

DiveBanter

Scuba diving has been growing in popularity and shows no signs of slowing! Since 1946, when Jacques-Yves Cousteau explored the underwater world with the first aqua-lung prototype, people have been finding new reasons to go down into the blue!

The popular BBC documentary Blue Planet said "we know more about outer-space than we do about the deep oceans", but that hasn't stopped us inventing ways to exist outside our comfort zone. Humans have an incredible ability to adapt to new surroundings and the underwater environment is no exception.

Perhaps it's our child-like curiosity, or maybe it's a sign of our insatiable urge to conquer, but whichever way you look at it mankind can't resist exploring the unknown and pushing the boundaries of possibility. For over 50 years we've been jumping through the door to the underwater world, kicking off our shoes (or fins) and making ourselves at home.

For some divers the oceans are playgrounds, for others it's a day at the office.

Recreational divers have a range of courses and specialties available to them as wide as the ocean itself from cave diving, wreck diving, ice diving to deep diving. Commercial divers earn their living from underwater construction or welding, while other professionals specialize in naval diving or even police diving such as search & rescue dives. Then crossing across both the amateur and professional lines, there's the challenge of underwater photography and videography!

So why do most divers do it?

Like any hobby or sport, it means different things to different people but perhaps the fact that this umbrella term 'scuba' encompasses so many skills and passions is the reason it appeals to such a broad spectrum of people. It's an inclusive activity, with options for everyone, depending on your personal fitness and interests.

While being fit is always an advantage, divers don't always conform to the typical 'sporty' image (which makes a refreshing change for those of us who can't resist one too many slices of pie or pints of Guinness and can't quite make it to the gym as much as we should).

When you join a dive trip you never know who you'll meet ... a traveller who wanted to try something new ... an experienced technical diver kitted out with strange equipment ... a young cartoon-enthusiast looking for Nemo ... or a retired businessman in his 70s who just took his first dive course, bought a shiny new underwater camera and eagerly set off in search of the perfect photo.

For some of us it's a bit like a cool version of stamp collecting. We jump out of the water and rush straight to the log books to scribble down every new coral or fish we saw. Invariably we reach for a handy fish encyclopaedia (or a book on nudis, or crustaceans, or cephalopods, or cetaceans, or elasmobranchs) and debate with our buddy whether that was really a 'striped' or 'lined' fangblenny.

For others it's an adrenaline rush and an opportunity for a challenge. We seek out the swim-thrus and tunnels to practice our buoyancy skills, or drop into a fast-moving current and let that 'washing-machine' effect render us helpless to the power of the ocean.

For those of us who surround ourselves with noise on land (a busy office, a loud family, a hectic social life or just a habit of talking a lot!!!) the underwater world is a chance to escape. It's our 'yoga' and our 'time-out'. As your head sinks under the surface it all stops ... its eerily quiet ... the only sound is your breathing. All the rules you live by on land evaporate, as your body submits to the new physics of depth.

Communication reduces to simple hand gestures and those language or culture barriers that would limit you above the water don't matter anymore.

You're all just guests in this place ... all outsiders ... all land beings out of your element.

You're diving!

Superb Scuba Spots near Singapore

Do you know how lucky you are to live in Singapore? Aside from the actual benefits of this city-state, we're in prime position to take advantage of all that Asia has to offer. Not only are we pretty much in the centre of this fascinating region, but we have arguably the best airport and transport network right here at our fingertips.

Before moving here I technically worked and lived in London, but the home to office commute was about two hours one way ... that's 4 to 5 hours of travelling a day!

Think about where you could be in less than 5 hours! Australia (Darwin, Perth, Christmas Island), Malaysia (Penang, Langkawi, Perhentians, Kuching), Indonesia (Bali, Sulawesi, Komodo), Thailand (Samui, Krabi, Chang Mai), Laos (Luang Prabang), Cambodia (Siem Reap), Vietnam (Hoi An, Saigon), Philippines (Anilao, Puerto Galera), China (Macau, Shanghai, Hong Kong), the Maldives ... or India and the list goes on!!!

And if all that weren't enough, we're pretty much slap bang in the middle of the best marine environments on the planet in terms of biodiversity and accessibility!

