

Further adventures with a new hip

Six months after her hip operation – detailed in the July 2009 issue of *Choice* – **Jenny Fowler** prepares for her first post-op dive

Jenny explores some underwater fauna on her first post-op dive

DO WHATEVER you like! But don't start with downhill skiing." I was talking to the surgeon who, six months ago, had replaced my worn out, arthritic hip joint. I had asked him if I could go scuba-diving with my new metal hip. I wanted to get back to the travels and adventures I used to enjoy so much, but which had become too painful to contemplate.

I was very pleased with the new hip.

The pain from the arthritis was gone as soon as I came round from the anaesthetic. My only regret was that I had delayed having the operation for three years after my GP suggested it. Hip pain spoilt all my favourite activities and made daily life difficult. Eventually, I had forced myself to overcome my fear of the operation.

Now, after six months of recovery with careful exercising and stretching every day, I felt much better. My walking sticks sat in a corner of the kitchen gathering dust. I had enjoyed a day out shopping for new clothes, which would have been an ordeal before the operation. Now I was delighted to find I could enjoy life again.

Before the operation, I had attended weekly hydrotherapy, gently exercising to try to keep my leg muscles strong. On getting the surgeon's all-clear I was so excited I went swimming next day and ploughed up and down the pool at high speed for half an hour. Not a good idea! Those leg muscles spent several weeks protesting at this sudden return to activity. I should have built up strength more gradually before trying to go fast.

My partner Charles and I started choosing a holiday to include diving. We decided on the Red Sea in Egypt. I wanted to go to a resort which was not too crowded. Some Red Sea dive sites are so popular that you can be in a queue of 20 all trying to get up a ladder into a boat and under pressure to go quickly. We chose Nuweiba in Egypt, which is much quieter. Our hotel, the Swisscare

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Nuweiba Resort Hotel, was right on a sandy beach and had a lovely swimming pool so if diving was too much I could just relax while Charles enjoyed the diving. The dive centre at the hotel, African Divers Nuweiba, only took small groups and Sarah, who runs it, was sure I would be able to cope.

Taking the plunge

I was apprehensive before my first dive. Dive kit is quite heavy and Sarah kindly carried my kit down the beach to the water's edge. I put it on and we all waded in, then descended to a coral reef. I forgot all my worries as I found myself in

blue water surrounded by a shoal of pretty orange fish. I found I could remember how to adjust my buoyancy. I finned gently around in the water, approaching the reef and watching multi-coloured fish of all shapes and sizes as they hid, fed, courted or cleaned each other. With the support of the water, I felt no strain at all on my hip.

The dive went quickly. I felt capable of carrying my own kit to the water ready to go on a second dive. We explored a coral garden and a pinnacle where we found a large turtle. Then coming back to the beach, I found I had lost my mask while carrying my kit up. I'd never lost an item of dive kit before. I was getting very tired.

Activity after a hip replacement

Straight after the operation, you have to follow 'hip precautions' such as avoiding bending your leg above 90 degrees, or crossing your legs.

A hospital physiotherapist will advise how to do safe, gentle stretching exercises during the time that the muscles and ligaments around the joint are healing after the operation. Doing the exercises daily helps to give the new hip a good range of movement when fully healed.

Walking and swimming are useful activities to rebuild strength. Your doctor or surgeon will discuss when you can do more active sports, as it depends on the type of hip replacement and your medical history. Activities that involve sudden impact or carry a high risk of falling are probably best avoided.

For more information go to: www.nhs.uk/conditions/Hip-replacement.

Next day I decided to take a rest. I saw Charles off for more diving, then returned to the room to collect my swimsuit. The hotel bed was very large and comfortable, and I laid down on it while I decided whether to go to the swimming pool, or a few steps further to the beach. The next thing I knew was Charles returning to the room. It was three o'clock in the afternoon and he had done two more dives while I was sound asleep.

Learning again to take things gradually, I decided to do just one dive a day for the next few days, then my strength and stamina built up so I could enjoy two or even three dives in a day.

Another challenge was diving from a boat, when we moved along the coast to another dive group, Scuba College





Jenny prepares for her big dive

◀ Nuweiba. Getting back into a boat had become difficult with a weak hip because you have to fin hard and propel yourself over the inflatable tubes that form the side of the boat. I usually ended up being hauled into the boat by several other divers, feeling a bit clumsy and undignified. Now my performance was much improved. I won't say I launched myself into the boat with the skill and speed of a leaping salmon, but I certainly needed much less help.

