

Scuba Confidential

AN INSIDER'S GUIDE TO BECOMING A BETTER
DIVER

SIMON PRIDMORE

Sandsmedia Publishing

BALI, INDONESIA

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*For my three mermaids
Kayleigh, Savannah and Caroline*

The Expert View

“If PADI’s Open-Water manual is the Bible of scuba diving, consider this the New Testament. Scuba Confidential is the closest thing there is to a scuba diving self-help book and a must-read for any diver, new or old.”

David Espinosa, Editor in Chief, Sport Diver magazines

“What a welcome book! I have been instructing SCUBA for several decades now and this will be an excellent addition to the training books currently used. This is written by a diver who is up to date with the equipment on the market and knows how to configure it for clean and trimmed out divers. I would encourage all our clients to purchase this new publication. Well done, Simon!” **Evelyn Bartram Dudas NAUI #8672**

“Instead of writing another training manual, Simon has utilised a very unique approach to sharing his many years of experience underwater with those that may be thinking of becoming a diver or are already enjoying the wonders of the underwater world. Through the use of case histories Simon provides a black-box approach to avoiding some of diving’s pitfalls and in doing so, he gives some great tips and insights on subjects important to divers at all levels that may not be found in other publications.” **Terry Cummins OMA**

“A compelling page-turner packed full of thoughtful – and thought-provoking – information, tips, analyses and insights gleaned from more than thirty years as a widely-respected diving industry professional, Simon Pridmore’s, ‘Scuba Confidential: An Insider’s Guide To Becoming A Better Diver’, is required reading for all divers, regardless of experience level, whose minds remain open to the book’s underlying message that, “Learning to dive is easy; becoming a good diver is hard.” Deserving of a place on every thinking-diver’s bookshelf, ‘Scuba Confidential’ is much more than just another, ‘How-To’ diving manual; it’s a resource that, for those who heed its message, will pave the way for exciting and enjoyable diving adventures and discoveries.” **David Strike, OZTeK Organiser**

TABLE OF CONTENTS

<i>The Expert View</i>	4
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	7
FOREWORD	9
PREFACE	10
Safety	13
1. <i>Mental Preparation for Scuba Diving</i>	14
2. <i>Detecting and Dealing with Stress</i>	19
3. <i>Trials and Tribulations</i>	26
4. <i>Five Essential Strategies for Survival</i>	36
5. <i>Why Divers Die</i>	45
6. <i>Solo Diving</i>	54
Out of Air Drills	66
Skills	68
7. <i>Acquiring Perfect Buoyancy</i>	69
8. <i>Improving Navigation Skills</i>	73
9. <i>The Art of Conservation</i>	79
10. <i>Demythologising Deco</i>	86
When A Safety Stop Is Not Safe!	94
11. <i>Ten Things Tech Diving Teaches Us</i>	95
12. <i>Don't Always Copy The Pros</i>	104
Dumb Things Dive Pros Do	109
Training	110
13. <i>The Training Minefield</i>	111
14. <i>Beneath Dark Waters - Night Diving</i>	119
15. <i>Going All the Way In – Wreck Diving</i>	125
Rules for Safe Wreck Diving	132
16. <i>Below Frozen Seas – Ice Diving</i>	133
17. <i>To the Extreme - Technical Diving</i>	138

