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**WILDEST
CANADA**





CRASHED OUT in the BAHAMAS

He became a household name in the 1990s, and now Chris Boardman hopes to do with scuba gear what he did with his bicycle – get really, really good with it. He’s impatient to learn the lot, but **John Bantin** let him in easy on coral-reef diving when they travelled out to Abaco

THE ENDURING PUBLIC IMAGE OF CHRIS BOARDMAN MBE IS of a man with a very pointy helmet riding a strange-looking bike made by Lotus to win a gold medal at the Barcelona Olympics.

The test of his fame in the cycling world is that, when I told a keen club cyclist friend of mine that I had just spent a week away with Chris, diving in the Bahamas, he still insisted on telling me everything he knew about the man, including details of his character, his physique, and even his physiological problems. Having followed his cycling career as a spectator, my friend felt he knew him better.

Chris smashed Eddie Mercxx’s record for the furthest distance covered in one hour (the Blue Riband of cycling) with his techno-bike. Then he went back and did it all again with a conventional machine when techno-bikes were banned by the governing body of the sport.

He has now retired from professional cycling at the age of 32 and taken up scuba-diving.

When Chris won gold in the 4000m Individual Pursuit event in Barcelona, he achieved the unheard-of by lapping the silver medallist in the final. That’s something that does not usually happen at that level of the sport.

He won bronze at Atlanta. He has been twice World Individual Pursuit champion; World Time-trial Champion; he holds the New Athletes One Hour record, is current World Record-holder for 4000m and has worn the coveted Yellow Jersey three times as the race leader in the Tour de France.

Why did Chris Boardman retire? As he put it: “I suddenly thought, what the bloody hell am I doing, just trying to go faster than other people on a push-bike?”

Chris is a modest man who has obviously done well from his career as a professional cyclist. He lives in the Wirral and still has pretensions of



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where that all the locals use as a meeting point. Nippers is an island of insanity in an ocean of tranquillity.

Who Let the Dogs Out? boomed from the PA. There was lots of animated discussion among the men and some young girls let their hair down and slacked the strings to their bras. Some of our fellow-tourists wondered why they had paid good money to leave the serenity of their private beaches to accompany Brendal.

That day, Chris went snorkelling and had two encounters. One was with a little turtle that looked as if it could have sighed and asked: "Are you going to grab me like all the other people?" The other was with a fellow-cyclist who recognised him and grabbed him as he climbed out of the water.

Within two days we had grown blasé. There was only so much soft coral you could look at, even if its growth was luxuriant.

"I'm inclined to be a bit sarcastic," said Chris one day. "I couldn't believe we got round that last coral reef so quickly – I'm used to doing more laps.

"I like watching the parrotfish grazing. It's started getting nice just to stop and look at the smaller things. The souvenir shell I had picked out was perfect, but it ran off!"

We finally persuaded Brendal to take us to the wreck of the ss *San Jacinto*, said to be the first American all-steel steamship. It sank during the early part of the 19th century and its plates are

well-flattened, as it lies in very shallow water and must have endured a few hurricanes since then. Its twin boilers are highly visible, along with a sizeable section of the stern.


There were a lot of schools of snapper and grunts around and we saw a parrotfish with a remora, a shark-sucker, bigger than itself.

Bluff House provides a peaceful sanctuary where busy people can unwind and escape from the telephone. What did Chris Boardman think of Green Turtle Cay and the Bluff House Club?

"Very little is expected of you and that includes the diving. It's a great place to convalesce, to recuperate from a long illness!" I might add that I thought it was very expensive.

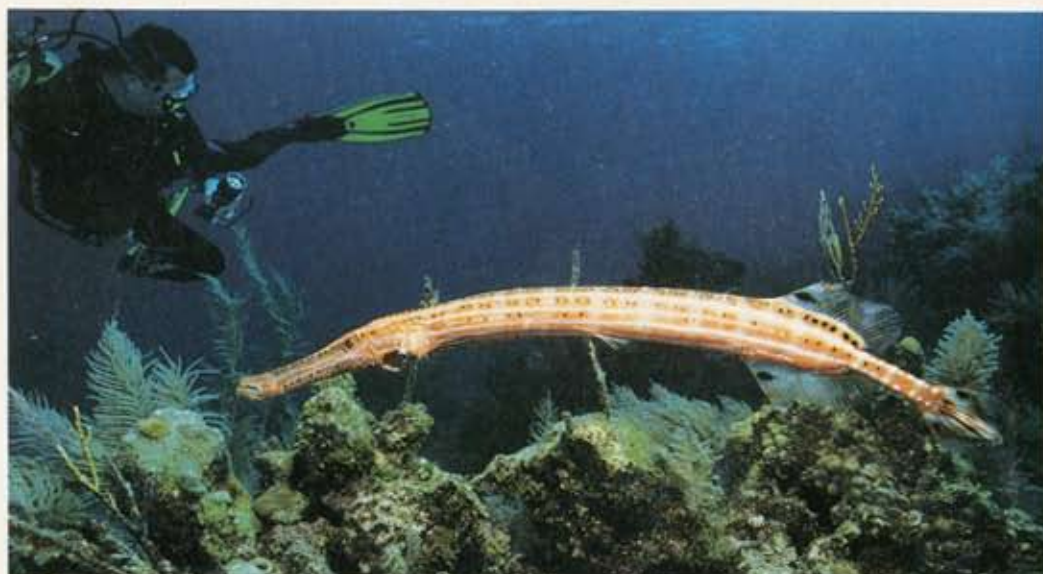
On our last and non-diving day, we went for a cycle ride. I let Chris have the better bike, the one with the brake. Mine actually had a square front wheel, which I discovered only once we were off the monumentally bumpy, and in places steep, track and got on to Green Turtle Cay's only stretch of tarmac.

