

Diving the Underwater Grottoes of Rosh Hanikra

Mention cave diving to most SCUBA enthusiasts, and they'll shake their heads side-to-side, and politely say, "No thanks, too dangerous."

However, diving the underwater caves of Rosh Hanikra is a very safe and relaxing adventure.

Located at the Northwest coast of Israel, the cliffs of Rosh Hanikra are part of a chain of chalk mountains. Appearing as a dramatic, steep, 210 foot white pillar right at the water's edge, this area is one of Israel's top tourist attractions.

Cable cars take up to 15 passengers to the top of the mountain. There, tourists can hike along a 1200 foot long pathway through dramatic caverns, enjoy a panoramic view of the cliff and surrounding sea, dine in a restaurant shaped like a ship, and of course, purchase souvenirs.

These same tunnels and caverns, formed by sea action against the relatively soft chalk, are even more dramatic below the

surface, where ten spectacular underwater grottoes are interconnected along a large, 600-foot long underwater tunnel.

Danny, owner of the Trek Yam Dive Shop, noted that diving the site today is much easier than when he first opened his operation 25 years ago.

“Today,” explained Danny, “you can drive right up to the dive site, park your car, descend a special, divers’ staircase right down to the water, and begin your dive immediately.”

Leading us down the stairway, Gideon, a scuba instructor and grotto guide, explained that the water temperature, from 80 to 85 degrees Fahrenheit in the summer, was always comfortable, but that water conditions could sometimes be rough.

“When strong winds blow in from the southwest,” he warned, “dive conditions can sometimes be unsuitable. It’s best to call the dive shop beforehand, just to be sure.”

Standing on a slippery rock at the water’s edge, the sea looked rough to us, but Gideon taught us the unconventional entry method that he had perfected after years of experience here. With

one arm clutching the staircase railing, we squatted down ungracefully, waited for a wave to reach our rock, and then glided off the rock into the swell.

After this very undignified, but surprisingly quite comfortable entry, we found ourselves in seven feet of water with a sloped and rocky bottom. We christened this entry technique the “Gideon Glide,” and prayed that no one on shore was videotaping us.

The sunlight reflected off the white face of Rosh Hanikra made the water around us sparkle like thousands of white-hot diamonds. I wondered if SCUBA manufacturers produced masks with sunglasses.

We turned to our right, faced the massive cliff, and descended to a rocky floor. There, the water was very calm, and we enjoyed a leisurely swim through clear, light green water toward the grottoes.

Following Gideon's signal, we descended through the shimmering, warm water, almost vertically, to the mouth of a large tunnel entrance.

We entered the tunnel and were delighted to discover that in this and all the other tunnels and caves that we would be exploring, several factors were present that made the diving very pleasant and non-stressful.

First, all the tunnels and grottoes were very large. Ceilings were very high, and walls very far apart, so no claustrophobia here.

Second, none of the areas we visited were dark. All had large, clearly visible, wide-open entrances and exits, abundant sunlight streaming in from both ends.

Third, with the constant wave action flushing the tunnels and caves, there were no massive deposits of silt or debris on the floor. Therefore, our kicking fins did not cause any silt to rise off the bottom and cloud the water or mar our view. Visibility was excellent throughout the dive.

Gideon signaled an ascent, and we found ourselves floating comfortably on the surface, breathing fresh air, inside a huge cave, a large sunlit entrance yards away. We enjoyed viewing the cave's ceiling and walls, where water and wind had carved the chalk and dolomite into fantastic shapes.

The sunlight made the white chalk walls with its embedded mineral deposits sparkle. Turning to the cave entrance, we enjoyed a spectacular view of our cave opening framing the green water around us and the sea beyond.

Our guide explained that this was the preferred method of diving the Rosh Hanikra grottoes: swim through a tunnel, ascend to the surface inside a cave, enjoy the view, breathe fresh air, relax, and plan the next dive segment.

Descending once again, we turned left and entered another tunnel. Swimming lazily through this tunnel provided us with a scene that would soon be repeated again and again through the morning: we could see divers to our rear, silhouetted against the

large, sunlit opening behind them, while we swam in twilight toward the brightly lit exit in front of us.

In this manner, we visited five of the ten caves. In some cases, we descended to a maximum of 24 feet, before swimming horizontally again and ascending to the surface inside another cheerful, open cave. Shafts of light and splashes of color surrounded us.

At one surface interval, Gideon pointed to the east, and informed us that this section of cliff looked like, and was therefore called, the “Elephant’s Foot.” I was able to see what he meant (especially after turning my head toward the sun and squinting my eyes just so).

He quipped that after another 200 years of erosion, the “elephant” would probably look like a mouse.

Turning north, we were able to see remnants of the 700-foot long railway that had been built through the mountain by the British army in World War one. During Israel’s War for

Independence, it was blown up to prevent invasion by the Lebanese army.

At our final cave surface interval, we were able to see tourists walking through the tunnels above us, and after an interesting conversation, succeeded in convincing them that we weren't terrorists.

We turned left, and swam south toward our beach exit. We noticed the water around us, so green before, was now definitely blue. Gideon explained that on clear days the water is green in the morning, blue in the afternoon, and then darker blue later in the day.

Kicking lazily back to shore, we noticed more details that we had missed on our way to the grottoes. Many colorful wrasse played in the green grass, and medium-sized groupers kept their distance from us, hoping to some day become large groupers.

Spiny urchin hid under many rocky nooks and crannies, as did small, spaghetti-like, multi-colored anemone.

Toward the end of the dive, we were surprised by a sad-looking loggerhead turtle who quickly passed in and out of our field of vision. I learned, later, that Israel's Nature and Parks Authority has undertaken a conservation program to protect these reptiles.

Early every summer, large numbers of turtles dig bottle-shaped pits on shore and lay their eggs there. Several weeks later, guided by the light of a full moon, hundreds of little, baby turtles dig their way out of their pits, and scurry off to the open sea.

Exiting on the beach, we received another surprise. An Israeli army jeep was waiting patiently on the road above us, armed soldiers watching us with great interest. Apparently, all dive operators always let the army know when divers will be present in the area.

When the soldiers realized that we were the tourists they were told to watch out for, they were all smiles as they laughed and joked with us. One soldier asked us to send a copy of SKIN DIVER with his picture to a relative in New York.

I had never before associated the phrase “Cave diving” with relaxation and safety. But, when I asked, none of the local dive operators could recall a single incident of any mishap, major or minor, to anyone diving the grottoes of Rosh Hanikra. Of course, whenever diving in unfamiliar territory, it’s wise to be guided by a local, knowledgeable, expert.

After this glorious dive, it was easy to see why it’s a favorite destination for those in the know.