



## Adventures in Wonderland

Anne Doubilet has discovered the secret of eternal youth: investigating the underwater world. Eve MacSweeney reports.

Photographed by Annie Leibovitz.

There are worse ways to be spending Earth Day than cruising on Lake Tahoe against a horizon of snow-capped mountains and stately firs with cones the size of pineapples. And there are also less bizarre ones: We have been sallying back and forth on a speedboat all day, tracking the progress of a tiny submarine as it bobs above and below the surface of the pristine water.

I'm here for an informal gathering of American explorers summoned by Alfred McLaren, an Arctic adventurer and Cold War submarine pilot who is one of a group of entrepreneurs developing a prototype "performance submersible." The two-man Super Aviator, with its articulated "wings" and bubble hatches, looks like a race car and acts like one, too. A crew of technicians tinkers with it lengthily before every "flight"—whether strictly for necessity is hard to tell: We are clearly in the presence of the ultimate boy toy.

Which makes it a somewhat surprising place to find Anne Doubilet, a lifelong diver, underwater photographer, and conservationist. "I'm not very mechanically minded," she says a touch anxiously, eyeing the sub's multiple gauges and controls. But Doubilet, who spends her time traveling, lecturing, and organizing activities as a board member of the Explorers Club and Wings WorldQuest (a nonprofit supporting female explorers and scientists), has many unpredictable excursions on her schedule. Attending "flight school" in Lake Tahoe—which, incidentally, contains little marine life but does boast a shipwrecked steambot from the 1940s—is just one of them.

Doubilet, an elegant, patrician blonde from Boston, tells the story of how she came to have "explorer" as her job description as a happy convergence of interests and circumstance, spurred on by two serious physical setbacks. Every summer of her childhood was spent at her family's beach house and nearby cove in Massachusetts, and Doubilet adored the ocean. "My parents did once send me to overnight camp in the mountains," she recalls, "and I was miserable." At eleven, she contracted Saint Vitus' dance, a disease that confined her to bed for a year—she remembers pining at the window and resolving to explore the underwater world when she recovered. Then, at nineteen, while a student at Boston University, she suffered a near-fatal motorcycle accident that required six years of surgeries. "I'm a walking miracle," she says now. "I almost lost my left leg. I found my place in the water because swimming is weightless."

She was studying literature and photography when she met her former husband, David Doubilet, already an established underwater photographer, and everything clicked. She got her diving license and took her first open-water dive in the Bahamas at a barrier reef off Andros Island. "I had my first *Alice in Wonderland* moment," she says. "I stepped off the side of the boat into crystalline turquoise and entered an enchanted realm." She swam down to a submerged sandy shelf at 185 feet, bathed in blue, ethereal light, with 6,000 feet of abyss beneath it. "That was it. I was hooked." Doubilet went on to accompany her husband on trips and become a professional photographer and writer in her own right; her first assignment was on her 1974 honeymoon in the Red Sea, where she discovered "the most exquisite paradise you could ever imagine, teeming with corals and anemones and sharks swimming around; polka-dotted stingrays and schools of glassy sweepers; beautiful pink, purple, orange, lavender, and yellow soft corals gently waving back and forth in the currents. . . ."

Doubilet describes the aquatic world with an animation that is not entirely typical of a 61-year-old discussing a long-held career. "Even now, I get so excited to go underwater," she says. "I never lose my sense of wonder and curiosity." And over dinner with the group in Lake Tahoe, most of whom are middle-aged and beyond, it becomes evident that this joy is a trait of explorers. The guests—filmmakers, adventurers, a wildlife-TV presenter, and an elderly marine scientist who holds the record, along with a late colleague, for going the greatest ever depth in a submarine—give off a collective air of having discovered the elixir of youth. They smile. They glow. They sparkle. McLaren and the marine scientist reminisce about excavating the sunken *Bismarck*, while the women flutter their hands gracefully, engrossed in a vivid conversation about manta rays. "Explorers love to get together and tell their

stories," says Doubilet.

Sad to say, however, the marine world is not all sweetness and light, a state of affairs that exercises the optimistic Doubilet, who recently chaired a forum at the Explorers Club in New York to bring experts together to discuss the crisis in the oceans: the world's coral reefs in major decline; the seas overfished; global warming affecting the food chain; a gyre of plastic garbage twice the size of Texas swirling in the Pacific; seals and whales getting cancers caused by toxic chemicals, and these same chemicals showing up in the breast milk of Inuit women in the Arctic. That Red Sea reef she described so vividly from her honeymoon is decimated now. The facts are grim. So grim, says Doubilet, that "people don't really want to hear it." But even so, she believes, things are not entirely hopeless. With the newfound public awareness of environmental issues, together with a willingness to probe the problem beyond such simple measures as recycling plastics, now may be the time. "I can't find it in my heart to say it is too late," Doubilet says.

Just how far the world of exploration has transitioned from trophy-hunting expeditions to planet-saving missions is evident at the Explorers Club, housed in a building on East Seventieth Street that looks like Jordan College in *The Golden Compass*, its walls rife with wildlife paintings and its bookshelves crammed with such titles as *Man Meets Grizzly* and *Beasts in My Bed*. A stuffed polar bear presented in 1969 greets visitors atop the stairs. (The taxidermied—and now officially endangered—creature has lately been a subject of hot debate, but it was decided that the club should not deny its past.) Here Doubilet has been chairing a series of public lectures, and on a spring evening, despite an elderly gentleman snoring in a back row, interest was high for an NYU physician showing slides of a visit to a Polar Inuit tribe. A few years ago, the doctor might have been happy just to get to northwestern Greenland; now his focus was the effect of global warming on its occupants.