18. <i>Current Events – Drift Diving</i>	146
19. <i>Learning Your Lines - Cave Diving</i>	154
Glossary of Cave Diving Terms.....	162
Equipment.....	164
20. <i>Running the Rule over Regulators</i>	165
It Only Takes a Few Seconds	175
21. <i>Taking Control of Your BCD</i>	178
22. <i>Dive Computers - Faith or Science?</i>	185
The Best Dive Computer.....	193
23. <i>Look Behind You – Cylinders and Valves</i>	194
24. <i>Surface Safety</i>	209
How to Deploy an SMB.....	215
25. <i>The Concept of Configuration</i>	217
26. <i>Accessorize Wisely</i>	221
The Save-a-Dive Kit	227
Gases	228
27. <i>The NITROX Revolution</i>	229
28. <i>The Black Gases</i>	235
29. <i>Narcosis - Diving Under the Influence</i>	242
30. <i>The Folly of Deep Air and the Joy of Mix</i>	247
31. <i>Rebreathers- Are They the Future?</i>	255
Choosing Your Rebreather	265
Travel	266
32. <i>Great Diving and Where to Find It</i>	267
33. <i>Life on Liveboards</i>	274
A Liveboard Medical Kit.....	281
34. <i>Behave Yourself - Diver Etiquette</i>	282
10 Tips for Diving with Photographers	296
35. <i>Hidden Treasures - Muck Diving</i>	298
36. <i>Marine Life Diversity & Behaviour</i>	305

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My wife Sofie for her unwavering support and extraordinary patience

FOREWORD

I have known Simon for many years and have been privileged to have had several diving 'experiences' with him.

His wealth of knowledge as a diving educator and experienced diver is evident within the content of this book. We are lucky that people like Simon take the time and effort to consolidate their knowledge and experiences into such texts not only for those of us that are still new to the underwater world but for those that wish to expand their horizons further into the part of our planet that so few of us get to see and bond with.

I especially like the 'Becoming a better diver' summaries with each chapter, which are obviously the thrust of the book. A wise diver should collect these into one document and study and understand them fully.

As Simon notes, it is tough to become a better diver, but it is something we should all strive for. It is even tougher to then write meaningful and concise guidance for others to share so that they can safely and enjoyably continue to expand their underwater horizons.

Kevin Gurr

IANTD IT #6, Author of Technical Diving From the Bottom Up, co-designer of the VR3 dive computer and Sentinel CCR

PREFACE

Why Scuba Confidential?

Why did I decide the world needed another book on how to scuba dive? It was not a decision reached quickly. I have been writing for dive magazines for the last decade or so and, over the years, a number of readers and editors have suggested I collect the articles in a book some day. This is not the “Best Of” compilation they were asking for, although the genesis for some of the chapters of Scuba Confidential does lie in those magazine pieces.

I have noticed over the years that as divers we all have a number of things in common. We make mistakes, are often plagued by insecurity, know we occasionally stray outside our comfort zone in the water and give thanks every time we get away with it. We are always eager to improve our knowledge. Many of us are aware of deficiencies in our skills and technique but are at a loss as to how to overcome these. A frequently asked question is, “where do you go to become a better diver if you have done the basic courses, logged a couple of hundred dives and do not want to take the faux-professional route to scuba slavery?”

I decided therefore to write a book offering an insight into the knowledge that top professionals in the world of scuba diving acquire from years of experience and that extreme technical divers learn through intensive training: knowledge that readers could use to develop their skills and become safer, more confident and more capable divers. The aim was to advise, educate and provoke thought, reinforcing essential truths about diving but also challenging common assumptions, presenting ideas in a readable and entertaining way, without preaching or adopting too didactic an approach; just plenty of common sense and straight talk.

A glance at the Table of Contents will give you a good idea of the range of

topics on offer. For example, the top trends in scuba diving, liveboards, rebreathers and muck, are covered in detail, as well as hotly debated issues such as etiquette, configuration, solo diving, decompression and accident analysis.

Why believe me?

How do I know what I am talking about? Scuba Confidential represents some of what I have learned from thirty years of diving and twenty years of teaching and writing about the sport. I have worked as a dive guide, divemaster, instructor, instructor trainer and instructor trainer-trainer, owned a dive centre, run a regional diver training agency, worked as international sales manager for a computer and rebreather manufacturer, organised dive tours all over the world and spoken at conferences on four continents. Being by nature an “early adopter” I have been fortunate to be involved at the cutting edge of the sport for a long time and am currently lucky enough to live in Indonesia where the present generation is the first to dive for fun. The enthusiasm for this “new” sport here is refreshing and inspirational.

