

## **4b -How underwater and deep-sea tourism became so popular**

**In recent years, a wave of underwater "bucket-list" experiences has sought to bring travellers in close contact with the ocean's depths.**

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More than 70% of our planet is covered by water, and in an age when so much on land has been explored and explained, a recent wave of underwater tourism is allowing travellers to venture deep into one of the Earth's last uncharted depths: the ocean.

A series of high-profile openings – such as the world's first underwater hotel, the Conrad Maldives Rangali Island; the world's largest underwater restaurant Under in Norway – have been increasingly luring wealthy travellers to explore new worlds under the ocean's surface, even if they lack the specialist training. But as rescuers race against time to recover the tourist submersible that went missing during a dive to the Titanic's wreck, it may be time to rethink the limits of some of these bucket-list experiences.

Underwater tourism is hardly a new concept. Jacques Cousteau invented general-use scuba gear in 1942, and the Professional Association of Diving Instructors, PADI, has issued 27 million diver certifications globally since 1967. (...) More recently, however, a shift in thinking has brought scuba-like adventure to people who are not skilled divers or swimmers or don't have the time or means to earn diving certification. Experiences such as Seawalker on Green Island in the Great Barrier Reef allow people to submerge while wearing a large glass helmet. Dressed in a protective suit, "divers" are gently lowered to the ocean floor, where they quite literally walk upright on the sand, connected by tubes that allow them to breathe normally while underwater.

Then there are submersible rides, which offer tours along reefs of some of the world's most interesting islands and coastal regions, from Hawaii to Mauritius. These can range from larger submarines for groups of tourists to super-luxurious private subs, such as the ones by Deepflight that operate in the Four Seasons Resort in the Maldives. These environmentally friendly and air-conditioned crafts, with space for two people plus a pilot, have individual viewing domes that allow for an exclusive up-and-close experience.

Although many believe these sleek submersibles may be the future of underwater exploration, since no scuba or swimming experience is necessary – plus the battery-operated and low-noise-level submersibles mean the experience is as sustainable as possible – they often carry a high price tag. The Deepflight, for example, costs \$1,500 per couple for an hour's excursion. Lovers Deep, a luxury submarine hotel that glides through the reefs around St Lucia – complete with its own private chef and butler – starts at \$150,000 a night.

And then there's OceanGate, the deep-sea exploration tour company whose 23,000lb submersible, Titan, is currently at the centre of an international search operation. When the BBC spoke to the company's CEO, Stockton Rush, in autumn 2022 ahead of one of its maiden voyages to the Titanic wreck site, he said that his goal was to make deep-sea exploration commercially viable for the masses, while positioning the Titanic as a "must-do dive". But with tickets costing \$250,000 for a chance to witness the world's most famous shipwreck up close, the experience has been far out of reach for most travellers.

"While underwater tourism invokes evocative images of deep-sea fantasies, these experiences are in reality few and far between," said Dr Hayley Stainton, UK-based tourism academic and author at Tourism Teacher. "They are also very expensive. I do think that there is a market for underwater tourism. I just believe that it will be limited to the wealthy and the few."

Patricia Rodiles Martinez, Institutional Development & PR Manager of Les Roches, who held the first Space and Underwater Tourism Universal Summit in 2019, holds another view. "As demand increases over time, the costs associated will also come down, making it more and more accessible for all. This is what happened with the first airplanes, cruises and hotels."

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Whether or not submersible rides will become mainstream, many of these innovative underwater experiences have an important secondary benefit: they're educating a new audience on the need to

care for the ocean, which is struggling with threats such as coral bleaching due to global warming, over-fishing and pollution. (...) [Some] underwater projects are working hand in hand with conservationists and marine biologists to make the travel experience not only fun but educational, by raising awareness of the threat to the oceans and its habitats. While dive centres highlight the threats to their dive grounds, research centres, in particular on the Great Barrier Reef, are showcasing their research on topics such as coral bleaching, the effects of plastic waste and reef destruction. They're asking visitors to take away not only an enjoyable experience but vital knowledge, too.

Citizen science initiatives, from mapping seaweed species on the Washington State coast to tracking sharks and turtles on the Great Barrier Reef allow travellers and volunteers to help monitor the marine environment and potential tourism impacts, and provide critical data for research. They also have the side benefit of spreading the responsibility of protecting our underwater world to the entire community. (...)

In many ways, the idea behind underwater tourism is the same as expeditions to the Arctic, Amazon or other far-flung and environmentally fragile ecosystems: by visiting these hard-to-reach places, travellers may grasp the power and precariousness of our rapidly changing planet. But with so many historical, natural and artistic attractions under the seas, it is up to local governments and tour operators to ensure the sites are safely managed in an environmentally friendly and beneficial manner. The danger is that a site becomes too attractive and crowds will destroy the natural habitat. Tour boats, walkways and excursions need to be monitored and forced to adhere to strict guidelines. Even aware scuba divers can inadvertently harm the very sites they have come to enjoy. Studies into sustainable tourism growth by groups such as by Unesco have shown the solution lies with educating and empowering local governments and communities to oversee infrastructure developments, monitoring systems and creating strict local legislations.

Some projects are already in place, monitored internationally and designed to educate and bring local businesses on board. To protect the reefs through the education of scuba divers and snorkellers, for example, the Green Fins initiative has collated a number of internationally approved guidelines promoting a sustainable dive and snorkelling industry, which have been adopted by 11 countries and nearly 600 individual marine tourism companies in popular underwater tourism destinations such as Bali and Egypt since its inception in 2004.

"There are ways to develop underwater tourism in a sustainable manner that allows for positive impacts," Dr Stainton said. "For example, an aircraft that was submerged off the coast of Turkey has encouraged marine life to the area through the creation of an artificial reef.

As underwater tourism becomes more innovative and grows in popularity, we have a chance to develop new experiences and attractions that educate travellers about the deep sea. But it's imperative that we do so while prioritising sustainability and safety.

Ulrike Lemmin-Woolfrey, BBC.com/ travel, 20th June 2023

*EDITOR'S NOTE (20/06/23):* This article was **originally published in 2020**, and updated to reflect the news about the **disappearance of the Titanic submersible**.