The coral triangle loops from southern Indonesia to eastern Borneo to the Philippines and on to Papua New Guinea and the Solomon islands. It's home to 600 coral species and over 3,000 reef fish, plus it ranks as the number one place to find new species of marine life. Divers recently found new species of frogfish, giant clam, pygmy seahorse and manta ray, to name just a few!

No matter whether you're a scuba fanatic with 1000s of dives under your weight-belt, or you're a total newbie who has never so much as snorkeled in your bath-tub, there's a great dive site just waiting to be explored pretty much in your back yard.

So what are you waiting for? Dive in ...

BALI

If you need an easy getaway, Bali is hard to beat.

- At 2½ hours, it's a little further than flying to the Thai islands, but overall it's a more convenient option for diving and offers a lot of choice in dive sites. There are flights throughout the day from Changi (on SQ, Garuda or Jetstar) and the range of places to stay are endless with something for everyone's budget. And if you've got non-divers with you, no problem! Bali has plenty to entertain you above the water, from temple monkeys to handicraft shopping.

- Dive sites range from easy shore dives to challenging drift dives and for critter spotters out there you'll be spoilt for choice, with everything from the largest bony fish in the world (the enigmatic 3 metre 'Mola Mola' sunfish) to the 1cm pygmy seahorse!

Top dive sites include: Tulamben (wreck, coral garden and wall), Candidasa and Seraya Secrets off the east coast and Crystal Bay, Blue Corner and Manta Point out by Nusa Penida.

Dive site focus on Tulamben's US Liberty Wreck: This is a world famous dive, which many experienced divers have on their wish list, and yet it's easy enough for many first-time divers to enjoy as their introduction to the world of scuba. The US Liberty was beached after WWII on Bali's east coast, but when Mt Agung (Bali's highest and holiest mountain) erupted in 1963 she was pushed out into the sea, where she took on her new role as a base for a thriving artificial coral reef system.

- It's a fun beach entry, which will either have you humming the James Bond theme tune as you stride out confidently over dramatic black volcanic rocks and descend into the blue, or if the waves pick up you'll be crashing around helplessly much to the amusement of your buddy! Moments from the shore, the wreck comes into view making this surely the most accessible wreck you'll ever encounter. Lying in just 8 to 30 metres of water, this dive is full of light and easy to navigate - not something you usually associate with a wreck dive.

- Hard and soft corals fight for space, creating such a colourful blanket of life that you'd be forgiven for missing the wreck itself. Swirling schools of jack are a regular log-book entry, along with puffers, sweetlips, parrotfish, unicornfish, angelfish, moorish idols, blue-spotted rays, trumpetfish, lionfish

... and if you're lucky (or blessed with good vision and a lot of patience) the elusive pygmy seahorse can be spotted swaying in the current with its tiny tail curled round a delicate sea fan.

Who to dive with: Crystal Divers (a 5-star PADI centre at Hotel Santai) are famous across the region for their professional service, safety standards and contagious enthusiasm, and can take you diving anywhere off Bali's coast including tailor-made dive safaris (with an extra bit of magic thrown in for free if you go out with the legendary dive guide 'Magic Toto'): www.Crystal-Divers.com

- Or for all you macro fiends, try the Scuba Seraya Resort where you're only a few flipped steps from Bali's best house reef (home to harlequin shrimp, frogfish, spider crabs, ghost pipe fish, dragonets, squat lobsters, nudis and much more) and you're still just 3kms from the wreck and wall dives of Tulamben: www.ScubaSeraya.com

- And if you're hooked on the idea of seeing the US Liberty in all her glory, then stay at the Matahari Tulamben Resort to get easy access to the wreck for some incredible night dives and even more stunning sunrise dives (yes sunrise grab a torch and get in by 6am to enjoy the night creatures all to yourself and then witness the transformation underwater as the sunlight starts to trickle through the wreck and the day-shift slowly wakes up!): www.DiveTulamben.com

GILI

Staying on the Indonesia theme, why not head over to the tiny islands of Gili Trawangan, Gili Meno and Gili Air?

- Either fly over to Bali, then travel up the east coast to Padang Bai (around an hour from the airport) and jump on the Gilicat which makes the 25km journey over to Gili Trawangan in about 80 minutes ... or catch a flight to Mataram in the west of Lombok island (next door to Bali) for a 30km scenic drive up the west coast and finally a 10 minute speedboat ride over to the Gilis ... where your 21st century travelling ends since there are no vehicles at all on the islands, just the local 'cidomo' (horse & trap)!

