

With lungs convulsing, it felt like a giant hand was squeezing my chest. My eyes darted instinctively to the surface six stories up, but I knew I wouldn't make it if I tried. At that point I realized I might have taken my last breath. *Don't panic.* I told myself again. *Trust him.* Seeing the fear in my eyes, Ramon moved his hands up and down in front of my face. *Calmly. Try again.*

Like a clumsy astronaut in a space suit, I extended my right hand straight ahead, dropped it to my side and around in a circle. With renewed focus I crossed my left hand over to touch my right arm, slid my hand up towards my shoulder, and found it—my lost air hose.

I stuffed the hose into my mouth and blew out sharply to empty the tube of water, but my lungs were void of air and nothing came out. Ramon stared calmly but intently into my eyes and nodded: *Plan B.* My lungs spasmed again as I raised my tongue to block my throat and pushed the front button, which blasted air into the tube, clearing the intake. I took a cautious sip of air through my mouth, then another one, and then a final long intake of oxygen and nitrogen, and began breathing normally. It was the longest 60 seconds of my life—and I was paying to do this.

My goal for the past year has been to come back from every vacation I take with more than a sunburn, a hangover, and five pounds to work off on the treadmill. (OK ten pounds. Food is so into me.) I was determined to bring back some practical new skill that would enhance my life beyond the vacation, even if it might mean risking my life underwater in Mexico.

I give you, my year of learning vacations.

SCUBA CERTIFICATION IN PLAYA DEL CARMEN, MEXICO

Scuba was something I never saw in my future. On a casual snorkeling trip with my family years ago, a few of us decided to try diving. A few minutes into the boat trip, the guide mentioned something about not holding your breath when you ascend or your lungs could explode, and I yelled "I'm out" and re-joined the snorkelers.

I always felt there was a secret world of diving still waiting to be discovered, so I decided to face my fear of sharks and exploding lungs by getting my scuba certification in one of the best dive spots in the world, Playa del Carmen, Mexico. Playa is a charming village 45 minutes from Cancun and a short ferry ride from Cozumel. The Professional Association of Scuba Diving (PADI) certification proves to dive shops and resorts around the world that you've completed the basic training and experience required to safely scuba at a certain depth. The deeper the dive, the more training required. www.padi.com

I chose **Phantom Divers** (www.phantomdivers.com) in Playa as my dive center, because they had positive reviews online, an informative website, and an active Facebook page.

The PADI Open Water Diver certification can be completed in two to four days, and includes an educational component, a confined water dive (usually a swimming pool), and four open water dives. For the educational component, PADI offers a book and DVD package for self-study, but the easiest option is to just follow their online eLearning course for \$120. The course covers basic scuba skills, terminology, and safety procedures, and you can't move on until you've passed the test for each section. The eLearning must be completed before your first open water dive, but it's an easy thing to do the week before your trip so you can focus on the vacation when you're there. I didn't do that, of course, and spent my first couple nights in Playa cramming until 2 A.M.

That first pool dive is awkward, because you're wearing heavy equipment, you have to get used to breathing under water, and without the ability to speak, hand signals become a matter of life and death. Thankfully, my friendly PADI instructor Ramon Magaña spoke perfect English above the water, and perfect hand signals below. **Rule number one in diving is never hold your breath, and you have to constantly pres-**



Author with Turtle

surize your ears as you descend. As you go lower, you continue to pressure adjust, but the lower you go, the more dangerous it is to ascend quickly if anything goes wrong. If you suddenly can't breathe your instinct might be to panic and blast to the surface, but if you're 60 or 100 feet down you probably won't make it in time, and it's dangerous to ascend that quickly anyway (see exploding lung theory). Thus a major part of scuba training is just learning the correct way to handle any problems that could occur. Having said that, it's quite safe, as you always have a dive buddy and back up breathing options. In an emergency, you just have to remain calm and do what you've practiced.

