

SOLO DIVING AND THE RECREATIONAL DIVER

PART ONE

As most of you are aware, SDI is now sanctioning a Solo Diver certification. This has been a long time coming and I have no doubt that all the other certifying organizations will be following suit.

You may be asking, "Who is SDI"? Well, SDI (Scuba Diving International) is the open water arm of TDI (Technical Diving International). TDI is the largest technical training organization in the world. SDI is now in a dead heat for the number two position among certifying agencies for the number of divers trained annually in the US. Their background in the technical field gives them a unique perspective to diving. They were the first to allow ten year olds limited certification and the first to require the use of computers in all their programs. Both SSI and PADI have now started their own young diver programs in response to the interest initiated by SDI's program.

Now on to the Solo Diver certification: To a large extent it seems to have been brought on by several lawsuits settled in the last year. Recently divers who have been injured have sued their buddies for negligence. In a couple of these suits the surviving or uninjured buddy had to pay damages to the errant partner or his/her estate. The worst part is that this buddy policy was forced upon each partner with little or no consideration as to the qualifications of either diver.

What exactly is "solo diving"? To me a solo diver isn't just someone who shows up at the dive site and jumps in. It is more complicated than that. If I am diving with a buddy who is unaware or unconcerned about my whereabouts, I am actually doing a form of solo diving. Further, if you are more than a breath away from your buddy you may as well be alone as the results will be the same. The last two examples will put you at the same risk as the bloke who jumps in by himself and disappears.

The diver who just jumps in and solo dives without training is playing the fool's game. He may have an over-inflated opinion as to his abilities to handle any problems he/she may encounter. Alternatively, a dependent buddy partnered with an unconcerned buddy is diving solo in total ignorance. He doesn't realize that in the case of an emergency he may have to save himself. The problem is that he isn't trained to do so. In the third example above either buddy could have a problem and being unprepared and untrained each is alone. When you read the dive accident and fatality statistics all the above described types of divers share the limelight.

The dependent diver (or surviving kin) who dives with someone he thinks can help him may indeed have a case if there is an emergency. Due to the standards of the community, it is accepted practice to "buddy dive". The implied purpose of the buddy is to render aid in the case of an emergency. This fosters a degree of inter-dependency on some divers. It also hints at a degree of legal liability in a duty to perform in the case when a lesser qualified partner is hurt. Until divers start to accept the responsibilities of their actions this will persist. However in most cases, each of the partners is depending on the other diver who may have no more training or experience than himself. The problem here is that most divers are hard pressed to render effective aid if pressed to do so. The open water certification skill levels required for certification are severely lacking in adequate performance standards as regards these specific skills. Believe me, a near panicked diver is a handful for even the most skilled professional.

I personally prefer to dive with a dive partner. I prefer someone to experience the dive with me. In my case, I know full well that a dive partner will be able to do very little for me in the case of an emergency due to time and depth constraints in some of the types of diving in which I am involved. Worse still is the fact that if I am not self-reliant and my buddy has to intercede, I am putting his/her life in jeopardy as well. This is totally unacceptable to me. When I dive, neither my buddy nor I is hindered by the need to have to assist or baby sit the other because my "buddies" are as self-sufficient as I am. We are free to explore the environment together and separately at the same time. We are two or more divers enjoying the same dive site but with potentially different memories of the experience. My partner can also critique my performance as I can his in a post dive briefing.

One of the primary reasons I do so few "dive vacations" is that I have had several occasions when I was forced to baby-sit poorly trained divers. This was true even before I became an instructor. I found it intrusive and most of the time it detracted from my diving pleasure. It became worse once I became an instructor. It got so bad that I have opted not to dive rather than be paired with someone who could have even endangered my well being.

My dive friends and I have taken the offensive and have become self sufficient divers. In other words, we received special training to enable us to dive without having to be dependent upon another diver. We often showed up at a dive site and started dives with our buddies, and then as we had different dive objectives, separated once we had submerged. During the course of the dive we would cross paths and do an OK check. We all knew the capabilities and dive habits of those we dove with. Most dives we met back up at the exit point at the end of the dive. We quickly discovered the pleasure and freedom of diving with a competent buddy who was not dependent upon us.

Of course, we had to practice our solo activities clandestinely. The boat operator or quarry owner would throw a fit if or when he found out what we were doing.

Many times they tried to tell us that their insurance was the problem. According to Bret Gilliam, founder of TDI and his insurance contacts it is not, nor has it ever been an issue.

In the Solo Diver class, the experienced advanced diver candidate is made aware of the special needs in equipment, techniques and mental attitude needed to do this type of diving with minimum risk. Contrary to popular belief, even technical divers don't dive alone. Solo diving can be similar to cave diving in that no amount of previous experience, can prepare the uninitiated solo diver to what can and does transpire in an emergency situation. That is why the prerequisites for entry into the solo diver program are high.

You may have noticed I have not used the term safe when referring to solo diving. Diving is unsafe if you are not trained. Solo diving is even more unsafe if you are not trained to execute solo dives. Everything we do carries risks. Whether driving a car, walking at night, or eating in restaurants, we are at risk. We attempt to mitigate these risks through knowledge. Knowledge really is power. In this case, that knowledge may be the power to live rather than perish. With that knowledge you will be able to avoid a turn of events that could cascade into a real life threatening problem. Most dive injuries are not due to a major catastrophic failure of a piece of gear. They start with a simple problem which when ignored and not dealt with leads to a more serious threat.

Are you starting to understand who is a solo diver and who may be an unsafe diver? Solo diving isn't going to just give you the capability to strap on a scuba tank and dive. If you are diving alone you have a responsibility to file a dive plan. It is not complicated. To the captain, dive master, shop owner, site manager, significant other (on site), just say I will be diving alone. I will be back at x time and will be in such and such area. When you finish the dive make sure you let whomever you told that you are ok.

As I covered earlier, solo diving is being practiced all the time. The problem starts when you decide to solo dive with a buddy who doesn't have the training to perform a basic self rescue skill. You are endangering him/her and that is irresponsible. Remember, when you dive with somebody, because of the standards of the community, you do have an implied duty to perform in an emergency to the level to which you are trained. You can assume that a smart lawyer on the other side will be able to do great damage to your future financial status.

In the next installment I will cover some of the pros and cons to solo diving as well as some of the topics covered in the course.

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