

So, You Want to Dive? A Frank Discussion

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So, you think that you would like to try SCUBA diving. If so, you are among well over a million people who sign up for certification classes every year. And as one who is completely and unashamedly biased, it is the **grandest** sport in the world. Swimming in a swirl of colorful reef fish in the Hawaiian Islands, or gliding along a deep vertical wall in the Caribbean, or dancing with the sea lions in the kelp off the California coast, there is **nothing** more glorious than time underwater.

People sign up for dive courses in droves. They come full of enthusiasm and expectations. But we have to ask: If there are over one million people certified every year, then why are the estimated number of **active** divers only a few million? The answer is that there is a large drop out rate, both in the classes and after certification. In my experience, it is because these folks did not have a clear picture of what the sport requires in time, money, and expertise. Their enthusiasm got them to sign up, and unfortunately the realities of the sport pulled them away.

The purpose of this article is to try and give you a clearer picture of what is required in recreational SCUBA diving so that you can make an informed decision. I do not want to scare you away, only give you a better sense of what it takes. Should you take that course? The sport requires a commitment

in skill, money, and time and acceptance of certain risks. If you are not willing to invest in these things, it is probably best you find another recreational activity.

Skill

Many certification agencies promote diving as an easy, fun sport. They are completely right! It is fun, and easy, but the operative word is **sport**. No one needs to be an athlete or a lifeguard to be able to become a fantastic diver, but it does require a commitment to developing the physical skills necessary to have that fun and be safe. In California waters, you are going to be strapping on 60-70 pounds of gear and binding yourself up in an exposure suit. It takes some getting used to, and you'll have to display a little patience as you become accustomed to the gear and the new environment of the ocean.

Most certification agencies require a watermanship test to determine if you meet the minimum physical standards. The student must be able to swim 200 yards with no time limit. I have seen many students barely complete the swim either because they were exhausted, or more commonly, they were fighting to keep their head above water - they told me later that they don't like to get their face wet! Seems strange that someone who hates to get their face wet would sign up for SCUBA diving, but they do!

So if the 200 yard swim fills you with anxiety, or you have recurrent nightmares about drowning, you might want to consider another activity. You need to be **comfortable** in the water. Remember, you are going to strap all that gear on. So, if you aren't comfortable in just your swimsuit, the addition of the gear will just drive your anxiety level through the roof. As long as

you are comfortable to start, I can help you develop the necessary skills.

How do you react to the unexpected? Do you deal with it calmly, or do you become unglued? A little serious soul searching is important here. While diving is a relatively **safe** sport, things can go wrong. What will be your reaction to a problem underwater? The training you receive in your class will give you the knowledge to deal with every possibility. What will you do with that training? Will you be able to follow it underwater and deal with problems that might arise? Most accidents are the result of a succession of small problems that the diver let get out of hand and develop into a near panic. Can you break that chain and prevent a panic? Panic is implicated in a majority of diving accidents and deaths every year. *Quite simply, people prone to blind panic should not dive.*

A little anxiety is to be expected. I remember having a dream or two about drowning during my first SCUBA class. Remember, diving is not a *natural* activity - about as natural as a space walk. But if you are just not comfortable in the water, or the thought of facing a problem underwater makes you freak, snorkeling might be a wonderful alternative. You can still see some of the exciting plants and animals without the hassles of SCUBA.

Money

Certification courses are offered by a variety of dive shops and organizations. People sign up for these courses thinking that the \$200-300 instructional fee is pretty reasonable. In fact, \$200-300 is usually at, or below the dive shop's cost. Just be aware that the drain on your pocketbook is only starting.

Students must realize that they are wedded to their gear in this sport and it is a "shotgun" wedding. If you are going to participate, you have no choice. Buy or rent, it is expensive. Surfing takes a board and a wetsuit, hiking some shoes and a backpack. ***SCUBA diving requires life support equipment!*** If you buy cheapo shoes and your laces blow, it is an inconvenience. Buy a cheapo regulator and it could be deadly. Your gear is an investment in your life - neither of which are cheap.

The continuing expense part of diving also requires an investment. There's getting to the dive site (unless you already live there), air fills, equipment that regularly wears out like gloves, hood, and boots, and annual service requirements for life support gear. Even if you own all your gear, a weekend of shore diving could cost upwards of \$100 depending on your choice of lodging and food. If you go cheap, you can probably get by with \$20 - 25. Now, if you rent your gear, add another \$60 - 120. Diving from a commercial dive boat will run you another \$50 - 100. Ouch! is a polite way of phrasing some folks surprise at the cost of diving.

I often get the reaction from students, "I didn't know it was going to be so expensive!". The truth is, yes, it's expensive. It is not a sport like, hiking for instance, that you can decide to do on a whim and a shoestring (pun intended). Diving takes planning and money.