The day after the pool dive, we boarded a dive boat right on the beach in Playa and hit the azure blue water for a ten-minute boat ride. Ramon was clear and methodical in his instructions, and I finally jumped into the water for my first ocean dive. We descended 60 feet into the muffled ocean silence, and when my mind stopped racing with rules and warnings and emergency procedures, my world became spectacular.

Everything on the ocean floor was new and extraordinary and surprising. Giant prehistoric looking turtles, ridiculous puffer and clown fish, crabs, barracudas, anemones, scary looking moray eels, and a million animals I'd never seen before. The only problem I had with breathing was that I kept laughing, because it was like swimming through the Mos Eisley Cantina scene in *Star Wars*. At that point, something inside me shifted, and I finally understood the allure of diving. I even felt a twinge of sadness for the many people who may never experience this incredible world.

While in Playa, I stayed at **El Taj** (www.eltaj.com), a newly-opened condo hotel on the beach. The condo hotel concept is brilliant: it allows you to stay in a comfortable, upscale condo with a full kitchen and living room, but with the comforts of a luxury hotel like concierge, maid service, spa, and gym. All El Taj condos (starting at \$205/night) have ocean views, plasma screens, marble bathrooms, A/C, outdoor

whirlpools, and filtered water. Some even have in-unit washer/dryers, which is the ideal amenity for a beach vacation. El Taj is perfectly situated on the beach in Playa, just a few steps from Phantom Divers and only two blocks from the popular 5th Avenue, a long cobblestone pedestrian walkway with shops, restaurants, and a swinging nightlife.

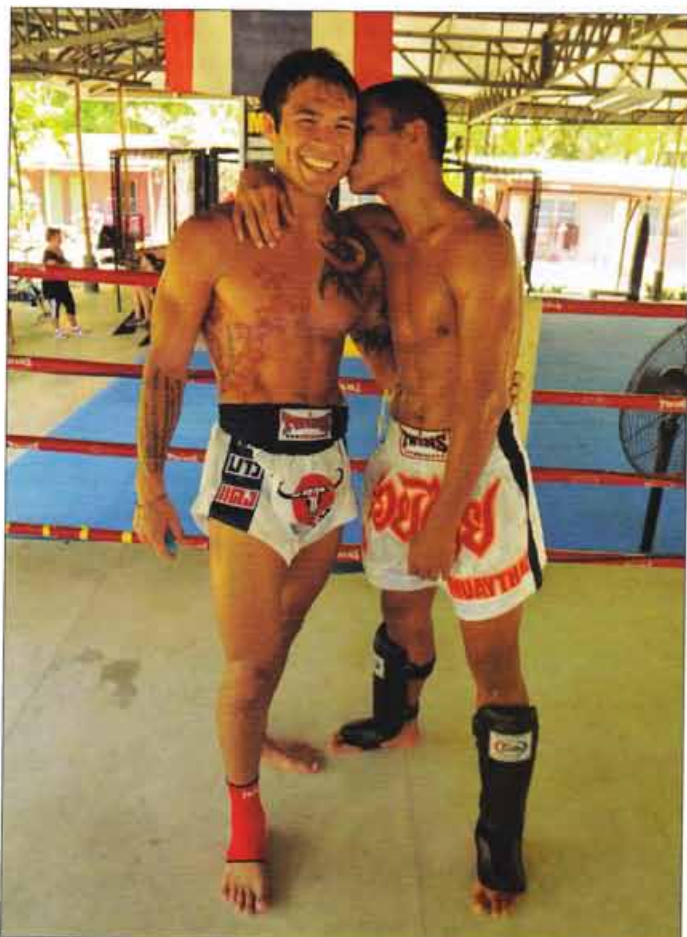
KICKBOXING IN PHUKET, THAILAND

I have no interest in sports or martial arts or kickboxing or anything physical or tiring or macho. So when my friends heard I was going to a kickboxing camp in Thailand, they assumed I was joking.

In fact, I did it because it was literally the most ridiculous thing I could possibly imagine, and would thus probably be great fun to write about, even if I just ended up complaining about how terrible it was. To heighten the terribleness of it all, I decided to go for an entire two months. Go big or go home.

