

Do not think lightly about using a surface marker buoy.

This is going to be the last blog of this journey, which has abruptly come to an end and it has to be written. The last couple of months have been extraordinary. So many amazing things we've seen. Without this last blog, the story will just not be complete. Second reason why this blog needs to be written is because for me it's a hard and emotional story (BE AWARE!). At the moment I live by the day. I don't want to talk about what happened or what is still to come. Not yet. I only want to talk about the bits and pieces that I can handle at that moment. This blog will be the exception.

The third reason why this blog has to be written, is because there are lessons to be learned by other divers. I hope that when you are finished reading you feel the importance of using a surface marker buoy during your safety stop. EVERY TIME AND IN EVERY PLACE!! We share the water with boats and everyone makes a mistake now and then: either you get lost or drift off or boats accidentally enter a diving area. You can get angry about that, but this will not help you in case you get overrun. Prevention! Let not happen to you, what just happened to me.

But let me start by telling how special Eke is. He got me out of the water, feared for my life, held pressure on my wounds, realizing it could have well be him. He never left my side, coping with his own emotions, continuously translating Spanish into Dutch and vice versa, organizing and coordinating so many things, kept everyone back home well informed, and so much more. I would have been nowhere without him. Eke, I love you dearly.

It's Thursday, May 9th. The ingredients of the day are: a dive site at the Galápagos Islands about 1,5 hours off shore, one boat (ours), four crew members of which two are dive guides and besides us, seven other divers.

At 50 minutes into the dive, Eke points out a turtle to me. Wouw! I look for the guide to see if we have time to stay with the turtle for a short moment, but I see he's busy handsignaling with the other two divers in our group. One of them is low on air and as previously agreed will end the dive. The diveguide accompanies the buddyteam away from the rocks so they can safely start their ascent. He then joins us again to look for the turtle at around 12 meters depth. The whole dive has been shallow, so we still have enough air. Unfortunately we quickly run out of time, because we agreed not to dive longer than one hour. No rejoining the turtle. At 57 minutes into the dive the diveguide gives us the signal to start our ascent and our safetystop: always a harsh reality at the end of any dive. But this ascent is different. A fourth member joins us: a curious fish. He follows us closely until we reach a depth of five meters. At this depth we, divers, have to wait three minutes before returning to the surface. The fish, curious and brave as can be, stays with us and swims from diver to diver keeping less than have a meter distance. When the three minutes are up a wave the fish goodbye and slowly go up to the surface. The fish is still there at three meters. And also at two!! So funny! What does this fish want? Eke stays a brief moment longer at two meters to say his goodbyes. I make it to the surface.

The following takes place in less than a second:

When I get my head above the surface I see the right side of the bow right before my face. The boat is moving and distance is less than a meter. The captain could never have seen me. All alarmbells ring. I cannot get away. I'm going to be overrun. In a split second I realise that I have to avoid the bow to run right into my face. I try to turn over my left shoulder and get the divetank between myself and the boat

and perhaps a bit of depth. This does not work. I feel a light suction and the fast rotating motor blades grasp my left leg and release it again. The boat has passed.

Right behind me Eke surfaces, unaware of what just happened. I lift my leg out of the water but it's gone. Where my knee should have been, I see a lumb. I lost my leg. I don't feel pain and don't feel panic. I start to scream as loud as I can. Everybody must know immediately something is really wrong. Eke sees my injury and blows air into my bcd and drops our weights. Within second the boat is in the right position to lift me on board. I feel how people get hold of me and how they unbuckle my diving equipment. I surrender; it's all up to my rescuers now. I get lifted on board and laid down on a soft bench and to much of my surprise, my leg follows as well. First I think Eke has found my leg, but then I realise I can wiggle all five of my toes. My leg is still attached! I still have my leg! And I can move my toes! Hope!! I need oxygen right away! I need to breath so much oxygen, that enough will reach my foot an toes so they get a chance to be saved.

On board Jen (AU) and Lynzi (GB) move super fast. Within thirty seconds they turn a weightbelt into a tourniquette and place this thigh around my leg. The second one is about to be ready. Jen is standing on my righthand side and is managing the scene in a more than perfect way. She has complete overview, delegates tasks and talks to me. Above me I see Ekes face. I hear him say that he loves me and that I should try to remain calm. His eyes and his trembling voice tell me that this is something he can hardly do himself. My mind is extremely clear. Never before had I have to ask myself the question if I was going to live. My head stays clear, I do not feel any lost of concious, I understand the bleeding is under control and I can still wiggle my toes. Yes, I will survive this. I tell Eke and Jen that all will be fine in the end. This I believe. Why is there still no oxygen?

A short discussion wether to wait for the other four divers is ended when they surface. They are in the boat within no-time and we leave full speed for the main island, still one and halve hours away. Several persons support my leg and they place towels around my knee. Finally there is the emergency oxygen and when I tell them I get cold, they immediately cover me in more towels. I feel no pain and I feel completely calm and fully awake. Today I will not die.

