

So, You Want to Dive?

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I guess what started my desire to learn scuba diving was watching shows such as Lloyd Bridges' Sea Hunt, Flipper, Voyage to the Bottom of the Sea, numerous James Bond movies, and of course, all of the wonderful Jacques-Yves Cousteau specials over the many years we were privileged to have him among us. However, it wasn't until recently that I was able to fulfill this life-long desire when was on a consulting assignment in the diver's paradise, Grand Turk Island, in the Turks and Caicos.



The beautiful turquoise waters off of Grand Turk Island hide a diver's paradise beneath the surface. Taken by Author using Canon ZR50MC Digital Video in still mode.

At 48 years of age, the proper combination of time, money and opportunity came together and I was able to do a resort course given by Sea Eye Diving with PADI Master Instructor Algrove (Smitty) Smith at Grand Turk Island in the Caribbean. With the first instant I went below the surface I was hooked, even the small reef shark waiting at the bottom of the dive line on my first dive wasn't a deterrent but an added joy to the dive experience. I vowed to get fully dive certified as soon as possible.



Interesting things can await you at the bottom of a dive line, here, Alexander, the Grand Turks Grouper good will ambassador waits to have his tummy scratched by Smitty, a Master Instructor with Sea Eye Diving. Shown in this photo taken by the author using the Sea and Sea Motormarine 35mm and YS60 Strobe using auto exposure and manual focus.

I had hoped to do my certification in the wonderful clear, warm waters of the Caribbean, but alas it was not to be and I ended up doing my certification dives in the somewhat turbid waters of Lake Lanier near Alpharetta, Georgia, my home when I am not traveling, with Clifton Hunter from Divers Supply of Doraville, GA. Even with visibility of only 15-20 feet and a water temperature of 69 degrees Fahrenheit, I still enjoyed the experience and looked forward to future dives.

I was in luck in that I was scheduled to once-again work in Grand Turk. In real-life I am a full time Oracle database consultant for Burleson Consulting, (www.dba-consult.com). The job was for a two week period shortly after my certification and I was able to do 5-2 tank dives over the two weekends I was able to stay there. For those who don't know, a 2 tank dive means you do two dives, one tank each, usually at different sites. This gave me a total of 10 great dives at 7 different Grand Turk sites, a great indoctrination into diving!

I dove again with Smitty and with Mitch Rollin, owner of the Blue Water Diver shop and leader of the most popular band on the Island. Then I did 2-1 week western Caribbean cruises, one for pleasure and one work related, where I got to do an additional 4-2 tank dives in Cozumel, Grand Cayman and Jamaica. I liked Cozumel so well I did a repeat dive there and skipped Grand Cayman to go to Stingray City with my wife. You would think that would be enough to satisfy the dive bug, but here it is only a couple of weeks later and I am starting to look for ways to go diving again...and again!



Mitch Rollin, Mike Ault and Divemaster Michael Rosenquist. Mitch owns Blue Water Divers in Grand Turk and Michael is one of his divemasters.

I guess the lesson learned from the above is that even if you aren't an athlete and in perfect trim you can become dive certified. Believe me, look at my picture I am hardly in the greatest shape of my life! Don't let age be a factor either, as I said, I am 48 years young and on several of the dives I was able to do in the Grand Turk area after certification I was accompanied by a 71 year-old retired archeologist and his wife, both were well able to out last me diving!



Going to McDonalds, Grand Turk Style! McDonalds, named for its arch, is one of the dive sites in Grand Turk. Shown is the wife of the 71 year old archeologist, diving is for all ages! Photo taken by the author using the Sea and Sea Motormarine 35mm and YS60 Strobe using auto exposure and manual focus.



In this picture you see the author all kitted up for one of his first dives after certification.

As long as you are in reasonable health, don't have any medical conditions that could prove dangerous for divers and are reasonably fit, there is no reason why you shouldn't consider becoming a certified scuba diver. Virtually every area of the country has dive classes where you can learn in local lakes, queries or on special charters to other areas where diving is possible and enjoyable. A visit to the PADI website will provide a list of PADI certified instructors near you (www.padi.com).

Diving is also available to those with physical handicaps, take a look at the Handicapped Scuba Association (www.hsascuba.com) for more information. You are the judge if you can perform the needed certification activities.

