

The Fearless Kalymnos Sponge Divers

The Life of the Fearless Kalymnos Sponge Divers

The small fishing boat carries the three men out to sea. There is a captain, a crew member, and a third passenger—the naked man preparing for his journey. The tanned leathery skin of the “chosen one” attaches the 15 kilogram *skandalopetra* (flat stone) to himself. A crew member clenches the harpoon and prods the ocean floor for treasures. Bingo. It looks like a good catch. There’s a motion with a finger signaling it’s time for the nude man to go under.

The waters around Kalymnos are warm, very warm and pleasing as the defenseless man is propelled overboard. The weight bound to the bare-skinned gentleman plummets him quickly to the bottom of the sea. He’s done this before but knows that his lung capacity 30 meters below the sea can only withstand the physical threat three to five minutes maximum.



Sponge from Kalymnos, Greece

The Risks of Sponge Diving

In the short time the excellent swimmer is underwater; he quickly cuts as many sponges as possible from the ocean bottom and then places a net around them. The diver often pushes himself, staying under as long as possible because this is the only way to make a living. Classroom diving training lessons wards against pushing the limits, though many divers did not heed the warnings.

During the early years, the male Kalymnos sponge divers did so without equipment, called “free diving” holding their breathe underwater as long as possible. Often the divers came up too fast from the deep waters causing decompression sickness (DCS) commonly called “the bends death”. The divers that survived often came to shore with severe foot injuries as their feet became tangled around the boat since they needed to

ascend quickly. Despite the risks, the fearless sponge divers of Kalymnos continued their occupation.

Kalymnos, the Sponge Diving Capital

The mention of sponges for bathing dates as long ago as ancient writings of Plato and Homer. Centuries later through trading, Europeans' desire for sponge use increased. Natural sponges have been used for padding for helmets, cleaning, and even contraceptive use.

Aside from citrus fruits, the land on Kalymnos is rather barren so sponge diving was an obvious career choice which brought wealth and social-economic power to the island. Kalymnos was the center of the Greek sponge diving industry until the late 80s. In later years of the Kalymnos sponge diving heyday, proper equipment was used, but over-fishing and disease brought both the sponges and the industry close to extinction.

Journey from Greece to Florida

Today, there are a handful of Kalymnos divers and their families keeping the art of sponge diving and sponge processing alive mainly entertaining and informing Greek tourists.

Due to the decline of the sponge industry in Greece, in 1905 around 500 divers migrated to Tarpon Springs, Florida. Many of those who settled in the town south of St. Petersburg, Florida continued their trade of making diving helmets. Today, Tarpon Springs is the "sponge capital of the world," alluring visitors to the largest community of Greek Americans in the United States.

The Kalymnians remember the essence of their past in the somber Greek sponge divers dance which is still performed today. Like the sponge, the dancers move slowly yet

methodically dancing around the single Kalymnos sponge divers who represents those physical scarred by their fearlessness.