A man wearing a white thobe and a white ghutra with a gold pattern is sitting in a black Vermeiren wheelchair. He is looking towards the camera with a slight smile. The wheelchair has a large front wheel and two smaller rear wheels. The brand name 'VERMEIREN' is visible on the side of the wheelchair frame. The background is dark and out of focus.

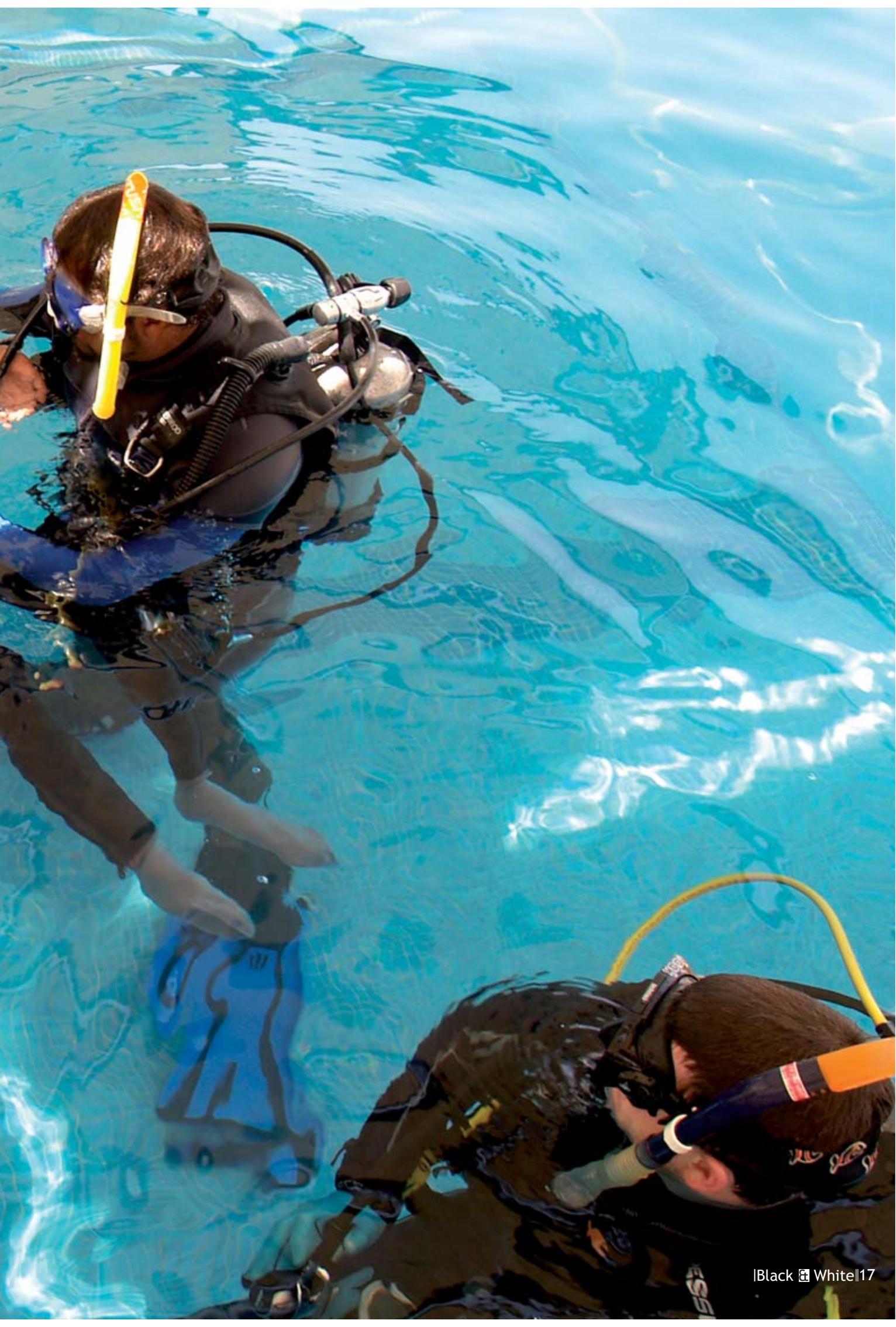
# Out of the **WHEELCHAIR** and into the **BLUE**

He dove into the pool, touched the bottom and came up, almost exulting. He frolicked in the water with others and was in a real state of joy when suddenly his eyes fell on his wheelchair...