Caveats

This is not a messianic pronouncement. The message of Scuba Confidential is not, “Dive Like Me!” All of us are different; we have different attitudes, needs, goals and intellectual and physical capabilities. How you choose to dive is for you to decide, based on as much research and advice as you can get. Scuba Confidential is designed to provide you with a short cut to that decision.

Some may criticize me for not covering basic information in the book, and it is true, I do assume that readers possess at least one diver certification card and have logged more than a few dives. In those chapters where I go back to the basics, I do so because I believe that insufficient emphasis is placed on the importance of these topics in early diver training. The concept of managing stress and cylinders and valves are cases in point.

Others may also accuse me of not covering subjects in adequate detail

and, again, I plead guilty as charged. This is often deliberate. For instance, the Cave Diving and Ice Diving chapters do not teach you how to dive in caves or under ice. Reading this book is not a substitute for getting expert tuition and spending time in the water. However, the training chapters do endeavour to vicariously share with the reader some of the magic of the experience, so that he or she can decide whether a certain type of diving is something they think they would be interested in or thrilled by.

Some chapters, for example Solo Diving, deal with the more contentious and complex questions that face divers and, although I do attempt to be even-handed, I have often been unable to prevent my personal opinions from shining through and they will not be universally shared. Too bad: this is my book!

Learning to dive is easy; becoming a good diver is hard. It requires dedicated application. You may find on reading Scuba Confidential that you need to make changes to long-established habits, but you will find that even apparently minor things can make a world of difference to your comfort and confidence in the water. It is a good idea to opt for evolution rather than revolution and make changes or adopt new techniques one by one, as a step-by-step process is much easier to manage.

My main hopes are that you enjoy reading Scuba Confidential, that it causes you to review and reflect on how you dive, that it helps you progress, that you find it a useful reference to return to time and again and that you find that it does indeed succeed in making you a better diver!

Simon

August 2013

Safety

1. Mental Preparation for Scuba Diving

Becoming a successful scuba diver is not just a matter of developing skills and getting the right equipment; it is vital that you also learn how to stay in control of what goes on in your head when you are underwater. Athletes call this 'mental conditioning' and it is an important factor that determines a competitor's level of performance in any sport. Scuba diving is no exception.

The skills we learn through diver training are designed to make sure that we know how to deal with anything that can happen to us underwater but to cope properly with any given situation simply being armed with the knowledge of what to do is not enough. You also need a clear head and a positive outlook to ensure that you function effectively and make the correct decisions. Your mental conditioning has a considerable effect on how much enjoyment you will derive from diving, directs how you will perform in an emergency and, perhaps most importantly, will help you to manage stress.

We all recognise that stress is a bad thing! Most of us have adopted mental conditioning strategies to avoid or reduce stress in our working and social lives but conventional scuba diver training does not really teach divers how to avoid or reduce stress underwater.

In chapters two and three I discuss how to identify and handle stress when it occurs and what to do when equipment problems strike. However, the primary aim must always be to do everything you can to try to prevent stress arising in the first place: to ensure that you are mentally prepared for the underwater world and always in the right state of mind to deal calmly with anything that happens. Here are a few tips and techniques to help you.

Focus on Your Skills

Your self-rescue skills need to be learned to the point where they can be performed automatically, so that when an emergency strikes you do not have to think about what to do, you just do it, instinctively. You can practice the skills on every dive you do. For example, it takes only a second or two as you are swimming along to switch from your primary regulator to your octopus and back again. Now and again, you can reach behind your neck to locate your cylinder valve so you know where to find it if you ever find yourself descending with your air switched off. When you are on your safety stops, practice sending up your surface marker buoy.

Build Water Confidence

Get as comfortable as you can in the water, not just by doing more diving, although that is always a good idea. Go snorkelling, do some free-diving, swim more often, spend more time at the beach or the pool!

Get Fit

You need to be both mentally and physically fit for diving. The better your fitness, the better you will deal with the rigors of swimming against a current or making a difficult shore exit in full-gear, things that could easily bring on high levels of stress.

