

The ocean covers 71 per cent of the Earth's surface, yet more than 95 per cent of the underwater world remains unexplored. **Paul Joseph** meets a machine designed to explore our final frontier



INTO THE DEEP

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I am standing on the docks of Port de Fontvieille, nestled a couple of kilometres south of the supercars and superrich of Monte Carlo, about to explore the ocean's depths in a high-tech submarine piloted by an authentic James Bond villain, bear with me.

It is the kind of scenario that, as a travel journalist, makes convincing friends and family that you have a proper job all the more difficult.

Nevertheless, here I am, ready to board the DeepFlight Dragon, a two-person submersible designed by Graham Hawkes, world-renowned marine engineer and – due to events some 35 years ago – an accidental star of the iconic Bond franchise.

In 1981, Hawkes was hired to create an underwater craft for the movie *For Your Eyes Only*. Once built, the filmmakers asked its inventor if he would helm the submersible for a high-octane aquatic fight scene with 007 (played by Roger Moore). Hawkes took on his cameo role with gleeful enthusiasm – almost too much in fact, as he struggled to keep a straight face during shooting. The crew were forced to place a green light under his chin to make his childlike giggles look more like maniacal laughter.

Three-and-a-half decades later and his exuberance has not dimmed. London-born Hawkes has spent much of his life

traversing the underwater world, yet as he talks me through the Dragon's controls and functions, you'd have thought he'd just performed his first dive. "It's the best experience imaginable," he gushes. "When you're down there among dolphins and humpback whales, you forget you're even in this thing. You just feel a sense of calm and wonder."

The brainchild of Hawkes' California-based company DeepFlight, the all-electric powered Dragon, which reaches depths of 120 metres, is its latest creation following the success of its predecessor the Super Falcon, which is owned by such luminaries as Richard Branson, Red Bull co-founder Dietrich Mateschitz and venture capitalist Tom Perkins.

Unlike traditional submersibles designed for scientific or military purposes, which tend to move crab-like along the ocean floor, DeepFlight's models are more like fast and manoeuvrable flying machines, capable of gliding freely through the water at up to six knots. They are also – gratefully for your writer – virtually idiot-proof, with the controls comprising a lever to move up and down and a separate joystick for steering left, right, forward and back. No special training is required and my tutorial took a matter of minutes.

With a price tag in the region of £1 million, DeepFlight's primary target is unsurprisingly superyacht owners, though

they hope to reach a broader customer base in the future through the luxury resorts and short-term rentals market, in the same way that jet skis are available for hire today. In the meantime, however, they remain water toys for the 0.1 per cent.

UNDERWATER WORLD

So, what's it like to use? On the day of my dive, conditions were unseasonably blustery on the French Riviera – a portent of severe storms which, just a few days later, battered the coastline. Standing dockside, with the Dragon bobbing to and fro in the water, my excitement gave way to trepidation and, having never before suffered claustrophobia, the craft seemed to shrink before my eyes.

Noticing my unease, Hawkes, who would be my lead pilot during the 20-minute dive, reminded me that the Dragon is positively buoyant, ensuring that if anything goes wrong mechanically, the craft simply floats back to the surface. Mentally fortified, I stepped across the portable rig and slunk my six-foot frame into the back passenger seat.

The Dragon's acrylic dome was lowered over my head and, with Hawkes ensconced in the front, we were soon on our way down.

As we gently sank into the sea, there was a fleeting moment when both above and below water were visible – a sensory

trick denied to the naked, unaided eye. Then we were immersed, and I was immediately struck by the excellent visibility, even at 40 metres, which afforded views all around. Over our Bluetooth headsets, Hawkes explained that we owed such fortune to the wind, which disperses much of the matter that can create a virtual blackness under the ocean.

With front and rear ventilators keeping me well aired, any concerns about feeling cramped quickly dissipated and, like a small child nagging to enter the cockpit of a Jumbo Jet, I was soon pestering Hawkes to let me take control. With the craft at my mercy, I tentatively pushed forward on the joystick.

Though the Dragon is often compared to an aeroplane, its horizontal movements felt, to me, more like a helicopter, remaining almost level rather than banking left and right. Most striking was its velocity, which felt a lot faster than its modest-sounding top speed of six knots.

Captain Hawkes soon reassumed control, using the Dragon's interior compass

to guide us to a local wreck, a 300-tonne tug boat that had sunk several years ago and now serves as a dive spot for tourists. As we hovered close to the giant steel structure, I felt the same sense of wonder that was described to me on land moments earlier.

So will we one day see Dragons stacked up like pedalos on beaches around the world available to anyone with an hour to spare and a taste for adventure? It is a nice thought, but for the time being this particular licence to thrill is reserved for the global elite – and the odd lucky journalist, too. 🐉

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