

Leigh
Cunninghamtechnical
matters

The Wake Up Call

Confessions of a Deep Diver



Confessions of a deep diver

A long time ago, I sat in hoosha (Bedouin tent) after a deep air dive in the Blue Hole (Dahab, South Sinai, Red Sea). My good friend and dive buddy had less than an hour ago peeled me of the wall near the bottom of the Blue Hole. I had succumbed to deep water blackout, caused by a high degree of stupidity, wrong kit and inadequate training.

I now had to make one of two choices, which I should have made sooner: Give up diving all together, or invest in appropriate

training and equipment for the type of dives I was planning and trying to conduct. Spectacular deep sites is what does it for me, staying shallow was not an option - and neither was dying.

60 meter dives offered

At the time I worked in a small concrete and wooden hut with a compressor in one corner and some miscellaneous well worn dive gear in another. The hut is still there today, in the same place, around 5 km south of the Blue Hole at a dive site called the Canyon. The hut is called a dive center, which at the time was quite a novel feature in the area. The order of the day was guiding groups of certified divers around local dive sites, the most popular ones being the infamous Blue Hole and Canyon. Dive guides would even offer, under the counter, recreational guided dives through the Blue Hole's Arch which is at a depth of 60 meters. I can say, hand on heart; I did not take part in this.

No role models

Back then technical diving and training and facilities for such were as common as igloos and Eskimos in the Sinai. Things have changed quite a lot since - in the last 10 years or so - and fortu-

nately very much for the better, both from a diver training, safety, good role models and decent food point of view.

So back in the 'good old days', independent aluminum tanks were strapped together with extra long cam bands, a-clamp first stages were mounted with enough second stages to decorate a medium sized Christmas tree, BCD's seemed to have more holes than a slab of Swiss cheese and had inadequate lift for the job even without the holes, not to mention appropriate training that was seriously lacking. Having all of the above qualified you as a technical diver at the time.

My lame excuse

To be honest, I have to admit that it took a few near death experiences (rock climbing in the blue hole being the last) to give me the wake up call I needed. In my defense I can only say that good role models did not exist then as they do now. I consider this to be a very lame excuse for being well out of my depth, but it's the only one I have.

Relying on luck

Tragically the Blue hole have since become a sunken graveyard, giving it the undeserved reputation it has today. Much the

same goes for many other deep or particularly technical dive sites around the world which has been labeled "dangerous". There is not a dive site in the world that's dangerous - people are dangerous. I'm living proof of that. I survived the earlier stages of my diving career due to one reason - "luck". Tragically many divers were not as lucky as me.

Changes for the better

In the modern day of diving with a lot of training, experience a good few thousand dives and a couple of scuba records under my belt, I now like to be the role model for others, in a manner that didn't exist back then.

In the Sinai the technical diving community has now come full circle. Where it didn't exist 10 years ago, now everyone and their mother seem to be a Technical diving Instructor at one level or another.

The fact of the matter is technical instructors and technical training and facilities are a necessity in an area where there happens to be awesome dive sites in deep water. The reduction of numbers of deep diving accidents now, as compared to 10 years ago, speaks for itself.

It's your own decision

Ultimately individuals need to decide for themselves if the type of diving they do is beyond the realms of the type of training they've had, and if they want to do something about it. Experience counts for a lot, but it doesn't replace training.

After basic scuba training (OWD and AOWD) divers have a licence to conduct non-stop dives (no deco) to a max depth of 40 meters, in the type of environment they were trained in. With experience, and a level head, divers could gradually progress safely to harsher environments (colder, darker, surge and swell, surf entry and exits and so on).

Why not stay shallow?

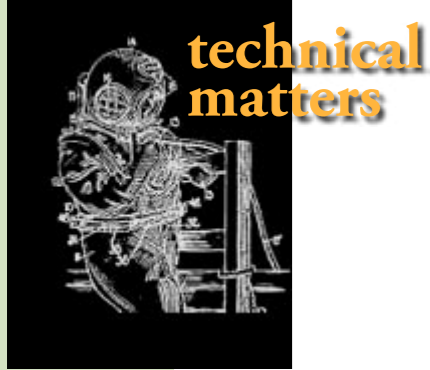
For the large majority of divers pushing beyond 40 meters or exceeding the NDL¹⁾, would never be a consideration. Talking from experience, in most tropical reef environments the vibrancy of the reef and volume of tropical fish in the first 30 meters is breathtaking.

And this is a very good reason for some to stay shallow. ▶

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¹⁾NDL: NO DECOMPRESSION LIMIT





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ADAM BUTLER

Due to this and the fact that NDL's between 30-40 meters rapidly becomes quite short and gas consumption increase proportionally with depth, most recreational divers in tropical reef environments stay on the shallower side of 30 meters.