Get Comfortable

You are more likely to panic on a dive if you are cold and uncomfortable. Think about your thermal protection, wear the right suit for the

environment you are diving in and replace your wetsuit regularly. Frequent exposure to pressure crushes neoprene, reducing its efficiency, so resist the temptation to hang on to your old wetsuit until it gets thin, worn and loose. A new suit does not only make you look better, it keeps you warmer.

Don't Dive Drunk

Other factors that can predispose you to panic are fatigue and alcohol so, if last night went on a little later and was a little heavier than planned, sleep through the first dive of the day, get a little more rest and drink plenty of water when you eventually get up.

Learn to Breathe

Correct breathing can prevent the onset of stress and help you keep a clear head if a potentially stressful incident arises. Get in the habit of exhaling fully with each breath, contracting your stomach. Then take a long, slow deep breath in, pushing your stomach out to allow your lungs to expand as much as possible. Ideally, each breath in and out should last 7 seconds or so, giving you a 15 second breathing cycle and four breaths a minute. This is the perfect way for a scuba diver to breathe. It allows you to expel from your lungs as much tension-inducing carbon dioxide as possible and will even reduce your air consumption.

Visualize

Before a scuba dive, do as the technical divers do. Sit in a quiet place, (difficult sometimes aboard a busy dive boat, I know), and think about the dive ahead. Reflect on the dive master's briefing; review what you have researched about the site or what you remember from previous dives there. Think positive thoughts, think about what you are going to see and visualize a successful dive. Picture yourself early on in the descent, in control, checking all your gear is in place, relaxing your breathing rate maintaining good buoyancy, and staying in touch with your dive team. Then reflect on the dive itself, what you will be looking for and what you might find. Visualize yourself feeling comfortable and in control, checking

your computer and high-pressure gauge frequently and regularly, then making a slow, safe and controlled ascent with a safety stop, finally establishing buoyancy on the surface and ending the dive with plenty of air.

Eliminate Apprehension

Visualization before a dive will usually remove any apprehension that you might have been sensing. Apprehension is best defined as a feeling of uncertainty about your ability to cope with a situation and the principal danger of embarking on a dive when you are in such a state of mind is that just a minor problem can turn the apprehension into full-blown panic.

By visualizing the dive you can build self-confidence and put yourself in a relaxed, positive, forward-looking frame of mind, the exact sort of attitude that you should have before any endeavour.

Follow Premonitions

There may be occasions when, no matter how well you visualize the dive, you just cannot shake off the feeling that something bad is going to happen. If you ever do feel this sort of premonition, don't ignore it. Cancel the dive and "sit one out" or change the plan.

Conduct an In Water Check

We all learn the pre-dive safety check during our beginners' course and this soon becomes something we do quickly and instinctively without realising we are doing it. Another very good habit to acquire is carrying out an in-water check at the start of your dive. The whole process of gearing up on a busy boat, entering the water and descending can be rushed and stressful and it can undo all the positive effects of your pre-dive visualization. So once you have left the surface and are a couple of metres under water, surrounded by the peace and quiet of the ocean, go through a quick in-water check. Take a few seconds to compose yourself, relax, get a long, slow, deep breathing cycle going, make sure all your equipment is intact, buckles are fastened, nothing is leaking and gauges

are working then set off calmly for the depths.

Become a Better Diver by

Including mental preparation techniques in your dive routine

2. Detecting and Dealing with Stress

Stress is a potential risk on almost every dive we make. Some of the more obvious examples are time-pressure stress from having a limited air supply, task-loading stress from needing to do a number of things simultaneously and compound stress, which is what happens when a number of stressful factors coincide.

In scuba diving, stress is particularly unwelcome as, if it is not controlled, it can very quickly lead to panic and when we panic our untrained responses usually make the situation worse rather than better. Panic is always life threatening when it occurs under water and is the most common contributing factor to diving fatalities.

A classic example is the nervous diver who is worried that his regulator will not give him enough air. He gulps greedily when inhaling but only partially exhales before trying to take the next breath. Eventually, he finds it impossible to breathe in because his lungs are still full but, instead of breathing out, he concludes that his regulator has failed, tears it out of his mouth and bolts for the surface, holding his breath.