A moderately priced, new gear set will run around \$1,400 - 2,000, and the sky is the limit on the upper end. Casual vacation divers can usually get away with renting gear at the resort. But if you plan to dive frequently, owning your own SCUBA gear is cheaper in the long run.

Time

Seems that some folks love to “collect” experiences. They’ve done a sky dive, a bungee jump, and a hang glider ride. There is absolutely nothing wrong with this, but a hang glider ride takes an afternoon, and you’ve got your “trophy”. Diving is an investment and a commitment to a sport, not just an experience. If you want just the experience, many dive shops and resorts offer a one time dive for people without a certification. Is a shallow dive or two on your Fiji vacation all you really want? If so, it is available through various certified dive professionals. But realize that you can not, and should not, dive without a professional instructor if you do not possess a valid certification.

Time is one element that folks often overlook. It takes time to develop the skills and experience necessary to do some of the great dives available to recreational divers. Descending 100 feet to see the screws on the Cayman Brac wreck M/V Tibbits would be unacceptably risky if you’ve had just two dives after your class. People sometimes believe that their certification card completes their skill development. Just the opposite, they are only beginning. For example, learning to move around expertly in the water column can take up to 50 dives. Lack of good locomotion skills can result in serious diving accidents or kill sensitive marine life as the inexperienced diver plows through the reef like a bulldozer.

You have to make the time commitment to become a good diver - staying abreast of developments and continuing with your education.

Risks

Non-divers often ask me if I am worried about diving in the cold California waters - where there may be sharks. My response, backed by accident statistics, is that once I get off the highway and into the water with the sharks, my risk of dying goes **down!**

“But, is diving safe?” The answer is yes, depending on your definition of safe. If by safe, you mean *absolutely* safe with astronomically low risk rates, then no, diving is not safe. It has been said that the only place to find an *absolutely* safe dive is under the shade of an oak tree. Remember, you will be entering an alien environment and totally dependent on life support equipment built and maintained by other people – that sort of activity entails some risks. Sometimes, things can go wrong and a number of people die every year in recreational scuba diving. To dive as safely as possible, you must understand and **accept** the risks just like you understand and accept the quite high risks of driving your car everyday.

“So – is it safe? Answer the question!” The annual risk of dying in a diving accident are about 1 in 50,000 while the risk of dying in your car is 1 in 5,000. The reality is that only you can provide an answer. No one can decide for you. Some people conclude that strapping on all that gear and getting in shallow water with all those squidgy animals is pure insanity, while others see the risk of strapping on 200 pounds of gear and penetrating a wreck at 220 feet in angry, rolling seas is an acceptable risk (this is the diving equivalent of climbing Mount Everest).

Warm Water vs. Cold Water Diving

The cold California waters (40 - 65 °F) are not for everyone. More than half of the people certified in this area are warm water divers (75 - 85 °F) and dive only in places such as the Caribbean or the South Pacific. Two things tend to wave them off of West Coast diving - cold water and low visibility. For a price, the cold can be beaten back by investing in a drysuit which keeps the wearer toasty, warm, and dry. The low visibility is just a fact of West Coast diving.

So, don't be discouraged if you don't really take to diving in Monterey. Maybe you are a warm water diver. Great! You can even do your ocean certification dives in warm water by getting a referral from your instructor.

Is Diving for You?

One conclusion from the preceding might be that I expect a prospective diver to be a fearless athlete/adventurer ready to shirk any danger and forego any expense. Nothing could be further from the truth.

In order to answer this question, it takes a little honesty. First, are you doing this for yourself or has a spouse or friend pulled you in? It is certainly OK for someone else to have sparked your interest. But do YOU want to dive? Is all the down side we've discussed so far offset by the thrill and wonder of flying under water? Certification courses are filled with people who don't really want to be there. Instructors can usually spot them before they even get in the water. Is the thought of strapping on all that gear intriguing or abhorrent? If your intentions are your own, then you

have to ask yourself the following questions:

1. Am I comfortable in the water? Does the ocean sing to me or scare me?
2. Can I deal with the expected dive conditions? For example, cold water or low visibility, choppy waves or mild currents.
3. Am I willing to invest the time and money to develop and maintain the necessary skills?
4. Can I afford to continue to dive after the class?

If your answer is yes, with a little perseverance you'll be telling friends and relatives about that pod of dolphins that rolled through on your last dive in Maui while everyone else tells the story about Aunt Agnes' latest romantic escapade.

Now, after all the warnings of poverty and commitment, does it still sound like fun? If it does, then diving may be a sport for you! Sign up for that certification course and launch a lifetime of exploration and wonder.