- Despite years of dynamite fishing, which damaged the reefs and reduced marine life, the dive sites here are a positive example of how humans and nature can learn to adapt. While fresh seafood is still on the menu (don't miss delicious BBQ fish at Scallywags) locals now work in the bustling dive industry and will vouch for eco-tourism's claim that marine life can be "more valuable alive than dead". Destructive dynamite bombing is illegal and fishing is restricted to outside the marine reserve but what's so impressive is how the local community has taken it upon themselves to police the rules here and act as true guardians of the ocean ... public shaming is still a highly effective deterrent to illegal fishing! You can even see conservation in action when you dive the man-made biorock, which was installed (and 'plugged-in') in late 2004 to help regenerate the reef.

For action divers there are some fast drift dives here, where currents whip you along the reef past pulsating jellyfish and cruising sharks, while snorkelers are almost guaranteed a close encounter with a graceful turtle or a curious cuttlefish. And if you need a break from diving, try your luck at wakeboarding or impress your mates by jogging round the entire island in under 40 minutes (just don't tell them it's a 7km loop, at most!).

Top dive sites include: Meno Wall, Shark Point, Halik Reef, Manta Point, Hans Reef and the Bio-Rock.

Dive site focus on Meno Wall: If you're a night dive virgin then it's time to pop that cherry! Night dives are absolutely magical and they literally double a divers' to-do list since a day dive on a great wreck or reef is like Peter Cook minus Dudley Moore, Fry without Laurie, French but no Saunders ... you're only getting half the picture!

- So after you've enjoyed the Gili marine life by daylight, jump back on the boat, watch the sun setting as you don your mask and fins, then roll backwards into the dark water and the incredible world waiting below. The parrotfish have gone to bed; tucked into the coral behind a slimy mucous cocoon to hide from predators ... the little Nemos have disappeared into their anemones ... and now the night shift clocks on.

- This dive is as relaxing as watching a movie, as you effortlessly glide past a wall of corals between 5 and 16 metres deep just letting the scene unfold. A giant moray eel you saw hiding in a crevice by day, suddenly comes wiggling along the wall hunting for food. The myriad of crustaceans from huge crabs to tiny shrimp all get their 5 minutes of fame as you sweep your torch along the sandy bottom.

- And then for a few minutes your dive buddies will turn their torches to their chests to block out the light, so you can wave your free hand in front of your face to create luminescent glitter trails in the water (phosphorescence). But before you slip into a mesmerized trance, contemplating the beauty and complexity of life, try to remember you're still bobbing along through the water in total darkness where fire coral thrives (so named for the burning itch if you touch it).

- It was here, at Meno Wall in the Gilis, where I saw my first juvenile batfish and if you don't know what one looks like then Google it now ... they really do look like cartoons with a totally black silhouette and a bright orange glow as an outline!

Who to dive with: Big Bubble Dive & Bungalows have a great mix of international and local dive guides who'll take you to all the best Gili dive sites and then drop you back in your private hammock so you can drift off with your underwater memories: www.BigBubbleDiving.com

SIPADAN

If you like wall dives and turtles then this is your site ... and if your buddy likes macro critters then you've hit gold here!

- To reach the Sipadan area, off the north-east coast of Borneo near the Indonesia/Malaysia border, get yourself to Tawau (via Kota Kinabalu or KL) where you'll be picked up by the resort guys for the drive up to Semporan and then a quick speedboat out into the Celebes sea to either Mabul or Kapalai (there's no accommodation on Sipadan anymore). OK so that doesn't make it sound like an easy-access trip but it's actually pretty quick when you consider what great diving awaits ...

- The great thing here is the choices. You have a world famous site for wall dives where turtles are so common you stop counting them and schools of barracuda swirl into those stunning spiral shapes with a backdrop of perfect blue ... but you also have a fascinating macro site under the oil rig at Mabul where photographers snap frogfish, crocodile fish and pygmy seahorses ... and an easy house reef at Kapalai where giant 1.5 metres grouper doze on the sandy bottom and 5cm mandarin fish come out right on cue at sunset.

Top dive sites include: Sea Venture Oil Rig, Kapalai Jetty, Mandarin Valley, Barracuda Point, Hanging Gardens and Mid-Reef.

