



Dive Into the Silent World

Relatively unknown so far, the tiny island of Netrani is emerging as a popular destination to discover the mysteries of the ocean. Its deep diving sites and pristine waters were showcased at India's first scuba diving festival and it has the potential of becoming one of the favourite spots in India for scuba diving and snorkelling.

Pallavi Pasricha

It was a time for firsts – the first weekend of the year, the first time a scuba diving festival was organised in the country and the first time I was going to try my hand at deep sea diving. I thought that Netrani in the south Indian state of Karnataka is an unlikely candidate to host this underwater event, but after encountering the rich marine life here, I realised there couldn't have been a better place than this tiny, uninhabited heart-shaped island in the Arabian Sea.

Ideal for Diving

Also known as Pigeon Island, Netrani is about 18km by boat from Murudeshwar, the coastal town where participants stayed during the festival. A perfect spot for diving because of the excellent underwater visibility, this island has become the newest kid on the block in India for scuba diving and snorkelling – so far Andaman and Nicobar Islands and Goa were the well-known spots.

Netrani is unique because it is one of the

few islands that lie at some distance from the coast, so the sea is pristine and the dive sites go down from six to 30 metres, making it suitable for both experienced and novice divers. Years ago, it was used by the navy for target practice but that stopped some time back due to environmental concerns after the discovery of beautiful coral reefs in the sea surrounding the island.

Easy accessibility is one of the key attractions in Netrani. The base town of Murudeshwar is about 150km from Mangalore and connected by air to major cities like New Delhi, Mumbai, Pune and Hyderabad. This means that adventure enthusiasts do not need to plan a trip in advance and can just hop over for a weekend. The approximately three-hour drive from Mangalore to Murudeshwar along the Konkan coast (the western coastline of India) is quite pretty with the vast expanse of the Arabian Sea giving you company for part of the way and setting the mood to explore its mysteries.

It has become one of the favourite spots for Ajey Patil, a Professional Association of Diving Instructors (PADI)/ Scuba Schools International (SSI) dive instructor with DiveGoa because it has everything divers dream about. "Considering that it has got 20 metre ways, great coral, big variety of dive sites, loads of fish – it's a fantastic place for people to keep in touch with their diving skills. Short of Andaman and Lakshadweep, this is stellar diving and it is easy to get to," he says.

The First Festival of its Kind

More than 1,000 people including 150 divers attended the festival, organised by the Karnataka government and Finkick Adventures. Three diving companies – DiveGoa, Netrani Adventures and West Coast Adventures guided the diving expeditions.

Though scuba diving was the highlight, the weekend at Murudeshwar was packed with a series of events meant to keep non-



Photo: Kshitij Mittal

Left: The second tallest Lord Shiva statue in the world;
Right: The island of Netrani is a rich bio-diverse area

divers busy – from beach football, spikeball and seminars to underwater hockey. For those who did not want to go diving, there were talks and films so that people could get a feel of what it was like to be underwater without actually going in.

Underwater hockey looked really interesting – two teams push the puck into the other team's goal to score points – all under water in a swimming pool. This was held at the hotel where I was staying, RNS Residency. The festival was inaugurated by the district minister, R V Deshpande, who at the age of 70 enthusiastically took part in this sport and also tried his hand at diving. I found that inspiring, and thought that if he can do it, so can I, and immediately let go off all my apprehensions, doubts and fears. I was ready to take on the experience.

The Diving Experience

The only concern I had about my first dive was that I didn't know how to swim and that thought gnawed at me during the one-and-a-half-hour journey via boat from Murudeshwar Beach to Netrani. I expressed my fear to the instructors, but they told me that it doesn't make a difference. The instructors briefed us about what needs to be done – equalising and breathing under water. The most important thing we were told is to stay calm because they will be guiding us. The moment the boat stopped near the island, my heart started beating faster, but after a quick check of

the equipment, before I knew it I was in the middle of the sea.

It took a minute or two to get my breathing right and then my instructor took my hand and guided me down. The moment I put my head under water, it was a different world. Of course I had read about it, seen it in movies, but now I was actually a part of it. The variety of fish here is mind boggling because this is a very rich bio-diverse area – from triggerfish, parrot fish, striped sergeant major to great barracuda and many others. They glide effortlessly between the reefs and the contrast of the fish, the blue water and the coral reefs make for a really pretty picture. It was like a scene out of the film *Finding Nemo* with an explosion of colourful fish around me. It felt absolutely surreal and at the same time strangely calming. The time passed quickly as I took in this new world and somehow I just did not want to surface.

It was as if something was holding me down there, maybe because I was at peace with myself, with nature and with the fact that I didn't have to talk to anyone. It was a world where all I had to hear was my own breath and the bubbles and I could have just lingered here for hours. For some time, the world's biggest aquarium had become my home, but my time was up soon and we headed back to Murudeshwar.

Exploring Murudeshwar

I got a few hours to explore this charming beach and temple town that is home to the second tallest Lord Shiva (Hindu deity) statue in the world. The beach is buzzing from dawn to dusk and offers water sports like jet skiing. I was famished after the dive so I stopped at one of the shacks selling fresh, piping hot chilli *pakoras* (fritters) and tea. It was so delicious and just what I needed after a long day.

Murudeshwar Temple dominates the town's skyline and is visible from everywhere due to the soaring 237 feet high Raja Gopuram (temple tower), which is actually the entrance of the temple. The highlight here is the amazing view of the Konkan shoreline from the eighteenth floor of the temple that fortunately can be accessed by a lift. The birds-eye view of the Lord Shiva statue is really impressive and an ideal spot to capture some stunning vistas. I was told that the sunset from there is quite a sight, so next time that's on the agenda.

There are several vegetarian restaurants around the temple but if you want to get

some delicious seafood, head to Nayak Fish Land. They serve the fresh catch of the day for dinner in their special *masala* (spices) and it's a dream for seafood lovers. We tucked into masala prawns, silverfish, surmai (kingfish) and much more. On our way back to Mangalore, we stopped at Bhatkal, about 15km from Murudeshwar, for its legendary *biryani* (rice cooked with spices and meat/vegetables). For the first time I had fish *biryani* and it was unlike the ones served in north India. Soaked in a thick curry of onion, tomato and spices, the rice was juicier and really flavourful.

India has Great Potential

With a coastal stretch of over 7,000km, India has huge scope for scuba diving. This popular international water sport was allowed only in Goa, Andaman and Lakshadweep, but since a year or so Karnataka is also emerging as a popular spot. "We have a huge coastline that hasn't yet been explored," points out Patil of Dive Goa.

Kshitij Mittal, co-founder, FinKick Adventure says that India has over 200 dive centres across the country and more than 100,000 certified divers. "Netrani has the best scuba diving in mainland India with great visibility and bio-diversity. The island is a protected area," he adds. Indeed, the small island of Netrani promises to become a favourite spot for scuba diving as the sport quickly captures the imagination and more and more people decide to explore the wonders of the ocean. ■



How to Reach

Murudeshwar is 150km away from Mangalore, the closest airport. It takes about three hours by road from there. It is 100km away from Udupi, 77km away from Gokarna and 200km away from Goa. From Bengaluru (514km away) it is best to take an overnight bus.

Where to Stay

RNS Residency and Naveen Beach Resort are the most prominent hotels in town. Both of them overlook the sea. RNS Golf Resort is also a good option.