In this case there is no need for technical (Advanced Nitrox, Extended Range, Mixed gases) training. Having said that I firmly believe that all divers during entry level training should be trained and certified at least in the use of Basic Nitrox mixtures, giving all divers the skill and knowledge to utilize the optimum mix for specific depths if they so desire. Basic Nitrox is not technical diving but air will become a gas of the past for recreational divers in the future.

Definitions

The big question is "where do we draw the line between recreational and technical diving in open water?"

Training agencies have a general definition: A NDL dive to a maximum 40 meter is categorized as a "Recreational Dive". Anything beyond 40 meters or exceeding the NDL, or a combination of both, is categorized as a "Technical Dive".

But while the answer from a training agency's standpoint is quite clear, it seems to be less clear from the diver's point of view.

A story all too common

I was recently made aware of a true story about a group of 10 certified divers on a day diving trip to the SS Thistlegorm (which is a very nice World War 2 wreck in the Gulf of Suez, off the Sinai peninsular resting at 32 meters); the story is all too common.

All divers had varying degrees of certification, from AOW to Open Water Instructors but none of the group had technical training of any sort. On the second (and last dive) of the day, the group entered the water for a 25 meter repetitive dive. This followed an hour's surface interval after a first dive to 30 meters. All divers exited the water after a 30-50 minute dive time and after completing between 5 and 25 minutes of decompression stops - with most of the group having 15 minutes or more. According to training agency definitions, all ten divers carried out a "technical dive" but none had technical training at any level.

Responsibility

In my opinion a small degree of responsibility falls on the dive guide who should have encouraged the divers to leave the bottom and initiate the ascent before clocking up required decompression stops. The higher degree of responsibility falls on the individual diver to initiate the ascent before



stops are required. What's acceptable before decompression diver training is required? Is it 5, 10, 15, 20 minutes of deco - or more? "The line is not so clear", seem to be the individual's view.

Take more training

For what its worth, I would advise all divers planning dives below 30 meters or making dives that require decompression stops, regardless of the duration, to at least take the first step on the technical ladder, advanced nitrox.

The line needs to be drawn somewhere, the harder you push, the bigger the bite in the arse! If you have arrived at the point where you think you might be exceeding your level of training, then you are.

Looking at the bigger picture, technical training will give you no guarantees in itself, but it will dramatically increase the likelihood of coming back. ■

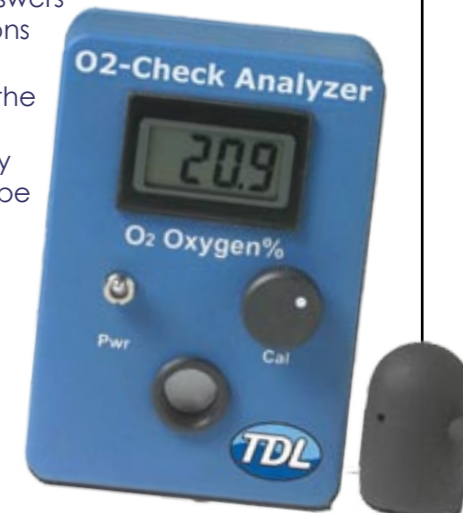


Want to win one of these?

Always analyze and label your gas. If you're wanting a simple solution for Nitrox analysis, take a look at the compact GA-O2 Check Oxygen Analyzer from Technical Diving Limited www.techdivinglimited.com Since it's launch, the GA-O2Check Oxygen Analyzer has taken the U.S. diving world by storm. Probably because this durable splash proof analyzer is easy to use, runs on user replaceable AAA batteries and is quick responding. So, if you fancy getting your sticky paws on one, just jump onto www.techdivinglimited.com —they ship worldwide

To win one, send in your answers to Leigh's three quiz-questions to Leigh@xray-mag.com by July 20 to participate in the draw for one GA-O2 Check Oxygen Analyzer generously sponsored by TDL. Prize will be shipped directly from TDL.

Questions relate to Basic Nitrox diving and planning Editor's decision is final.



QUIZ 1 — WIN GA-O2 CHECK OXYGEN ANALYZER FROM TDL

1. What is the recommended maximum depth and max. operating depth of EANx 40? (assuming a max pO₂ of 1.4)
2. What is the maximum training depth for the TDI Extended Range? And the TDI Advanced Trimix course?
3. What is the equivalent air depth of EANx 38 at 22 meters?

Leigh Cunningham is the technical manager and TDI Instructor Trainer for Ocean College, Sharm El Sheikh.

Probably best known for his records - Leigh once held the record for the deepest dive in the Red Sea, and is the cur-

rent holder of the record for deepest wreck dive - and attempts of reaching extreme depths, he also has a wide range of teaching credentials to his curriculum: TDI instructor trainer, DSAT Tech Trimix instructor, PADI MSDT IANTD Technical diver