Dive site focus on Mabul's Oil Rig: Focusing on a relatively shallow macro dive site when you're right next door to world famous wall dives might seem insane, but we're all entitled to a little bit of crazy! So by all means prioritize the Sipadan diving and enjoy the coral reefs teeming with colourful fish, launch yourself into a huge school of barracuda and watch as the shape miraculously bends and ripples around you, lose yourself in existential contemplation at the sight of so many descendants of the great A'Tuin (the turtle that holds up the Discworld, for any poor souls who haven't read Terry Pratchett). But spare a little time for a muck-diving afternoon under a decommissioned oil rig that's teeming with life.

- My buddy and I descended 15 metres surrounded by the eerie silhouettes of metal struts, with pretty low expectations for finding much to photograph given the strong currents and limited visibility. As we pulled ourselves over the sea bed, digging our fingers into the sand or gripping onto odd bits of rock, we noticed the dive guide pointing to a pale yellow gorgonian sea fan that almost totally blended into the sandy background. As I inched my way closer and closer, my mask just cms away from brushing the coral, a tiny speck of yellow came into focus and I saw my first pygmy seahorse. I managed to get a quick photo of the little 1cm critter with my thumb on the edge of the shot for scale but every time I took my eyes off him, even just for a moment, he blurred back into the background.

- Moving on along the sand I passed brilliantly camouflaged crocodile fish, their exquisitely decorated eyes raised up on top of their elongated faces. On a rusty piece of discarded metal (probably old equipment from the oil rig) I found a bright orange giant frogfish and even managed to fight the current

long enough to wait for that classic 'yawn' shot. But aside from the unexpected photos, this dive also provided a diving souvenir in the form of a scar on my buddy's leg!

- While I was perfecting that frogfish image, my buddy had found another metal structure and decided it was an ideal opportunity to test out his buoyancy skills. Having just completed a two day course on 'peak performance buoyancy' he was confident that he could swim in through one end and elegantly drift back out through another opening, using just the air in his lungs to control his ascent. The current had other ideas! As if to remind us divers of the ocean's ultimate power over our every insignificant move, it suddenly changed direction and tossed my buddy unceremoniously into the metal where he scraped his un-wetsuited leg across a jagged pole.

- We drifted up towards five metres for a safety stop with an impressive stream of green liquid coming from his leg. Back at the boat my buddy climbed up the steps in front of me and the green gunge suddenly turned blood red (you lose red colours underwater). And within a few days the cut had become an impressive scar that resembled a dramatic 4-clawed slash mark.

- As you can imagine, my buddy has now retold the story of his scar numerous times ... and each time the scary beast involved gets bigger and the encounter becomes even more life threatening!

Who to dive with: The Borneo Divers team can arrange accommodation on Mabul, which means easy access to the oil rig, but also dive trips over to Kapalai and Sipadan: www.BorneoDivers.info

- Or if you fancy staying on Kapalai to make the most of their addictive house reef then book yourself into the Kapalai Water Village (resting on stilts atop a sandbank, with no land in sight) and let the onsite dive team take you out to Mabul and Sipadan: www.Sipadan-Kapalai.com

PALAU

Far out in the Pacific, (550 miles past the Philippines and just before you reach the islands of Micronesia), Palau is an incredible destination with exquisitely beautiful scenery, a rich heritage and absolutely fantastic diving!

- Fly direct to Manila (3½ hours) and then transfer to the Continental Airline flight (2 hours) which takes you to the island of Koror. You might need an overnight in Manila on the way out, or back, or both ... but you'll soon forget the hassle when the stunning rock islands come into view; a strange collection of ancient limestone and coral reefs, rising up out of patches of blue, green and turquoise water! These majestic islands suffered horrifically in WWII, but the invasive sound of gunfire has been replaced with the contented sigh of tourists enjoying paradise and the excited chatter of divers.

- Dive sites are often challenging with strong currents in some of the best spots, but there are plenty of opportunities for less experienced divers. Explore a WWII plane wreck at 13 metres, get swept down a channel of cabbage corals, sneak up on a cleaning station as you wait for the mantas to visit, hook onto a rock to hang out with sharks or navigate underwater caves and pop your head up under huge stalactites Palau has it all.

