

THE NEXT ACT / LIFE STORIES

THE AMA DIVER
Hideko Umeno, 84

Treasure hunter

THE ANCIENT JAPANESE TRADITION OF PLUNGING INTO THE SEA TO FISH STILL OFFERS JOYS TO A WOMAN WHO HAS BEEN DOING IT FOR ALMOST 70 YEARS



I am happiest when I am in the sea. And what I love most is the sea in winter, when it's freezing and there are many abalone.

At age 15, I became an ama diver, joining an ancient Japanese tradition of women who plunge into the sea for delicacies such as abalone, oysters and sea urchin. On my island of Tsushima, the ama have been diving for 800 years – in Japan the practice goes back at least 2,000.

When I started, the ama still dove half-naked wearing only a loin-cloth, even in the dead of winter. I think that gave me a strong body. Today things are a little easier, as we wear wetsuits. But never an oxygen tank. This means I must be able to hold my breath underwater for up to two-and-a-half minutes.

At our peak, there were 50 ama diving off Tsushima. Now I am one of only three. It's hard work and the young girls all want to leave for the cities. My back is bent from diving with 10kg weights around my hips and I've grown hard of hearing from the decades of plunging but I still love it.

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THE SEA MADE ME STRONG, AND I EAT WELL AND SLEEP WELL

I did not ask for this life. I wanted to go to high school when I was 15. But my mother, also an ama, told me "Dive! Dive! You won't starve if you become an ama diver." That's why my greatest pride is that through my earnings, I was able to put my two sons through university. And I am proud that today I am still a professional diver, earning my own living.

I don't have any secrets for a long, healthy life. The sea made me strong, and I eat well and sleep well. I am in bed by 6pm, and get up at 6am. I eat healthy food such as fish and seaweed. And I eat a lot of rice – until recently up to six heaping bowls a day but now more like five.

The sea is my companion. Even today, my heart beats faster when I take my rickety motorboat alone out to sea to dive for abalone and sazae snails. I can't wait to plunge. When I am underwater, I feel joy and exuberance.

It was my harsh training as a young woman that allows me to draw such enjoyment today. Back then we didn't go out diving alone. There was a boss who took us out to diving spots. On snowy days, the captain would scold you mercilessly if you complained it was cold. You just had to dive in. And you had to stay in the water until the captain said you could get back onto the boat.

It was rough going but that hardship is why diving is such a joy for me today. On cold winter days, I'll build a fire on the shore to warm up before diving – and roast fish on the fire for lunch, watching the waters.

But there were times in my life when I couldn't face the sea. One was when my husband, a fisherman, died 15 years ago. I could not enter the sea for nearly a year. Now, every evening, I kneel at our Buddhist household altar and tell my husband about the day's events.

My eldest son has been telling me I should come live with him and the children outside Tokyo. But I am staying put, living as I have lived since for almost 70 years. I belong on this island. For the sea is my treasure.

This is the latest in a series of profiles of individuals who are redefining later life that will appear in FT Weekend Magazine and at www.nextact.ft.com.

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