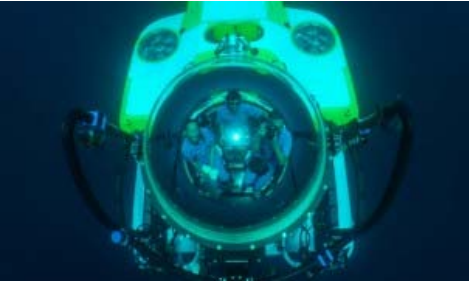


# 100 Metres Under the Sea

4 July 2012



During a diving trip to Costa Rica, Karen Catchpole and Eric Mohl upped the adrenaline and dropped 100 metres below the surface of the ocean in a clear, plastic submersible.



STORY BY:

KAREN CATCHPOLE AND ERIC  
MOHL OF THE TRANS-AMERICAS  
JOURNEY

FOLLOW: [@TransAmericas](#)



As James Cameron and his team were celebrating the director/explorer's super-sub descent to the deepest point on earth—a mind-boggling 10,898 metres (35,756 feet) under the sea in the [Mariana Trench](#)—we were preparing for our own submarine adventure.

We were visiting [Cocos Island](#), a national park more than 480 kilometres off the coast of [Costa Rica](#), on a dive boat called the [Argo](#). We were there to scuba dive with endangered scalloped hammerhead sharks, which are reliably found there in impressive numbers. As if hanging out underwater as dozens of hammerheads (and rays and other sharks) glided and darted around us wasn't enough of a rush, we jumped at the chance to go even deeper in a custom built, multi-million dollar submarine called the DeepSee.

The [DeepSee](#), which travels onboard the [Argo](#) like the cornerstone in the ultimate adventure garage, is neon yellow and looks like an economy-car-sized Lego. But don't be deceived. It's actually a complex machine built to keep its occupants alive for hours underwater at depths that deliver bone-crushing pressure and deadly cold.



The DeepSee is a festive, pint-sized life support system and we couldn't wait to get in and go down. First we had to sit through the obligatory pre-dive safety briefing that included what to do if the oxygen supply conked out (it's never happened). There were also lots of warnings about what not to touch inside and outside the submersible, which is chock full of controls and gauges for everything from monitoring interior CO2 levels to changing the descent rate.

After a quick weigh-in (exact cargo weight is needed to properly operate the DeepSee) we each put on a pair of Dickies coveralls. Why? Because the zippers, buttons and buckles on normal clothing can damage the DeepSee cockpit, which is nothing more than a four-inch thick acrylic orb.

*Wait. We're going 100 metres underwater in a craft that can't handle a zipper?!*

The round, totally clear, pressurized cockpit of the sub carries only three people including the pilot. Once we'd successfully navigated the precise, Twister-like course we had to follow to reach our seats without touching any forbidden areas of the sub, the cockpit turned out to be more comfortable and far roomier than it looked from the outside, though claustrophobics may want to think twice.

The sub was towed on the surface of the water behind a small boat (bring your sunglasses for this part) until we were directly over an underwater formation called **Everest Sea Mount**, the base of which was the destination of our 100-metre dive. Unhitched from the tow boat, the DeepSee gently tipped forward like a weeble in mid wobble as the air bladders that had been keeping us afloat were emptied. Then we slowly started to sink.



We've each done hundreds of dives using traditional scuba gear. We're comfortable under water and comfortable trusting equipment to keep us alive down there. But watching the water rise outside the totally clear orb of the DeepSee and not having a breathing apparatus in our mouths did feel a bit, well, wrong. However, once we were totally submerged (and still breathing) we were hooked.

The orb of the cockpit gives a 360-degree view and the acrylic virtually disappears underwater, making it seem as if there really is no barrier between you and those hammerheads doing lazy figure eights above the orb or the small school of oceanic triggerfish feasting on jellyfish to the right of you or the enormous spotted eagle ray flapping slowly by (tip: bring your widest camera lens to make the most of photography from inside the orb).

Unlike most scuba divers, the DeepSee doesn't give off any startling bubbles or make any alarming, predator-like sudden movements so sea creatures are not afraid of the sub. In fact, the animals actually seemed curious about the slow moving craft. Reef fish even hovered around the DeepSee as if it was part of their environment or at least a safe place to hang out.

The mechanics of the DeepSee do create an electromagnetic field, which both attracts and repels fish and sharks. The hammerheads, in particular, seemed ultra-sensitive to this energy field, swimming toward us then swerving off suddenly as if they'd just bumped nose-first into an electric fence.

We were fascinated by the underwater show being put on before our very eyes and delighted to have joined the submariners club.



A 1.5-hour DeepSee dive to 100 metres costs US\$1,200. Yes, per person. If that price tag doesn't scare you, I highly recommend going whole hog with a DeepSee dive to 300 meters (US\$1,800). This three-hour dive takes you down to where the ocean really gets weird. Some of your adventure will even be spent in complete darkness except for the lights mounted on the outside of the DeepSee. But you won't be alone down there. A father and son who did a 300-metre dive the day before our shallower trip saw a rare prickly shark and a completely transparent octopus—two creatures who only live way down deep.

The DeepSee isn't just a cool underwater toy. It's also a powerful scientific tool. Every DeepSee dive is filmed and the footage is shared with marine biologists at the University of Costa Rica; and leading oceanographers and scientists use the craft, too.

Look for **Karen Catchpole and Eric Mohl's Just Add Adventure!** series every Wednesday and Friday all summer long on Travel and Escape!

## KAREN CATCHPOLE AND ERIC MOHL OF THE TRANS-AMERICAS JOURNEY



In April of 2006, journalist Karen Catchpole and photographer Eric Mohl left their jobs and apartment in New York City and embarked on the **Trans-Americas Journey**, a 200,000-mile working road trip through all 23 countries in North, Central and South America. After many years on the road they are still nowhere near their goal of Tierra del Fuego at the tip of South America where the road literally ends. Until then, their slow and steady overland exploration of The Americas continues.

FOLLOW: [@TransAmericas](https://twitter.com/TransAmericas)