Top dive sites include: Blue Corner, Blue Holes, German Channel, Pelilieu Express, Pelilieu Corner, Ngedebus Wall, Turtle Wall, Siaes Tunnel, Ulong Channel, Devilfish City, Jake's Seaplane, the Chuyo Maru Wreck, the Iro Wreck and the Chandelier Caves.

Dive site focus on Blue Holes to Blue Corner: Most divers would be happy with either of these dive sites but if you're feeling greedy then why not combine the two. This is one of those dives where you curse your stupid air-breathing anatomy and dream of finding Harry Potter's stash of 'Gillyweed' to prolong your time underwater. The minutes seem to fly by at record speed, and all too soon you're out for the surface interval, watching the clock, until you can get back in again!

- After a giant stride into crystal clear water, you drift over the corals towards a patch of darker blue water and start falling like Alice-in-Wonderland down one of the four blue holes which lead to the cavern below. The holes open out at different depths so you can exit at just 15 metres if you want a shallow dive, or instead descend to the cavern floor that starts at 24 metres and slopes away to 40 metres.

- Once inside, spin over onto your back and gaze up at the shafts of sunlight that penetrate down through the holes. Drift slowly through the cavern, lost in the mesmerizing patterns of light that change shape from every new angle. Look out for the bright red disco clams flashing electric blue, and pass respectfully by the entrance to the Temple of Doom where turtle skeletons rest.

- Then make your way out of the cave and head along the coral wall that leads to Blue Corner. Along the way you'll pass marine life of all colours, shapes and sizes but when you reach Blue Corner it's the sharks that take centre stage.

- Grab onto a bit of rock and attach your 'reef hook', then pump a bit of air into your BCD so you rise up into the current and enjoy the show! Grey sharks and black-tips come cruising past you, almost within reach, moving effortlessly in the strong current. Although they see divers here every day they still seem curious and circle the reef to swim back past you, a little closer each time.

- And if you can drag yourself away from these incredible creatures, there are schools of bumphead parrotfish munching loudly on corals, redtooth triggers sweeping over the reef edge, photogenic groups of sweetlips hovering above layers of table coral ... and perhaps the world's friendliest napoleon wrasse.

Who to dive with: Fish 'n Fins operate liveaboard trips on the luxurious Ocean Hunter vessels. Arguably more relaxing than a land-based trip, you'll sleep like a baby in top notch cabins and gorge yourself on huge quantities of delicious food served up by the onboard chef ... giving you the energy for 5 dives a day (plus a side trip to the stunning Jellyfish lake ... another one to Google!):

www.OceanHunter.com

- Or get a few friends together and charter the ocean sailing yacht, Eclipse: *www.SamsTours.com*

MORE INSPIRATION

Just to really wet your appetite, here are a few more nearby dive spots:

Anilao, Philippines

Probably the easiest dive spot in the Philippines from Singapore, Anilao is just a 3½ hour flight to Manila and a 2 hour drive south. In recent years, the local community has started seeing the benefit of tourism over illegal fishing and their efforts to protect the marine environment are paying off, with new dive sites and species being discovered all the time! Don't miss Kirby's Rock where thousands of tiny seacucumbers turn the whole dive site a magnificent yellow colour! And look out for the weird and wonderful at Secret Bay.

- Head to Dive Solana for great cabins, great food and really great dive service ... especially if you go out with host and underwater photography fanatic Adrien: *www.divesolana.com*

North Sulawesi, Indonesia

Once you get to Manado (3½ hour flight) you have a choice of heading off the main island to stay on a number of popular islands, or you can head to one of the fabulous resorts around the coast who take divers out to all the famous dive sites. Expect action-packed wall dives, cool swim-thrus and huge schools of fish, but request a trip to Paradise Jetty by Bangga island to warm your fingers on an underwater hot spring and hunt for strange creatures like the Indian walkman or 'devilfish'.