To deal with stress you must first recognize that it is present and to do this you need to be both aware of the signs and in tune with what your mind and body are doing.

Indicators of stress include clumsiness, delayed response, disorientation, fixation on gauges, an increased breathing rate, irritability, tension, unease, and unusual anxiety or apprehension. Be conscious of your mood and remain objective so that you interpret it correctly. For example, if you begin to find something your buddy is doing intensely annoying, it is far more likely that you, rather than your buddy, are the one with the problem.

Once you have identified that stress is present, your intuition will tell you that there must be a logical reason for it. That is to say, because you feel worried, you must therefore have something valid to worry about. This is, of course, not always the case. An increased breathing rate accompanied by a feeling of unease or apprehension can simply be a result of a build up of carbon dioxide in the bloodstream following a hard swim against a current.

The secret to coping with the onset of stress underwater is to clear your mind, analyse the situation and then act according to your training.

To clear your mind, stop all activity; grab a rock, (making sure first that it IS a rock,) and rest. Exhale slowly and completely, compressing your diaphragm to expel as much CO₂ laden air from your lungs as possible then inhale fully expanding your diaphragm. Do this a few times.

As your brain clears you will be able to work out what is going on. Do you have any valid reason to be worried? Is there any urgent need for action? Look at your pressure gauge and make sure you have plenty to breathe. Check your decompression status or no-decompression time remaining. Run a quick check over your dive gear to make sure everything is in place and working.

Then act. If you have plenty to breathe, are comfortable with what your computer is reading and all your equipment is functioning correctly then you may just choose to continue your dive, reducing your effort so the panic does not return.

If you are low on breathing gas and/or have exceeded your planned

decompression status then your priority will be to make a controlled ascent to a shallower depth.

It is always wise to take a moment to gather your thoughts before you act to make sure that you are about to do the right thing. However, taking too long over this process when you are deep underwater can exacerbate your predicament due to the limits of your air supply. Therefore your thinking time is equally limited.

This is the main reason why it is important to practice emergency and self-rescue skills intensively to the point where your response to an emergency will be automatic, instinctive and appropriate.

Technical divers constantly practice gas sharing and switching between their primary and secondary regulators. Their responses are so conditioned that if a real-world emergency takes place and an out-of-air diver grabs the regulator they are breathing from, they will automatically switch to their back up regulator before they are intellectually conscious of what has happened. The emergency is over almost before it has begun.

Anticipation

The most effective way of dealing with stress is to anticipate it or spot it in the early stages so you can act decisively and nip it in the bud before it escalates into panic. Therefore you need to be constantly alert.

Professionals are not only required to monitor their own status but also learn how to identify the signs in others. This skill is sometimes acquired through bitter experience. At least once in our careers most of us have experienced that heart-stopping moment when a diver in our charge suddenly bolts for the surface. Yes, it is true that certified divers are ultimately responsible for their own safety whether a divemaster is present or not but nevertheless, we mentally kick ourselves for not having seen that the diver had a problem until it was too late.

In the following two case histories, the divers concerned recognized that they were suffering from stress but did not fully appreciate the potential

consequences. Fortunately, both events took place in a training scenario so an instructor was there to over-ride their instincts and anticipate the threat on their behalf.

Case History #1 Anxious Andrew

"I was one of three students on a deep diving course. We had spent a long time discussing the dive plan and were all looking forward to it. We descended quickly down the reef wall but when we arrived at depth I felt uneasy. I was breathing more quickly than normal and I became anxious and disorientated. My instinct was to abort the dive but I didn't want to let down my instructor or the other guys in the class who had spent so much time preparing so I decided to tough it out and when the instructor signalled OK? I just responded OK. However, instead of moving on, he looked at me for few seconds with a quizzical expression in his eyes then collected us all together and signalled up with his thumb. "

"I felt an immense sense of relief but when we arrived back in the shallows at the top of the wall, my mind cleared, my anxiety disappeared and I felt terribly guilty at having spoiled the dive. So I signalled to the instructor that I was happy to go back down again but he shook his head and we spent time in the shallows instead running through skills. The deep dive was rescheduled for the next day and everything went fine."

