



# Time to take a dive

**A scuba diving course will add surprisingly little cost, and a marvellous new dimension, to that holiday in the sun**

BY PHIL TRIPP

**F**OR thousands of scuba divers, their sport is a cool, calm, weightless escape from appointment-laden diaries and screeching mobile phones.

One-day beginners' courses that usually include an accompanied "joy dive" are easy to sign up for at resorts or holiday spots, but they fall well short of the enjoyment to be had as a qualified diver.

Early last year, at the age of 47, I took the plunge and in five days completed an intensive certification course with my local instructor. The course included two days of accompanied shore dives and a final day of two boat dives to gain a basic PADI open water diver C-Card. Since then, I have logged more than 50 dives off various Hawaiian islands, the Florida Keys and Sydney.

Diving has opened up a whole new aspect of our planet for me. I have seen pods of dolphins swimming in formation, lobsters

and crabs scurrying into nooks to avoid capture, and fleets of rainbow-colored fish flowing around multi-textured soft and hard coral reefs — not to mention the occasional shark lurking under an overhang, a whale breaching overhead and a four-metre manta ray exploding from the seabed to turn cartwheels as it fed on clouds of phosphorescent plankton.

To become a licensed diver one must be in reasonable health and at least 12 years of age. Some courses can be compressed into three days, but most last five. A qualification obtained at an approved course will be recognised throughout the world.

A C-Card is like a driver's licence: a permit that offers no information about experience or competence beyond the basics. Night-time, wreck, cave or deep dives generally require higher certification.

Underwater shyacking can be fatal or permanently disabling. Scuba fatalities are rare, but a diver who ignores safety rules or takes risks — like wearing a dark wetsuit among a group of seals in shark-infested waters — can easily reduce his or her chances of surfacing alive.

The first step to gaining a licence is a physical examination, preferably by a doctor who specialises in dive medicine. Asthma, diabetes, heart disease, a pulmonary condition, high blood pressure, severe sinus or ear problems can rule a candidate out.

One of the first tests is a 200-metre swim and 10 minutes of treading water. However, the most strenuous part of diving usually is carrying the equipment from the car to the boat.

The only other impediments are mental or emotional: diving

is not a sport for people who are agoraphobic, claustrophobic or scared of fish.

A variety of organisations train divers. The Professional Association of Diving Instructors (PADI) is the best known and its C-Card certification is recognised globally. Scuba Schools International (SSI), the National Association of Underwater Instructors (NAUI) and even the YMCA offer certification courses that differ little in the material they teach. Not all are recognised by all dive operators.

A five-day PADI open-water diving certification costs between \$300 and \$500. Most dive boats carry between six and 30 trainees, often with a cadre of snorkellers, too.

Equipment is generally rented, either at a resort or from a dive operator or instructor, rather than purchased. Apart from the mask, fins and snorkel, the most important items are a tank (steel or aluminium), an airflow regulator, a set of weights and a buoyancy control device (BCD), which is a vest that inflates or deflates to control ascent or descent. A wetsuit is advisable for insulation as well as protection from scrapes. A basic rig, for those who opt to purchase, will cost about \$2000; color co-ordinated top-line gear costs closer to \$5000.

A popular accessory is a dive computer to wear on the wrist or attach to the air system. This calculates depth, time under water and how long a diver can spend at various depths before having to surface. And there are knives, cameras, lights, hoods, boots, gloves, corrective mask lenses, and even underwater motor scooters.

Once the diver is equipped and certified, the underwater world beckons. Dive spots around the Pacific Ocean tend to have crystal-clear visibility for 30 to 50 metres, with the most abundant sea-life centred on coral reefs or shipwrecks. The Great Barrier Reef offers the best diving on Australia's east coast, with an immense variety of fish and coral. In the west, the Ningaloo reefs off Exmouth feature the mammoth whale shark — a vegetarian.



The Pacific islands have some of the world's best dives in terms of variety. In Tahiti, divers can hold on to a cable as the divemaster feeds schools of shark. In Truk, Palau and Guam, coral-encrusted warships from World War II are home to vast populations of marine life. Fiji, Samoa, Papua New Guinea and Vanuatu are famous for their flowing sheets of rainbow-hued soft corals.

Although Sydney Harbor is something of a junk yard, there are some worthwhile dives off the beaches at Coogee and Clovelly. Long Reef, Port Stephens, Seal Rocks and the reefs that extend up the coast towards Byron Bay also offer good prospects. Jervis Bay to the south is another popular spot. Melbourne's Port Phillip Bay has a few wrecks and some reasonable dives.

For diving courses, call PADI Australia on (02) 9417 2800. ■

**PHIL TRIPP** is a travel & lifestyle writer with an extensive range of articles placed in over 100 publications globally.

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