"In the water, I had forgotten that I was handicapped, until I saw my wheelchair..." (as recounted to Black & White by a key supporter of the Oman Association for the Disabled - OAD).







**Marhoon Batti Al Ghafri, 40, who is also disabled, agrees. However, there is not a trace of negativity in him. “In the water, I can go backwards, forward, up, down, side – everywhere. What freedom! The great thing about scuba diving for someone like me is that it offers unlimited freedom in the water, the like of which I will never have on land. Also, in the water, I am the same as everyone else. That is a great feeling,” Marhoon tells Black & White, as he wheels himself to a comfortable corner at the OAD.**

**MARHOON IS UNABLE** to conceal his delight in finally finding an environment where he, and those like him, are able to throw off their constraints and be one with the rest of the world. “It was a discovery beyond my imagination,” he tells us. “For once, I feel that I am not penalised for being disabled,” he adds.

This feeling is typical of many who are disabled. Unable to do many of the things considered normal are the disabled, quite often depressed.

But, like Marhoon, there are many who are now immersed in the scuba diving theme because it has been a voyage of discovery for them, an opportunity to become free. Scuba diving has become a focus of sport for the disabled and is considered now not only as a recreational activity, but also a source of rehabilitation for them.

Marhoon was not born disabled. He is a victim of polio. But, the remarkable aspect of Marhoon is that he has managed to take disability in his stride. “I was affected by polio when I was very young. I was going to school then, and when I became disabled, I had a difficulty in adapting to it.

Everyone around me also voiced the same concern and I did face some distressing moments then.

But, disability, is again, not here (he gestured at his disabled limbs) but, in here (he pointed to his head). That much I understood and that is how I decided to stop worrying about my disability and went ahead with my life!”

Which he did. He completed his studies and then got himself a job in the administration department of Oman Air.

He jokingly recounts how he went about obtaining a driving license. He had several hiccups in this area, until at last, he was able to convince the authorities concerned that he could indeed drive. “Today, I can proudly and confidently say that I can drive anywhere in Oman. I am from Ibri and I drive every weekend to my village there. Every Khareef, I am in Salalah and I drive and come back from there.

“I even travel abroad – alone!”

Sometime back, Marhoon was watching an episode on the television, which featured disabled divers diving deep. This was playing in his mind since then and when an opportunity presented itself for Marhoon to go scuba diving he just grabbed it with both hands. “I was of course nervous, especially because of my condition.

But, the German team that came in to train took us all in to a pool and started training us. »



A close-up, profile view of a man in a scuba diving mask and regulator, looking out over a body of water. The water is greenish-blue with ripples. The man is wearing a dark wetsuit. The background is slightly blurred, focusing on the man's face and the diving equipment.

> It was just a three-day training programme and they announced that two members will be selected for an advanced training in the sea.” Marhoon was shocked when the team announced his name as one of the two selected. “I felt very proud and good. We were taken to the Barr Al Jissah beach and were trained diving at the sea. This was an unbelievable experience. I have no words to describe it.”

Today Marhoon swears on scuba diving and describes how it changed his life, his perspective. “When we are underwater, it is a totally different experience. I feel like I am in another world. I have no fear, only the freedom to be part of nature. The unbelievable sights down under; the fascinating underwater life...it was all an out of the world experience for me.

### **NO DISABILITY DOWN UNDER**

“When I was down there, I felt full, complete like anyone else underwater. You are not disabled down there!” Marhoon said, adding how difficult it was for him to get out of the pool or the sea.

“When the instructors ask us to come out of the pool, we would ask them for some more time...we never wanted to get out!” Asked if he wanted to be a certified scuba diver in the future, he nodded in the affirmative. “Inshallah, maybe sometime in the future, I might be able to become a proper scuba diver,” he said. |