I hear lots of radio communication with shore. The captain slightly changes direction. We're not heading for the harbour anymore, but directly for the airport. I have to be transported to mainland hospital, about 1.000 km away, as soon as possible. Medical assistance on the airport is ready to receive me en some people from the diveshop are on their way to our hotel to collect all our personal belongings and bring them to us at the airport. Still fifty more minutes by boat, they tell me. I still see Ekes face right above me. He seems calm again. He tells me how great I'm doing. I still fully focused. I going to survive this.

When we reach shore, we have to wait a couple of minutes, because the ambulance has parked in a different spot. People board with a stretcher, which they place under me. Than they lift me. My leg is not in stable position anymore and rolls from left to right. This hurts badly, especially my knee. The ambulande brings us a couple of hundred meters to the first aid post of the airport. The doctor gives me iv fluids, emergency oxygen and the first pain medication. Under my leg they put two alumnium bins, to stable my leg. When I get cold, they cut me out of my wet wetsuits and replace it for towels and blankets. I hear fierce discussions about where I should be brought next. Persons in charge decide that I must be transported to the mainland immediately. I'm very lucky that the last commercial flight is delayed by quite a bit, so there is enough time to handle all procedures and formalities and get me on that flight. I asked one of the dive guides to stay close to me all the time, because he's fluent in Spanish and in English language. He has been of such a great value in helping with all conversations with both rescuers and the authorities.

I don't know exactly how long I've been laying here, but all of sudden we're moving. We're going! An ambulance takes me to the airplane, the bins remain under my leg to give support. They carefully carry me up the stairs of the plane, but one of the bins gives way. When someone on my righthand side lowers the stretcher a tiny bit, my knee moves in that direction. Pain!! I scream and for a short moment they put me down on the floor of the already fully boarded airplane. I manage to explain which movement they have to avoid, to exempt me from agonizing pain. They lift me again and carefully put me on the last row of seats (stil including two metal bins). Once the doctor who accompanies me on the flight has declared that I won't die during the flight, we take off. Eke is sitting backwards on a seat directly in front of me and keeps the bins and my knee in position. Next to him the face of a friendly hostess appears. She is going to take care of my during the whole flight. She immediately gives me emergency oxygen. I look at my hands and see that they are covered in blood. Then I notice the blood on all the seats and stow tables. I'm still very concious and I still can wiggle my toes. I'm going to stay alive and we're now on our way to a very modern privat hospital, and a excelent orthopedic surgeon. Within one and halve hours we arrive in Guayaquil and from there the ride to the hospital takes five minutes by ambulance. The doctors there take a short while to decide on which actions to take. In the meanwhile I go through the process of making extremely painfull x-rays. I get everyones attention by calling to them: "Look! I can move my toes. please save my leg!" It is 10 pm. I say goodbye to Eke. Finally the moment of liberation is there. I get to breath anesthetic gass. When I feel I'm drifting away, I wave to the aneastasiologist.

Today is Thursday May 23th. Tonight will be the sixteenth and also the very last night in this hospital. Tomorrow we'll fly home!!! This whole day I have no control over my emotions. Tears of happiness: tomorrow we'll fly home.

I've had multiple surgeries. On the day of the accident, Thursday, they cleaned the wounds and put bandage around them. On Friday morning they did the same. This needed to be done first to prevent infections. On Monday they fixed all fractures and closed the wounds. I have three fractures: just above my knee, my knee itself and my ankle. I also have deep cuts and damage to my muscles. The surgeon told my he can't believe that, seen the with damage to my leg, my artery and my nerves were still in tact. He used 21 bolts and two plates to put my leg together again. He promisses me that within a couple of months I will fully recover and that I will keep all of my legs functionallity. He's a bit more pessimistic about my knee. Some bone fragments are missing and my kneecap doesn't have a smooth surface anymore because of that. This will cause erosion over time and this is why I'll probably have to have my knee replaced in a dozen years or so.

Recovery right after the sugeries went with ups and very painfull downs. All the personal support messages that I got from Holland as well as from Ecuador gave me a lot of strength. I thank you a lot! Even more support I got from Eke. There have only been few that he was not directly at my side. There is a large couch next to my bed. This is where Eke has lived during the past two weeks. He took care of me, translated as much as possible for me, tried millions of times to get the nurses into action modus, continously kept contact with the emergency desk of the insurance company, held almost daily meetings with the financial department of the hospital about the payment of the fast growing bills, kept everyone back at home well informed, but more than all... helped me through all hard and painfull moments, day and night. I know how hard this has been for you. I would have been nowhere without you. I love you.

Tomorrow we fly home. At 7 pm there will be a direct flight from Guayaquil to Amsterdam. We'll fly business class. At Amsterdam Schiphol Airport an ambulance will take me directly to the hospital in Amsterdam. We're already in contact with a excelent surgeon of this hospital. They know I'm coming. I think I'll only stay in this hospital for a couple of days, so the medical team can decide on plan for the near future. I'll need a lot of support in the upcoming months.

This is where our dream journey ends, but we'll soon be back for sure. We still have to do many more dives here, but only with a surface marker bouy. This is not only applicable for us, but also for all other divers all over the world. This is going to be my mission. This is where I want to put my story at use.

Now it's time to let my emotions run free again: TOMORROW WE'LL GO HOME!!!

About the author

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