Jacques Cousteau’s son has opened a dive school on a private island — and it is ideal for children

This was my first dive in open water, in a Caribbean that wasn’t the bright cobalt of my imagining, but an inky blue. Some cloud cover had come in, shifting the colour of the sea from an inviting cliché to something more sinister. I was nervous I wouldn’t know which way was up and which was down in the darkness below but, more than anything, I was worried I might lose my 10-year-old son.

He — like me — was completing the final part of his Padi (Professional Association of Diving Instructors) Open Water Diver certification, a scuba-diving course that can be completed in a minimum of three days and is open to children as young as 10. Diving is not without risk but we were — I reminded myself — in experienced hands, at a new dive centre set up on a small, private
Caribbean island by Jean-Michel Cousteau, son of the celebrated French conservationist and underwater film-maker Jacques Cousteau.

He should know a thing or two about what children need when they learn to dive, having started out early in his father’s footsteps. Jean-Michel made his first dive aged seven, strapped to an Aqua-Lung, the device his father co-developed in 1943. “My brother learnt at four-and-a-half, my daughter at nine, my son at four,” Jean-Michel told me. “The 10-year-old rule is to do with modern safety concerns, but in my view, kids make far fewer mistakes than adults. They are also the decision makers of tomorrow. The sooner we educate them, the better.”

As well as fewer mistakes, children can be bolder, less susceptible to irrational fears. As we prepared for the dive, my body became heavy with dread, as well as a tank, tubes and bars of lead belted around my middle. My son’s short, slight frame was so loaded up with kit, he needed help in order to stand. We were going to dive to a wreck — a 150ft-long first world war minesweeper, Purini, which sank in 1918 off the coast of Mayreau, in the Grenadines. With that peculiar way children talk about the macabre before they are aware of their own mortality, my son — a touch hopefully — asked our instructor if we might see skeletons. He then jumped off the boat, just like that, expecting me to follow.

The 77-year-old Jean-Michel has, like his father, become a formidable oceanographic explorer, film-maker and environmentalist. In 1999 he founded the Ocean Futures Society, a conservation and education non-profit based in Santa Barbara, California (it was involved in the attempt to rehabilitate Keiko, the captive orca that starred in the 1993 film *Free Willy*). But despite the opportunities for exploiting the family name, this is only his second dive centre. The first opened in Fiji in 1994 and has nine diving instructors. This one, on the island of Petit St Vincent (or PSV), 130 miles west of Barbados in St Vincent and the Grenadines, opened in November and is more intimate, with just two instructors catering for guests staying in the island’s 22 cottages.

That Cousteau has ended up here is down to Philip Stephenson, 50, a Texan-born businessman who made his money in private equity, and who bought the island in 2010. He learnt to dive aged 12, and it has clearly become a passion. “My father was a naval officer,” he says. “We lived on the Texas coast, where we had a sailboat, and went on diving trips together for many years.” Over the past three years he has donated $1.5m to marine conservation via his private foundation, with beneficiaries including the National Geographic Society’s “Pristine Seas” initiative.

He spent $10m renovating PSV, but it remains what it has always been, an easy-going if expensive resort
without televisions, phones or anything pretentious (aside from the odd failed dish in the gastronomic restaurant). “I grew up watching underwater films made by Jacques Cousteau. So when I bought PSV, I sought Jean-Michel out, as the heir to his father’s legacy,” says Stephenson. “I went to see him at his house in Sanary-sur-Mer in France. He came here, and on his second trip agreed there were enough good dive sites in this part of the Southern Grenadines to justify an operation.”

Cousteau doesn’t lead the courses himself, but picked the instructors and sites. There’s a full range of courses, from a half-day in the swimming pool, to specialist instruction in night and deep diving. After the five dives of our three-day course, we would have the internationally recognised certification that would open the door to future diving trips worldwide.

Once in the water, my son was too captivated to notice my anxiety. Deeper he dropped. Then the clouds high above must have momentarily parted, for a shaft of sunlight sliced through the darkness, illuminating the carcass of the ship and a school of yellowtail snapper. A damsel fish as red as a ruby hovered, then shot off into the coral.

I was consumed by consciousness of our combined vulnerability — of the sound of my own breath through the regulator, of my curious weightlessness. Then, slowly, I could think and feel the moment for what it was: for the first time in my life my son was discovering the world ahead of me, without my interference, fears and prejudices.

More fish than boy, he glided through the water a few feet above the sandy floor where a stingray flapped its wings to throw up a cloud of white powder. It was a remarkable thing to me — more remarkable, if I’m honest, than this underwater Neverland — to see my child swim so confidently among creatures of the deep blue sea.

**Details**

Sophy Roberts travelled as a guest of Petit St Vincent and ITC Luxury Travel. Nightly rates start at £351 per person, full-board; the Open Water Diver course costs $650. ITC offers a week’s package from £5,319 per person, full-board, including return flights from London and the dive course.

*Photographs: John Fisher/Tom Ordway, Ocean Futures Society*