Thai kickboxing, or *Muay Thai*, is the national sport of Thailand, and after doing plenty of research, I decided to head for the beautiful beaches of Phuket, to a camp called **Tiger Muay Thai** (www.tigermuaythai.com).

TMT specializes in both Muay Thai and mixed martial arts, and both practices are going on every day, simultaneously, in different areas. Everyone starts at the beginning level on day one, and the instructor moves you to the intermediate or advanced levels at his discretion. Some participants are focused less on technique and more on the boot camp and weight loss experience. When you first arrive, you'll probably choose the morning or afternoon session rather than both, until you get used to working out in the heat (or rain), and there will also be days when you're just too tired and don't feel like doing any training. Those days are fantastic—lay by the pool, get an \$8 massage, eat some delicious Thai food, and explore the local beaches, temples, or malls. Remember, you're on vaca-



tion. The crazy nightlife of Patong is a 20-minute tuk-tuk ride away, and partying tends to be a big part of the TMT stay.

A typical 7 A.M. session starts off with yoga, boot camp fitness, or running, followed by Muay Thai or mixed martial arts technique at 8 A.M., then drills, grappling, and one-on-one or bag sparring for a couple hours. After a break for lunch, the whole routine starts over in the afternoon. Phuket afternoons are hot and many guests lounge in the pools to cool off between training sessions. For meals, you can eat at nearby restaurants, buy groceries and prepare food in your room, or eat on-site at the Tiger Grill (they offer an idiot-proof meal plan for \$185/month for two healthy meals a day).

What makes Thailand so extraordinary for foreigners is the cost of living at this kind of camp. To train four to eight hours a day at TMT is \$278/month. Accommodation options include everything from budget single rooms on-site starting at \$155/month, to roomy poolside luxury bungalows within walking distance for \$742/month. Add in a \$1,000 flight and you could escape to Thailand for an entire month for \$2,000 including training, food, lodging, and airfare. Of course you could also just go for a week or two, but if you want bang for your buck, a month in Thailand is a cheap way to push the restart button on your life while getting in shape.

I assumed a kickboxing camp would be a testosterone-fueled nightmare, but I discovered a friendly and diverse mix of men and women, primarily from Europe, Australia, and the U.K., at all levels of expertise. Some, like me, had never put on a glove before, while others were amateur fighters living and training at the camp for a year or more. I felt like I had discovered a secret escape to paradise that few people knew about, and almost every guest I spoke with had plans to return next year. TMT hosts mixers and barbecues for guests, and American owner Will McNamara and his friendly Thai staff do a great job of creating a welcoming atmosphere. It felt like a family, and I've traveled with and kept in touch with members of staff and guests. My time at TMT was both life-changing and eye-opening, and I can't wait to return.

Note: while ongoing political demonstrations in the last few years have hurt Thailand's tourism industry, foreigners have not been targeted in the conflict. Phuket is one of the safest areas to be in Thailand, but check the State Department's International Travel Department (www.travel.state.gov) for Thailand-specific travel warnings before booking your travel.

VIDEO EDITING IN SANTA BARBARA, CA

Remember when "desktop publishing" first hit, suddenly everyone could produce poorly designed layouts filled with awful graphics and way too many fonts? Now that the video revolution is in full swing, the same thing is happening with online video. Since anyone can produce video for web, there is a flood of terrible footage on everything from travel and instruction videos to personal and business video blogs. Amateur video usually means poor sound, a shaky camera with random pans, and too many filters and effects.

Enter the **Travel Channel Academy** (www.travelchannelacademy.com), a four-day crash course in video producing and editing, designed to turn formerly shaky, amateur videos into polished content ready for the web.

The Travel Channel, which is in millions of homes, is positioning **TravelChannel.com** as the new portal for high quality travel video. Now that it's easy to get HD video with tiny camcorders, the days of large video crews and expensive production companies are over. By taking advantage of the video production "one man band," Travel Channel can afford to buy short form video pieces from a large number of independent travelers, rather than just a few production companies, and the Travel Channel Academy is their way to actively train the next generation of video producers.