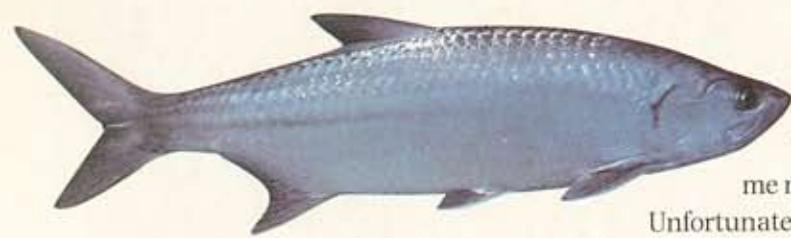
Anyway, I can now say I have been out riding with Chris Boardman, even if I cannot say I allowed him to slipstream me. I was really impressed at the way the ex-professional cyclist could take a pee without dismounting.

He is a natural diver. I not only have a feeling we will be hearing a lot more of him but I know it – ever-hungry to absorb more diving know-how and expertise. Chris is going to be reporting on training courses in future issues of **DIVER**. 

• Chris Boardman and John Bantin travelled courtesy of the Bahamas Tourist Office. They flew with BA to Nassau, where they spent one night at the Orange Hill Club. They then transferred to Treasure Cay by Bahamas Air and onwards by taxi and boat-taxi to Green Turtle Cay. They stayed at the Bluff House Club and dived with Brendal's International Diving. Details from the Bahamas Tourist Office, 01483 448900.

Clockwise from below: Many meetings – with a Nassau grouper; friendly sting rays – they come to you; a cornetfish; and Jack and chub





being a cabinet maker:
 "I hope you're not calling
 me middle-class!"

Unfortunately, he crashed out of the Tour de France twice (once as race-leader). As we felt he knew a lot about crashing out, we asked him to crash out for us at the Bluff House Club in Green Turtle Cay, Abaco!

Chris joined a diving club, a branch of the BSAC, when he was a kid, but the cycling distracted him from it for a few years. Now he is a member of Jesters SAC, in Chester.

"It's very child-friendly, so I like it for my own kids [he has four, between six and 11 years old]. A club is very much what you make of it. Jesters has the usual mixture of eccentric nutters, with a few sane people too. I am a bit pushy. I have been very training-orientated during the past eight years, and I want to get all my diving certifications now."

Chris is already a BSAC Sports Diver, Assistant Club Instructor, PADI Rescue Diver, and well on the way to being a PADI Divemaster. I can assure you that the stamina tests will not be a problem for him.

Apart from one dive Chris did in Sydney while attending last year's Olympics, his trip to the Bahamas was his first abroad as a diver. Until now, he has done a lot of his diving in cold inland sites.

In fact, whenever we surfaced from another unchallenging dive, he would remind me that he had been in Capernwray, enjoying a light fall of snow, only a few days before.

After our first dive to 13m for one hour, he surfaced and said: "It's like the Blue Planet Aquarium, only it goes a lot further!" Chris had dived in with the fish at Blue Planet when he appeared as mystery guest recently in TV's *Question of Sport*.

One typical day, we set off in our host Brendal's dive boat from Green Turtle Cay, and spent time en route watching a humpback whale feeding on plankton, blowing off like some industrial machinery each time it surfaced.

We then did a shallow dive with some tame Nassau grouper, had a close-up encounter with a blacktip shark, swam through a shoal of Bermuda chub and horse-eye jacks, saw a giant

barracuda bigger than Chris, got close to a school of giant silver tarpon, watched Brendal feed a big green moray eel, had a talk with a turtle, and watched an eagle ray fly by.

Later Brendal snorkelled down and caught half a dozen lobsters. So we went to picnic, cooking them on an open fire on the beach at Manjack Cay.

A large southern sting ray came into the shallows and allowed us to feed it, and we sat under the palm fronds rustling in a cooling breeze while the white coral sand worked up between our toes and we contemplated the turquoise sea and azure sky. It was just one cliché after another.

"When you get home and describe it to your friends, it always seems a lot better than it did at the time," observed Chris. In terms of crashing-out, it doesn't get a lot better!

Brendal is a character. Brendal is on holiday. You can pay to go with him, but don't expect him to interrupt his own fun. In fact, we quickly decided we were not on a diving holiday. We were on a holiday, which included some diving, with Brendal.

On the way back from one excursion we saw a pod of dolphin outside Bluff House. "Think Capernwray," Chris reminded me.

Chris was suitably cautious about animals of which he knew nothing, but we observed other divers with poor buoyancy control, ploughing a furrow through the dive site.

"You really don't want to touch stuff that might hurt you," he said. "Banning gloves would be a bit like banning seatbelts from cars and fitting them with internal spikes. You would drive safely if you knew you might really hurt yourself in the smallest incident!"

I asked him what else he thought about this warmwater diving. "It's a bit like a walk in the park. It's too easy!"

After diving, Brendal passes out the Goombay Smash. It's a punch made out of pineapple juice and lots of rum. It has a punch of its own, too, and many of the other passengers became very relaxed on these return journeys. Some became mysteriously seasick! Chris and I stuck to fresh water.

On Sunday we went with Brendal to Nippers Bar on Guana Cay, about two hours away by boat. It's obviously some-

Clockwise from below:
 Lobster kebab – Brendal
 comes up with lunch;
 a small barracuda
 on the reef; Chris
 examines a scorpionfish
 – "You really don't want
 to touch stuff that might
 hurt you"; preparing
 for another immersion.
 Opposite page: On the
 wreck of ss *San Jacinto*