The club is a short walk from Doubilet's spacious, light-filled apartment, whose large terrace offers an observation point for the dense overwater world of the Upper East Side. (Flip-flop comparisons of life above and below sea level are a feature of Doubilet's worldview. "Our busy, teeming streets of Manhattan, and all those people rushing around in Times Square, are not unlike schools of turquoise and golden striped grunts swimming to and fro on reefs in the eastern Pacific," she remarks.) Doubilet lives alone, having recently emerged from a "very wonderful relationship" with a New York doctor. She says she is now happy focusing her energies on work. "I'm very lucky in having a lot of opportunities at this point in my life."

Here she is gathering materials for a memoir, and her walls are hung with photographs juxtaposing corals and icebergs from an exhibit she has been touring. Many are the fruit of back-to-back trips Doubilet took two years ago to Papua New Guinea and the Arctic—literally, the ends of the earth. "To be able to see that much of the planet in the space of a few months was life-changing," she says. "Everything came into focus."

Having worked on some 30 stories as a member of an underwater team for *National Geographic*, Doubilet has covered many corners of the ocean—though, she stresses, there is so much more to see. "New species are being discovered all the time," she says, "and no one has ever seen a great white shark being born [in the wild]." In the heyday of big budgets and leisurely time frames, she would jet off to northwestern Australia or Japan's Izu Peninsula for months at a time, plucking her daughter, Emily, out of Manhattan's Trinity school and exploring her subjects in detail. Her mentor was Eugenie Clark, a.k.a "The Shark Lady," an ichthyologist photographed by Norman Parkinson for *Vogue* in 1969, a shark's jaw over her shoulder. "I imitated her every move," says Doubilet. "I exhaled when she exhaled, and learned to always keep my back to the reef so that nothing can come up behind you." Clark's example served her well when Doubilet became one of the first women to be lowered among great white sharks in a cage. "I looked up into the blue, all by myself," she remembers, "when from beneath me the ultimate predator surfaced silently, white and silver, with its huge teeth and big black eyes." She snapped away with her camera from what she later realized was a fetal position in the corner of the cage, petrified but, characteristically, undeterred. "I couldn't believe how magnificent it was." Doubilet is preparing for her next big trip: a month in Indonesia diving around Komodo Island with friends from her (ageless) field, some in their 70s and 80s. "You don't have to be a great competitive swimmer to be a good scuba diver," she says, though she works out with a physical therapist to help maintain the stamina required to swim with heavy camera equipment. She is shopping for new wetsuits, a little nervous about both the Komodo dragons, who recently killed a fisherman, and the notorious currents of the region. But first she has a week of events to attend for Wings WorldQuest, an organization that couldn't be much more different from the Explorers Club, which didn't admit female members until the early eighties. Its mission, according to director Milbry Polk, is to engage young women in science and provide support for those doing valuable work around the globe. "Women scientists often think outside the box," she says, "and historically they have often gone unacknowledged, or their work has been overshadowed by their husbands'."

Five young honorees, including a Mongolian paleontologist, a marine geophysicist studying earthquakes under the ocean, and a volcanologist tracking eruptions on Saturn, are being given awards at a gala not unlike many others, except that the Chanel handbags up for silent auction rub up against a sleeping bag and a Masai spear. Doubilet, who favors classic lines and often wears black pants and a cashmere sweater accessorized with vivid textiles, scarves, and jewelry found on her travels, is dressed tonight in an embroidered coatdress and earrings of her own design: Tiffany starfish she customized with white and golden South Sea pearls from northwestern Australia, acquired when she was working on a story about pearl farming.

Her daughter, Emily, sits at her table. Now 25, she's a twenty-first-century credit to her mother, an environmental-studies graduate who founded a Web site selling sustainable party products and works for a company producing ecologically sound countertops. She is also a member of an electro hip-hop dance duo called Suspicious Package. "Sometimes we make songs about environmental themes," says Emily,

who is wearing a pink-and-green vintage dress bought by her mother and texting on her pink-covered iPhone. “We did a global-warming evening with these fun burlesque dances that kind of taught the lesson of climate change at the same time.”

Doubilet’s involvement in selecting the night’s awardees is a gratifying aspect of what she is finding, she says, “a very fulfilling time in my life.” The illustrious Eugenie Clark agrees. “She’s at the peak, the bloom,” she says. “She’s reached a point where she is fully mature in what she wants to do, and she can express it beautifully in her photography.”

She can also express it in her constant attitude of being open to discovery. At Lake Tahoe, notwithstanding her apprehensions, Doubilet finally gets her turn in the submarine. Headset on, she goes into the bubble and slowly disappears from view. When she emerges some half an hour later, her face is all lit up. “It was amazing!” she says. “Going into the deep, beautiful blue, watching the play of light. . . .” Her favorite place is the transitional zone, that otherworldly arena just under the surface. “It’s like Jacques Cousteau said: ‘I put my eyes under . . . and civilization vanished with one last bow.’ ”