It is possible that had the group remained at depth on the original deep dive, the affected diver's mind would have cleared after a few minutes and the dive would have gone smoothly. However, once the instructor noticed that one of his students might be on the verge of panic, he assessed that, given the relative inexperience of the group, there was a high risk that keeping them at depth would cause the situation to escalate rapidly. His prompt action defused the situation immediately, ensured there was no escalation and completely eliminated the possibility of a host of adverse scenarios. The diver himself was aware that he was compromised and should abort the dive but decided to carry on and accept the additional risk in order not to disappoint the other members of the team. He was unaware that he was suffering from perceived peer-pressure stress as well as his other symptoms and this one additional factor could have led to disaster, had it not been for the instructor's

intervention.

Case History #2: Bad News for Ruth

"I was at the dive centre with my buddy preparing our gear for the final dive in our TRIMIX course when one of the divemasters arrived with the news that a diver that we knew from another dive centre had died in the recompression chamber following an incident that had taken place the day before."

"On the boat, the news was playing on my mind but I told myself not to dwell on it as I had to concentrate on the forthcoming dive which would be our first to 90m (300ft.) On arrival at the dive site, we saw that a strong current was running and that it had carried the buoy, which was to be our ascent platform, underwater. I glanced at my buddy and he looked concerned. It felt like everything was conspiring to prevent us doing this dive but it was the last day of our course and we would be flying out the following night so we were going to have to do the dive now, whatever the conditions."

"Our instructor came over as we were changing into our wetsuits and asked if we would mind postponing the dive to a future trip, given the circumstances. I almost cried as a strange combination of emotions flooded through me all at once, including grief for the diver who had died and also relief that we were not going to dive today. In the end, we rearranged our flights and enjoyed a perfect 90m (300ft) dive a couple of days later."

The instructor could not have known for sure how the news the students had received would work on their minds at depth. He did know, however, that the fact that they were undertaking a big dive would already be creating a certain level of anxiety, and that a strong current might lead to additional task-loading. Aborting the dive before they had even entered the water made absolutely sure that what seemed like a steadily cumulating series of stressors did not result in a tragedy. Even though the diver correctly identified a number of the indicators, the diver mistook the time stress created by their flight plans for the next day as a factor justifying additional risk. The diver would never consciously argue that a flight schedule is worth risking your life for but stress clouds the mind and

leads to poor decision-making.

Breaking the Chain

In both these incidents, the instructor acted decisively to break the chain of events that might have been leading to disaster. Every accident has a chain of events that lead up to it but often the chain is only visible afterwards. You do not always see a chain before an accident takes place, but if you do see one or if you only think you see one, you need to have the courage to break it, even if this leads to your being criticised by others in your dive team.

Cave divers have a rule that eliminates peer pressure and fear of recrimination and saves lives. This rule is: -

“Any diver can abort any dive at any time for any reason without having to explain themselves to anyone.”

When one of your team gives the up signal, (or turn signal in the case of cave diving,) the rest of the team acknowledges and complies immediately, no questions asked, either at the time or subsequently.

It does not matter if the threat to safety is genuine or not. For example, a diver may abort a dive simply as a result of misreading his pressure gauge. The important thing is that if one member of the team believes there is a threat, then that belief in itself is enough to put the team at risk if it continues.

Don't Let Your Baggage Get In The Way

A final point that goes back to the importance of mental preparation. Be aware that external factors can affect your concentration and add to your stress on a dive without you realising it. If your mind is occupied with problems elsewhere in your life such as money, girlfriends, boyfriends, family or work issues, these distractions can cloud your judgement in the event something goes wrong. So get into the habit of leaving worldly matters behind when you dip below the surface and immerse yourself in the peace of the ocean. Just go diving.

Become a Better Diver by

*Knowing how to identify stress, and
Knowing how to manage stress when it appears*