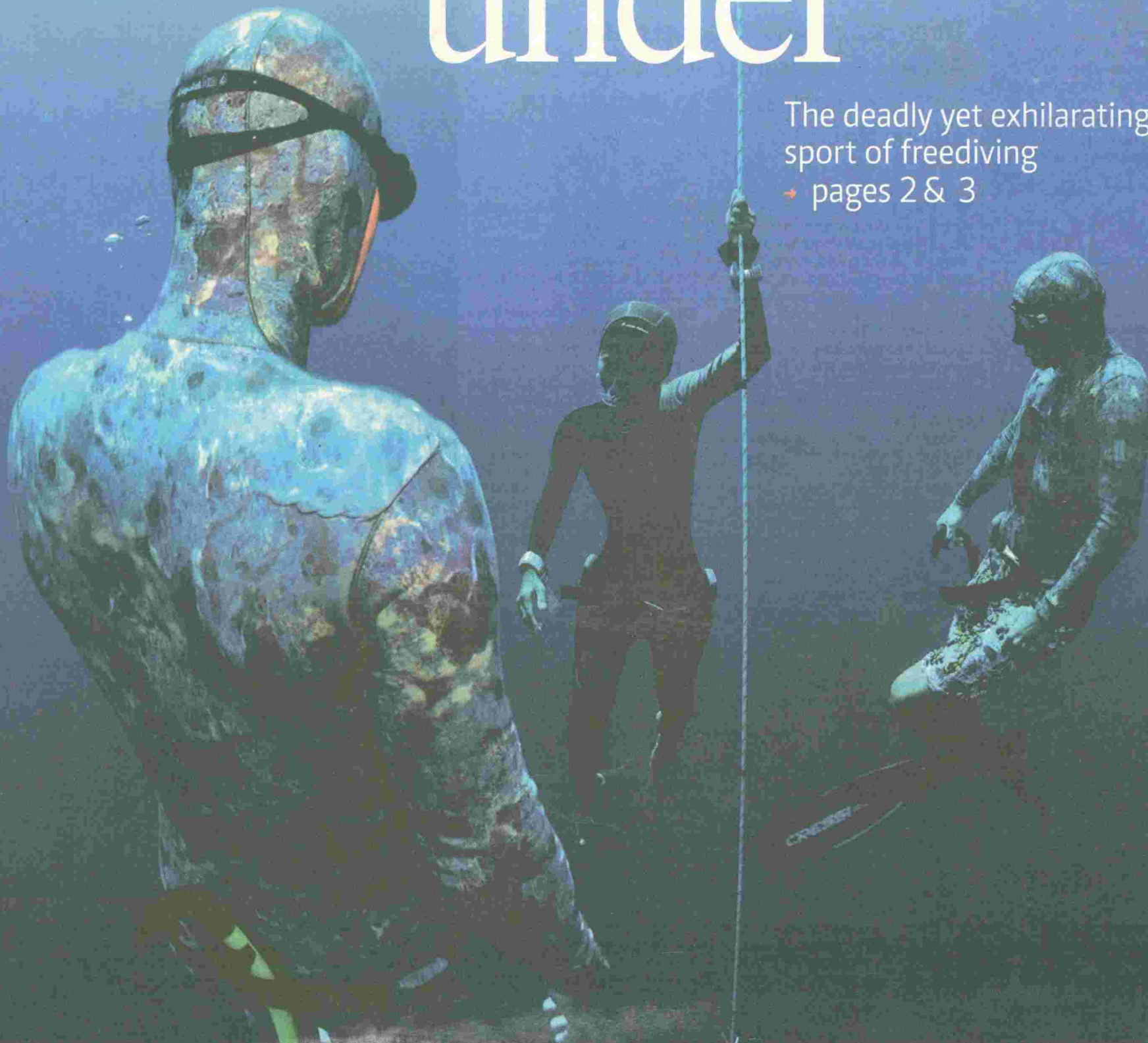
## SKY'S THE LIMIT FOR NELL NG

SHOWBIZ PAGE 12



# Going under

The deadly yet exhilarating sport of freediving  
→ pages 2 & 3



## LIFE &amp; TIMES LIVING



## CELEBRATING PENGUINS

IT'S World Penguin Day today, so let's get to know these tuxedoed seabirds better.

- There are about 17 to 20 species of penguins alive today, mostly living in the southern hemisphere, except for the Galapagos penguins, which occasionally fly north of the equator.
- The tallest are the Emperor penguins (122cm tall), while the smallest are the Little Blue Penguins (40cm).
- Penguins don't swallow salt-water because they have a special gland called the supraorbital gland behind their eyes that filters out seawater. They do this through their beaks, by sneezing.
- Penguins go through a catastrophic moult, where they lose all their feathers in a two to three-week period.
- They are not commitment-phobes. Many penguins mate with the same partner season after season.
- Penguins never forget their roots. They will return to same nesting site where they were born.