- For some pampering after a hard day of diving, or to appease a non-diving spouse, head over to the island of Siladen: www.siladen.com

- If you fancy staying on the mainland for access to the land tours (don't miss the white water rafting) then the rooms at Minahasa Lagoon are stunning and the pool side bar is a welcome post-dive hangout: www.minahasalagoon.com

- Or for avid photographers, the famous muck diving of Lembeh is just moments away from the NAD resort and it's run by 2 professional photographers who will happily advise you on getting that perfect macro shot: www.nad-lembeh.com

Ningaloo, Australia

If you can spare the time, fly out to Perth (5 hours) and then travel up the west coast to visit some stunning Australian landscapes and peculiar sights (the Pinnacles ... Kalbari national park's Nature's Window) or take a domestic flight straight up to Learmonth (2 hours). In the nearby town of Exmouth you can access the Ningaloo dive sites all year round or plan your trip to hit the whaleshark season. Snorkeling alongside the largest fish in the world (maximum reported length of 18m) is truly breathtaking and not to be missed, but after the grace of this massive shark you can also dive the Navy Pier in search of the grumpy looking 2-3m wobbegong shark that blends into the rocks and coral with its unusual flattened shape and straggly beard.

- Ningaloo Reef Dreaming operate both day and night dives at the pier, the dive sites in the area and also the trips to swim with whalesharks: www.ningalooreefdreaming.com

Christmas Island, Australia

North-west of Perth, way out in the Indian Ocean, Christmas Island is an Australian Territory but its closest neighbor is Java ... 360km away! Now that the direct flights from Changi are back, it's an easy 2 hour flight to get to some of the longest drop-offs in the world, with kilometres of untouched corals and hundreds of species of tropical fish! But try to head out from November to April for a chance to swim with the majestic whaleshark!

- Dive and stay with Christmas Island Divers, Wet'n'dry Adventures, Eco Adventures Worldwide, Dive, Adventures Sydney or Dive Adventures Melbourne: www.christmas.net.au

Silly Scuba Stories

So aside from the incredible creatures, beautiful corals, weightless feeling and excuse to sound cool, is there anything else diving is famous for? Yep ... COMEDY VALUE!

As activities go, it's pretty hard to avoid an embarrassing moment or two when you're dressed in skin-tight neoprene, you're shuffling along a boat deck like a penguin on your elongated rubber feet and you've stuffed a big plastic dummy-like contraption in your mouth! ... And that's before you even get under the water, where you lose touch with your old friend gravity and easily find yourself upside down with your head firmly planted on the sea-bed!

DiveBanter from a dive pro:

"I was gearing up together with one of my guests. It was the first time the diver was diving with us, so of course I asked him; 'How much weight do you need?' His answer; "Hmmm ... I'm not really sure ... but what if I start with 4 kilos ... and take an extra kilo in my pocket in case I need it later on' !!!!"

Hear more stories from multi-lingual PADI Course Director Minni Vangsgaard by visiting her at Crystal Divers in Sanur on the fabulous island of Bali or at www.Crystal-Divers.com

DiveBanter from a 'dive' party-planner:

"A group of us were away on a beach holiday to celebrate my friend Chris' 30th birthday. We knew we'd be diving on his special day, so we decided to plan a little surprise underwater birthday party.

- It all seemed pretty well coordinated while we were discussing the plan on land; at the right moment I was going to pull out a plastic Early-Learning-Centre cake (complete with candles) and then two of us would roll out a glittery shiny banner saying HAPPY BIRTHDAY before getting our friend's attention to surprise him for a birthday photo! Down at 20 metres it didn't go quite so smoothly ...

- Stupidly we picked a spot in the middle of nowhere, trying to maintain buoyancy without a point of reference! And we soon discovered that rolling out a shiny silver banner under water is really difficult (what with currents and swells and all) especially if one of you notices the banner is upside down but the other one doesn't ... so then every time you try to correct it, she re-corrects it, so you correct it again and you end up in a ridiculous tangled mess!

- Hilarity aside, the effect was not lost on Chris. And once he realized what we were trying to do, I'm sure I saw a little bubble escape from his mask and I thought to myself; 'Ahhhh, so that's how you cry underwater!'"

Read more stories from writer/diver/snowboarder/skydiver and 'Kamur.com' co-creator Alex Vrettos, who dares us to embrace our inner altruism and ponder the 'curious notion of finding kindness in strangers' at www.ItchyBacks.com

DiveBanter from a Singapore expat and comic superhero:

Diving can be a challenging pursuit if you're "lying on a rock watching something, when you get sat on by a large out-of-control learner diver, who knocks your regulator out of your mouth, and you can't reach it to take another breath until he finally rolls off you!"

