

WILD NZ



INTO THE

DEEP



“I looked into the sea with the same sense of trespass that I have felt on every dive. A modest canyon opened below, full of dark green weeds, black sea urchins and small flower-like white algae. Fingerlings browsed the scene. The sand sloped down into a clear, blue infinity. The sun struck so brightly I had to squint. My arms hanging at my sides, I kicked the fins languidly and travelled down, gaining speed, watching the beach reeling past. I stopped kicking and the momentum carried me on a fabulous glide.” – Jacques Cousteau on his first scuba dive in 1943.

BLUE

by Mike Cooney

The ocean has played an important part of my life – as it has for many Kiwis. I guess being a little South Pacific nation with more coastline than we can poke a stick at, it's inevitable that lots of us find our lives revolving around the wet stuff ...

As a family, we grew up sailing on the Manukau Harbour and spent endless summers either camping on the remote beaches of the Coromandel or at the family bach in Whangamata. And from an early age, the old man had us in the water swimming for our lives – whether on a fat polystyrene surfboard that gave out wicked rashes, or kitted out in leaky snorkelling gear!

And then there was the seafood ... We spent a good portion of our summer fishing for our meals – often from an unstable canoe or by setting the kontiki. But what we enjoyed most was diving for our dinner. The year Dad bought me and my brother our first Hawaiian slings was the year we became men. (We were only 10 or 11, but we mature quickly in our family ...) Spearing fish and gathering seafood were activities we thoroughly enjoyed (and still do!) – and the underwater world, with its mysterious but often yummy inhabitants, became a place for great adventures.

However, the one thing I'd always struggled with when diving for paua, spearing fish or just enjoying a scenic snorkel, was breathing underwater. No matter how hard I tried, I just couldn't do it. My underwater adventure was always limited to how long I could hold my breath – and despite being a great fan of *'The Man from Atlantis'* when I was a kid, the gills and webbed fingers kept eluding me!

Enter SCUBA:

The modern Self Contained Underwater Breathing Apparatus first came onto the scene around the end of World War II – perfected by the legendary Jacques Cousteau. The ability to move around freely below the surface without needing air pumped from up above, was to change the underwater experience forever – and during the war it enabled quite a few ships to be discreetly blown up, much to the annoyance of their captains.

Now, while I wasn't looking to blow anything up (although our local cray poacher had better watch out!), I'd always been keen on giving scuba a crack. So when my good mate Nigel, who owns *Bubba's Fishing & Outdoors* here in Whangamata, suggested I check out their new dive-school, I sacrificed myself and became their guinea-pig ...

Learning to dive isn't the cheapest activity you can engage in, but once you're sorted with your training and your kit, you'll be set for a good few years. I was lucky in that I had most of the gear already – except for regulators (stuff you breathe with), BCD (Buoyancy Compensator



PHOTO: DREAMSTIME.COM



Device) and the tanks (which hold the stuff you breathe!) Thankfully, Nigel came to the rescue and lent me his – and I've been using it ever since!

Of course, you don't have to buy new – you can hire gear or buy second-hand. Just make sure you get it checked out, because 30m underwater is not the time for equipment failure!

There were three of us booked into this first course: me, the local pastor, Rev Jim, and Constable Rob from Whangamata's finest – a diverse collection of lads, all keen to head into the deep blue. Our instructor, Phil, was an experienced diver, so we were in good hands and looking forward to what was to come.

The curriculum for our *Open Water Diver* ticket was created by SSI (Scuba Schools International), a worldwide diver

certification agency. And the first requirement, before any training began, was a medical examination. Somehow, we all scraped through and were duly presented with our course material. Unfortunately, it was back to the classroom for the theory and (after thinking I'd never have to sit them again) exams!

In actual fact, the bookwork was a piece of cake – and it didn't take too long to read through. Each chapter was supported by a short DVD, and there was plenty of good stuff to learn – including what mediastinal emphysema is! The exam at the end was only 50 questions – and multi-choice (or multi-guess for some people).

The best parts though, were all the practical components. You can't learn to dive without first getting wet!



To get our *Open Water Diver* ticket, there were a number of things we had to complete. First was 20 minutes of treading water, followed by a 200 metre swim. Then after getting the low-down on our equipment and how to put it on, we finally got down to business.

Our local swimming pool is 2.4m deep and was the perfect place to get used to our gear – and the foreign sensation of breathing underwater. It was here that Phil took us through exercises designed to get us familiar with the various parts of our kit, how to use it, and what to do should something go wrong: things like correct entry techniques, how to equalise, clearing and retrieving your regulator, and the different underwater

sign languages. (The ‘out-of-air’ sign is a good one to know!)

In fact, there were heaps of things we learnt – and we spent a lot of time practising them until it became second nature. Obviously, the out-of-air stuff and buddy-breathing was high on the agenda – and we spent plenty of time practising them ...

During one of our early open water dives in around eight metres of water and poor visibility, Phil signalled me to remove my mask (a training exercise). While I was fumbling around trying to put it back on, he swam behind me and turned off my air. With a mask full of water and unable to see squat, I ran out of oxygen ... Sucking on my regulator and getting no joy proved a little unsettling,

and I quickly signalled Jim (my dive buddy) who came to my rescue.

Now this, obviously, was a controlled stunt, and Phil had already planned it with Jim. But it showed just how important quality training is. Practising what to do should things go wrong and knowing the correct way to respond in an emergency – *without panicking* – can save your life.

At the end of the day, you learn these things so you can get out into the water safely and confidently. If the correct procedures are followed, there's no excuse for running out of air or succumbing to a decompression illness (like the 'bends'). Diving is just as safe as knitting ... only a little more fun!

After successfully completing our pool and ocean training sessions, and passing our exams, we became official *Open Water Divers!* A number of dives quickly followed – and, before I knew it, I'd filled my first log book. Opportunities to chase crays or load our 'catch bags' with scallops were hard to refuse, so I spent some amazing hours off the coast from home. The crystal-clear Coromandel water – with schools of kingfish circling, crayfish feelers poking out of their rocky holes, and an abundance of



PHOTO: DREAMSTIME.COM

BIRDS OF A FEATHER FLOCK TOGETHER – AND I'M FOR YOUR CAR.

weird'n'wonderful sea life – have kept me coming back for more!

The freedom to explore the underwater world with all its beauty and mystery is what I appreciate most about diving – and New Zealand has it in spades! Whether you're into cruising over a scenic reef with just a mask and snorkel, or exploring the ocean floor in full scuba kit, what matters is the experience ... and if you haven't tried it, make sure you add it to your 'Bucket List'.

Just leave some scallops for me!

"Tread softly, for this is holy ground. It may be, could we look with seeing eyes, this spot we stand on is paradise." – Christina Rossetti. ❁

IF YOU'RE EVER IN THE COROMANDEL AND WANT TO GIVE DIVING A CRACK, PHONE BUBBA'S FISHING & OUTDOORS ON 07 865 7464.