Freediving has helped to bring out the other side of Azua Shafii.

## Into the blue

Three professional freedivers tell **Aneeta Sundararaj** about a fascinating sport that enables one to interact with marine life

**H**ERE'S an experiment you can do right now: Sit comfortably with both feet planted on the ground. Practise inhaling and exhaling a few times. Then, start a stopwatch and hold your breath. How long did you last before inhale? The average person should be able to hold his breath for about 30 seconds. When you add the physical challenges of doing this underwater, it is remarkable to hear professional freediver, Flavia Eberhard, say that she can hold her breath underwater for six minutes.

Since 2007, the 38-year-old who comes from Brazil, has achieved nine freediving records including a South American record in Free Immersion to a dive of 69m. What is freediving though?

Freediving is diving, swimming or staying submerged underwater on a single breath of air. It can be a recreational activity or a competitive one. In other words, a freediver has to rely on his ability to hold his breath until resurfacing rather than on the use of something like scuba equipment.

Flavia, an instructor and trainer, is here to encourage others to take part in freediving courses for beginners and instructors alike. Two of the people she's training and working with are Malaysian professional freediver Syfidatul Azua Shafii, 30, and Scuba Schools International director of operations Nick Khoo Thean Chun, 45.

### NO BUBBLES OR NOISE

The nagging question remains: Why freedive? What's the attraction of this sport when you can probably achieve the same results scuba diving? It seems that freedivers and scuba

divers have different goals. Scuba divers observe aquatic life and the environment and freedivers experience "unlimited possibilities of thrilling actions, demanding challenges, and peace."

Flavia has a similar take on this, but what she says makes you aware that it's not how long she spends underwater that matters (scuba divers can spend up to 45 minutes underwater). It's the quality of the time she spends in the ocean that has her hooked on freediving.

She adds: "With scuba diving, I am observing marine life. With freediving, I am with them. I interact with them. I am almost a part of them. There are no bubbles or noise from the tank. It allows me to get close to the marine life."

In an online video called Folego about freediving, there is a scene where Flavia glides next to a shark (her favourite fish). For a while, they're happily swimming side by side. Then, Flavia moves a little to the left. Next thing you know, this fish has moved to the right and done a somersault, as if in response to Flavia's movements.

### IN SYNC

Is it difficult, then, to freedive? Both Flavia and Azua say they learnt the basics in less than two days. But Nick cautions: "I always use the following analogy. When you get your driving licence, you have the right to drive on the roads. But how experienced are you? It sometimes takes years to become a good driver. In the same way, once you know how to freedive, it will take time before you get experience."

While freediving is for all ages, there is no doubt one has to be physically fit. What helps divers to be in sync with the movements



of the fish is also some level of flexibility. This is why Flavia and Azua practise yoga.

"We practise a lot of breathing techniques and you have to learn to trust your body," says Flavia. "If you wake up one morning and you haven't slept well, it'll show. You

must listen to your body."

Even a slight slouch, which may not be discernible to the average person, will result in a person's breathing becoming disturbed. "That means the body has to use more energy underwater," she adds.

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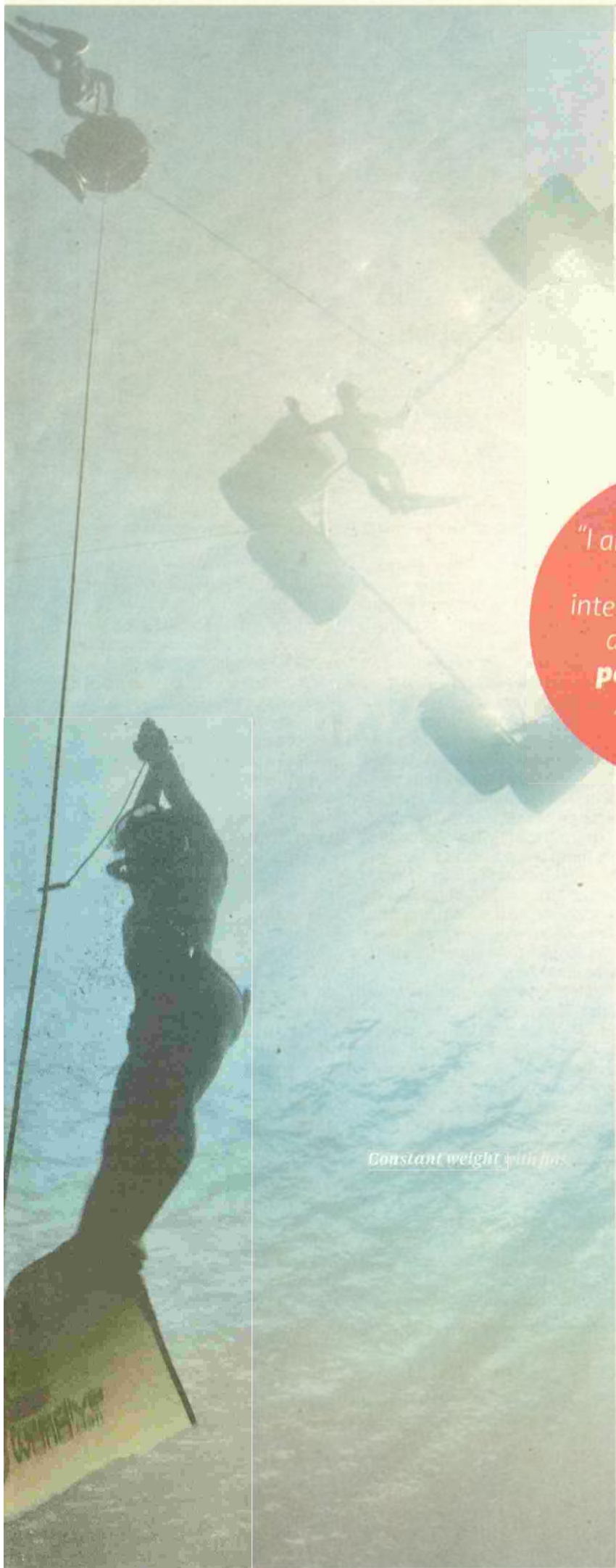
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*"I am observing the marine life. I interact with them. I am almost a part of them."*  
 Flavia Eberhard