- Dive trips can mean rewarding and frustrating experiences such as when "4 drunk 'ang mos' disappear on an impromptu fishing trip late one night while on a Maldives liveaboard, and manage to catch 7 fish in just 45 minutes, using only some cord as a rod ... while the guy who brought along his expensive professional fishing equipment sat on the back of the boat each night (6 nights in all) and didn't catch anything until the last night!"

- And dive gear can even get you mini celebrity status if you're "wearing a custom-made Spiderman

wetsuit and a group of Japanese divers start humming the cartoon theme tune ... they didn't speak English so it must have been the only way of communicating!"

The Diving Superman (aka Dave Lawrence) swaps his bright red disguise on land for 'Amber & Green', adapting his super powers to event organization at www.AmberAndGreen.com

DiveBanter from an underwater Indiana Jones (wannabe):

"I was in Caye Caulker (Belize) with 5 friends, hoping to dive the famous Blue Hole. We woke up early, ready for a 2 hour boat ride and a great deep dive but unfortunately the sea was too rough to make the trip! So instead we stayed inside the protection of the reef at Hol Chan, enjoying the coral walls and watching groups of nurse sharks relaxing on the sea bottom at 20 metres, lazily allowing the current to flow over their gills. It was a typical dive, with schools of reef fish and plenty of lobsters and moray eels and of course some fun swim-thrus.

- Half way through the dive, we were queuing to swim through a particularly narrow stretch. I was positive that I was the last one through, so I hurried to catch up with the other divers ahead, but to my surprise I felt a tug on my fin from behind. I rolled onto my back to see who I'd forgotten and saw ... a SHARK!

- Hanging of my left fin was a 1 metre long nurse shark. At first I was in shock. I wasn't afraid but completely and utterly jaw-droppingly shocked ... I mean it wasn't what I was expecting! But within seconds vanity had taken over, as I started to rehearse the heroic story I was going to tell that night over a bottle of Belkin Beer. Then fear! Fear as I contemplated how the story might end.

- I knew how to get it off. Kick it on the nose with the heel of my free foot. But then what? ... Will it swim away terrified by my 'Leonardo DiCaprio' retribution, or will it see through my Hollywood-style ('The Beach') defence and through my neoprene suit to the tasty morsel quivering inside?

- Thankfully it didn't enjoy being kicked and swam off... as did I ... only a little less gracefully, backwards in a sea of bubbles, straight into my waiting buddy. I tried to explain with dramatic hand gestures and saw the widening eyes of a man impressed. How cool was I? In my head the shark was growing in size already ... along with my ego.

- Back on the boat, I recounted my daring tale of courage and bravery in the face of a razor-toothed enemy to an enthralled and clearly very impressed audience but I could hear laughter coming from the other end of the boat. Walking over was our dive master. 'That was Reggie, our friendly shark. I was hoping to find him', he said with much chuckling then suddenly serious 'You didn't hurt him, did you?' As I quickly back tracked, the full extent of my heroic exaggerations became apparent and the 3 metres of thrashing wild beast shrunk back to a mere 1 metre ... the flying kung-fu kick to its head became more accurately a tentative bop on the nose!

- In the bar that night my story wasn't the daring tale of bravado I'd hoped for, but in the end the story of the "friendly" shark bite proved much more amusing. I was disappointed we missed the Blue Hole with its amazing walls and spiraling sharks, but perhaps when I do make it I'll finally get my hero's tale ... then again let's hope not!"

When he's not wrestling with imaginary beasts, you can still find Chris Grant-Peterkin indulging his creative side running an online art gallery at <http://VisualArtTrader.com>

DiveBanter from the ScubaDiva:

“There’s nothing like kitting up in a new bit of dive equipment and secretly thinking how ‘cool’ you look. So it was a proud day when I unveiled my new bubblegum-pink fins and matching mask, and prepared to back-roll into the glistening blue water!

- When I wasn’t too busy admiring my funky pink silhouette as I practiced dolphin-esque mono kicks, I gazed around at the beauty of the coral reef and mentally ticked off a list of colourful marine life: Parrotfish, check! Triggerfish, check! Cuttlefish, check! Anemone fish, check! Turtle, check and check and check! There were turtles everywhere ... munching on coral ... snoozing under ledges ... or gracefully gliding up to the surface to breathe. Then I noticed one with only 3 flippers and swam closer to try my luck at keeping up. Even minus a limb she made the whole thing look totally effortless, but I was pretty sure I caught a glimpse of some green-eyed jealousy when she spotted my dashing new shiny fins!

