

ICE MAGIC

Amber Fillary on her love affair with freediving under the ice

I love the water. Even as a little girl, I always loved the water! When I was at junior school I started swimming seriously but, unfortunately, I developed an eating disorder and my coach stopped me swimming seriously.

Ten years ago, after visiting Egypt on a scuba diving holiday, my love affair with freediving began after someone on the course suggested I give it a try. I remember watching *The Big Blue* as a child and was always fascinated by the idea of freediving. When I got home, I took a course, and was instantly hooked. After saving up, I returned to Egypt to dive deeper. Unfortunately, while out on a dive, I perforated both of my ear drums, which at the time was devastating, but in hindsight was a blessing as the recovery process required that I spend time training in a swimming pool.

After extensive training, I was able to break a South African freediving pool record. My coach encouraged me to compete in the South African National Championships. I was aiming to break the South Africa Mono Fin pool record, but ended up breaking all of the pool freediving records!

I was chosen to represent South Africa in the Freediving World Champs in Finland, which is where I first heard about under-ice swimming. I knew that I could handle swimming in really cold

water in a costume with no insulation, and I knew that my breath-hold work was good, so I thought to myself 'let's give this a try'. I went to an event while still in Finland and found out that I was

actually really good at it!

Being someone who is never satisfied with just being able to perform a task, I decided I should try to break the under-ice swimming record. As I come



Amber getting ready for her 120m record attempt in March this year





from South Africa, where we have no ice and very little snow, I had to first find a place to do my record attempt. I decided on Finland. My first record attempt was a disaster. I was not fully prepared, but I learnt from the attempt and decided to focus on re-trying the attempt, but this time in Norway.

I connected with an amazing team in Norway, and was able to set my first record there, swimming 70m under the ice on a single breath in a swimming costume, beating the previous record by 20m. Then Covid hit and the whole world came to a standstill.

I knew I was able to go further than the 70m, so I knew that I had to get back out into the ice. In March of 2022, I was able to get back into the ice and set a new Guinness World Record of 90m under the ice.

Still feeling like I had more to give, I contacted Guinness World Records and was able to organise a new attempt for March 2023 where I would be able to use a neck weight for my attempt as

I hoped to reach a new distance of 120m. Everything leading up to the attempt in Norway was perfect. I was easily able to cover the distance and decided that I would try for two records in one day – setting a new under-ice single breath-hold distance and setting a new under-ice single breath-hold mono fin record.

Unfortunately, on my attempt day, Saturday 4 March 2023, the wheels all came off. A small cut on my knee flared up almost overnight into a nasty abscess, causing an overall body infection. Combined with the freezing temperatures and the physical exertion required for the record attempts, my body was not able to function at optimal levels. I ended up swimming past my hole, having to turn back and then blacking out. I was taken to hospital where the abscess was drained and I was put on a course of antibiotics with daily visits to the hospital to have the wound re-dressed. I will have to wait until 2024 to re-attempt my records.

Swimming under the ice is pure magic for me. Everything slows down because of

the extreme cold, and the stillness of the breath-hold is almost addictive. You have to be completely one with your body. The cold water definitely helps my mental wellbeing. So while I am doing an extreme sport that is ridiculously dangerous, I am most at peace under the ice. There is so much magic underneath the water – it's a truly unique, special place to be!

Amber will be co-hosting a cold water retreat in Scotland in September 2023 with Travel Matters. For details of the retreat and to join, please visit amberfillary.com/retreat

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Amber will re-attempt her world records in 2024 after her 2023 attempt was unsuccessful

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Images: John Martin Media