## COMPETITIVE FREEDIVING

THE competitive stage of freediving can be divided into a number of sporting disciplines. They are:

- 1** Static Apnea: You lie face down, fully relaxed and motionless in the water to test how long you can hold your breath.
- 2** Dynamic With Fins: You're tested on the distance you can swim in one breath. For this you'd wear the traditional bi-fins or a mono-fin.
- 3** Dynamic Without Fins: As its name implies, it's the same as Dynamic With Fins but without fins.
- 4** Constant Weight With Fins: You descend and ascend the depths of the water with fins.
- 5** Constant Weight Without Fins: Similar to No. 4, you would descend and ascend the depths of the water without the use of fins.
- 6** Free Immersion: Use a rope to pull yourself down in to the depths and then back up to the surface.

Constant weight with fins.

communication for more than 20 years before he decided that the stress was just too much and left to pursue his love for the outdoors.

Azua, who has a post-graduate qualification in environmental management, was involved in creating Environmental Impact Studies. A native of Muar, Johor, she adds: "I was the only girl when I was growing up. My cousins were all boys and we used to go camping and fishing."

For a long while, her exposure to the marine world was limited to projects like saving sea horses and monitoring the dugong population in Gelang Patah. A few years ago, Azua replaced a friend who was on the course to learn to freedive. From then on, she was hooked.

She says: "Freediving brought out the other Azua. I realised that I liked the other Azua more and more and soon, decided that I wanted to dedicate myself to finding her all the time." The 'other Azua', she explains, is a person who is calmer and more confident.

Flavia was brought up on an island off the coast of Brazil. She grew up taking part in sports, but her life changed when she started to travel the world at the age of 17 as a professional model.

"I am like a nomad," she says. "I've been travelling all over the world since I was 17. For a long time, London was home and I did all my work from there. But every holiday I had, I would be snorkelling or scuba diving."

It's very telling that Flavia uses the word "nomad" because when she turned 28, something quite marvellous happened: She had a complete change in her outlook. "I gave up everything to



Nick cautions that it takes years to become a good freediver.

go and stay in a Bedouin village in Egypt. I stayed in Dahab for close to 2½ years and I still go back at least once or twice a year. It was a transition. From having tons of clothes, I now had one bag. I was in a long-term relationship and I had my whole world planned out. But suddenly, everything changed."

During one of her frequent trips to London, she decided to try freediving. "I was the only woman in my class and the water was freezing cold. But I was hooked. By 2007, I decided that I was going to dedicate my time and energy to this."

At one point, freediving was all she could think of. She would practise holding her breath all the time. "When I went up the escalator in the Underground in London, I would see how long I could hold my breath."

### MENTAL TEST

What's the limit to the depths that a freediver can go? Flavia gives an open-ended answer: "It's a mental test. You cannot fight the water. You have to become a part of it. The reward is setting the

goal and achieving it. And this is a continuous process. If you say that your limit is 70m and you achieve it, then what? What else is there?"

Perhaps, the real point of freediving, then, is that there is no limit.

Azua is focusing on ashtanga yoga and, in particular, the urdhva dhanurasana pose (backbend wheel pose) to help strengthen the muscles in the thoracic region. For now, she's able to do this pose on land, but she's still unsure about doing it underwater. In addition,

to ensure that she's in top form, Azua has stopped drinking coffee. "I don't smoke or drink alcohol, but I've stopped taking caffeine to swim better," she explains.

Before freediving, these three people had very different lives. Nick worked in marketing and