- We ended the dive and drifted to the back of the boat, swapping lists of what critters we’d seen this time. It was a bit choppy at the surface so I passed up my weight belt and camera first. Then I held onto the mermaid line and unclipped my fins, while I waited for my buddy to climb onboard. As I reached out for the ladder with one hand, I lifted my fins up out of the water to throw them on the deck ... but wait ... make that FIN ... singular!!! I’d been stupidly holding the fins together by the smooth end ... and with all the excitement of re-living the dive aloud and describing the photos I’d taken, I hadn’t even noticed one go!

- I pushed my head underwater and scanned for something pink, but the water was dark below me and the reef was at least 20 metres down in the gloom. As my buddy jumped in to help, I slipped out of my BCD and pushed away from the boat. But after a fruitless search attempt, duck-diving down as far as I could on a single breath, I reluctantly gave up and swam back to the ladder.

- Hauling my sorry self up the metal steps and lamenting my blondeness, my eyes narrowed as I thought back to that 3-flipped turtle from earlier ... I’d seen the look in her eyes ... that mix of desire and shrewd plotting ... maybe it didn’t slip out of my hand ... maybe a sneaky little turtle beak had grabbed my lovely fin and was now swimming off into the open ocean to show off her flirty new accessory!”

If you’re concerned for her underwater colour coordination please rest assured that the Singapore-based ScubaDiva has since replaced the missing pink fin (although there is talk of a switch to a new powder-blue theme) and is working on converting all you non-divers out there over to the scuba-side via www.ScubaDivaPR.com

Dive in to Scuba Shopping!

Be proud of your underwater passion with the latest scuba inspired products!

Miss Scuba: www.Miss-Scuba.com

- ❖ Now based in California, Szilvia Gogh (aka Miss Scuba) became a PADI Course Director in 2003, making her not only the first Hungarian female CD, but also the youngest female CD world-wide! She launched Miss Scuba to cater to other female divers, creating a great source of info on dive locations, travel tips for female divers, overviews of products with designs for women and inspiring stories from scuba ladies from all over the world ... plus some damn good shopping too!
- ❖ Combining a passion for diving and the female urge to shop, Miss Scuba offers a range of tank tops, tees and now jewelry that can be shipped overseas. Try the catchy "Dive to Live, Live to Dive" design ... or grab a cute 'bubbles' pendant.

Dive Junkie: www.DiveJunkie.com.sg

- ❖ Singapore retailer with online shop offering free shipping within Singapore, this year they also launched products at Orchard Road's Takashimiyaya department store.
- ❖ Mainly t-shirts and shorts with a good range of sizes for men and women (although double check the sizing chart if you're not a svelte Asian frame).
- ❖ Look out for critter designs; the iconic 'flying' school of Manta rays ... the weird silhouette of the Mola-Mola ... the cartoonish Puffer ... or the macro-lovers' Nudi with the catchy slogan 'Nudist - Nudibranch Specialist'. Or grab a fun slogan design; 'Buddy Me' ... 'Suck Me' ... 'Scuba Man' ... or 'Scuba Girl'.

Dive Logic: www.DiveLogic.com.sg

- ❖ Singapore-based seller of dive apparel, with designs by underwater photographer Aaron Wong.
- ❖ To quote from their website; *"Clothes make the man; naked people have little or no influence in society" [Mark Twain] ... unique designs are all about self-expression, boldly stating that we are divers and making you ask 'where do you dive?'"*

Bottom Crawlers: www.BottomCrawlers.com

- ❖ US based retailer with shipping worldwide and a wide range of sizes.
- ❖ T-shirt designs include a stylized hammerhead, graffiti-style grouper, peace sharks, turtle buddy and tribal dolphins ... or go for the slogans like "Got air?" ... or "Wrecked". And for the 'diver who has everything' then make your present stand out with some funky diving wrapping paper!

Your Bag Tag: www.YourBagTag.com

- ❖ We all love to personalize stuff ... must be some ingrained habit from when our mums stitched our names into school shirts and socks (just me?)
- ❖ So why not get a label for your dive gear and avoid any mix-ups on a crowded boat trip! Splash your name across your BCD with a simple velcro tag or add a personalized zipper to that sexy wetsuit.