Into the desert

Nuweiba is on Egypt's Sinai peninsula. Inland is desert and mountain, a spectacular region crossed only by unmade tracks. A local Bedouin, Sulman, organises trips to explore the desert and we decided to go for an overnight stay under the stars. Our driver, Zaid, skilfully piloted a four wheel drive over slippery sand and stony slopes. We reached an oasis where, amazingly, water appeared from under the parched ground, and palm trees grew. Our guide Awad took us on a walk through a canyon, called the White Canyon, where the wind had sculpted the rocks into fantastic forms.

I was so pleased to be able to enjoy this walk. A year ago, my main thought would have been "Can I get back to the car before my hip becomes really painful?"

One of the wonders of the deep sea

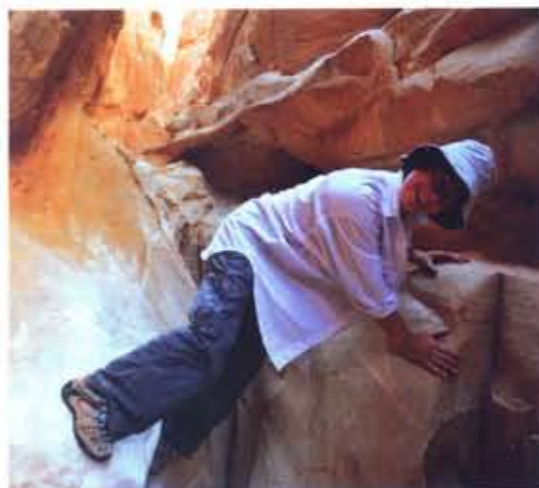


"Now I could make an effort to break away from ill-health and enjoy the good moments of life"



That night Awad cooked a meal over a fire. Chicken casserole tasted wonderful out in the darkness and quiet of the desert. Meanwhile Charles and I put up a tent and watched the moon and stars appear in the sky. In the peace and tranquillity, I reflected that health problems had caused me to develop a mindset of constant anxiety, and now I could make an effort to break away from this and enjoy the good moments of life.

In the morning we explored another very impressive canyon, steep, narrow



and colourful. It had been carved out by water over the ages even though rain only falls once every three years. In places it was blocked by boulders, or so narrow that we progressed by bridging ourselves between the two walls.

To my surprise I managed to scramble through, with Awad's help in the trickiest bits. We reached a place where against all the odds a tiny tree grew, in a deep cleft in the dry rocks.

Coral wonders

Next day, eager to experience more of this coast, we moved along to the Coral Hilton Hotel and dived on a reef just off the beach there. I now felt fit and confident and made the most of the last few days of the trip. We got to know the coral pinnacles. I relaxed in the water and enjoyed watching and photographing the life around them. Small cleaner shrimps worked on spotted eels, beautiful butterfly fish fluttered around the reef and shoals of glassfish made lovely patterns. In the sand, I watched paired shrimps and gobies as they co-operated to feed and keep their burrow clean.

All too soon it was time to go home.

Back home, tidying, I knocked some packets off a high shelf. I realised they were the remains of packs of paracetamol and ibuprofen that the hospital had given me to take home in case of post-operative aches and pains. I also realised I had not taken a single pain killer in all the time I had been away.

I will probably never take up downhill skiing, but it's great to be enjoying my favourite activities of walking, travelling and diving again. I am glad I overcame my fear of having surgery. I am also grateful for the quality of treatment I received, which gave me a quick recovery and return to mobility which has so improved my quality of life.

Passport to Nuweiba

- We stayed at Swisscare Nuweiba Resort Hotel (www.swisscare-hotels.com) and Hilton Nuweiba Coral Resort (www.hilton.co.uk). Booking was through Longwood Holidays who can arrange a flexible package including flights and transfers. Tel: 020 8418 2525, e-mail: (reservations@longwoodholidays.co.uk), website: (www.longwoodholidays.co.uk)
- We dived with African Divers Nuweiba



(www.africandiversnuweiba.co.uk), Scuba College (www.scuba-college.com/en), Emperor Divers (www.emperordivers.com/nuweiba_center.php)

- The desert trip with Sulman was arranged through (www.bedouin-experience.com).

PHOTOGRAPHY BY CHARLES STIRLING