Essentially all you require is the desire to learn and some basic equipment. Most dive centers will gladly provide the needed equipment, usually only requiring you to purchase your own dive mask and snorkel, fins (don't call them flippers!) and perhaps a weight belt. Personally I wanted to use my own equipment and was able to reasonably purchase the regulator, buoyancy compensator (BCD) and the dive computer I use. Once considered a luxury, dive computers have become almost a necessity for extending bottom time and enjoyment of the dive experience. I used EBay and for less than \$750.00 total for basic gear and was completely outfitted. Of course I had the regulator and BCD gone over by a certified dive shop (Diver's World, Norcross, Ga) before I used them, most will do this for a reasonable fee.



Example of gear showing fins, dive watch, mask and snorkel, regulator and buoyancy compensator. BCD and Regulator were purchased on the web.

The most difficult part of certification for me was actually the part where I had to switch between snorkel and regulator while trying to maintain a heading using my compass in the muddy waters of Lake Lanier. My instructor combined the two activities of the navigation with the regulator and snorkel change out, usually these would be done as separate activities. Others may find the idea of having to swim 200 yards, without mask, snorkel and fins, or 300 yards, with mask, snorkel and fins, daunting, but remember, the distance swim is not timed and you can do it any style you like, even dog paddle! Some parts are merely tedious, such as treading water for ten minutes.

In PADI certification (there are also NAUI and several other recognized certification bodies for scuba) there are the written examinations which cover certification manual and video taped class material, a pool session or sessions (up to 5 short dives) where you get familiar with the equipment and certification practical aspects, followed by the practical open water dives where you repeat the practical tests under actual dive conditions.

The practical aspects include clearing a flooded mask, removing and donning masks underwater, recovery of your regulator underwater, clearing regulator and snorkel, remove and re-don BCD and tank underwater and on the surface, learning proper entry techniques and learning buddy breathing and use of spare regulators (called an octopus in dive speak). You also learn proper ascent rates and do a free ascent (no-regulator) from 30 feet of depth.

Of course if you have a water phobia, claustrophobia or other fears that would prevent you from completing the practical aspects of certification then diving may not be for you until you can master or overcome these fears or phobias.

It takes 4 open water dives to complete the practical aspects of dive certification, usually you spend a couple of week nights at the dive center doing the class materials, spend a weekend in a local pool doing 5 short pool dives then spend a weekend or two diving in “open water” to complete your certification.

Once you complete the basic open water certification you are certified to dive to a depth of 60 feet for normal dives with a maximum limit of 130 feet. Believe me there is plenty to see and do in this depth range. Most coral and sea life is at between 30-90 feet in most locations.



Here is one of the many sea turtles that make the area around the Grand Turks and Caicos its home. This was taken in about 50 feet of water using a digital camera by a dive buddy.

In the 18 dives I have done since I completed my basic open water certification I have dove from 30 to 120 feet in depth in locations all over the Western Caribbean (Grand Turk, Jamaica, Grand Caymans, Cozumel) and enjoyed each dive. I have also done one night dive in Grand Turk which was a wonderful experience. I picked up two underwater cameras via ebay, a Sea And Sea Motormarine 35SE and a Nikon Nikonos

IVa 35 mm along with the needed strobes and mounting brackets (all told, about \$500.00 total) and really enjoy underwater photography although it has its challenges. For example, don't trust the mail system into the Turks and Caicos to deliver a strobe sync cable in time for your dive...it only took 2 months for a Global Express Mail package to be delivered...in fact it just caught up with me after a 4 month journey into the twilight zone. Many manufacturers have watertight cases for standard 35mm and digital cameras and some such as Reefmaster and Sea and Sea have digital and 35mm available with all levels of automation.



The author ready for underwater photography, with the trusty Sea and Sea Motormarine 35SE and strobe unit.

Underwater photography and videography are just two additional skills you can learn as a certified diver, in all there are 17 (at last count) individual special dive certifications you can get from PADI, other certification bodies also offer additional certifications. Included in these additional dive specialties are navigation, wreck diving, rescue and recovery diving, under water photography, night diving, cave diving and many more. You are only limited by your desires and pocketbook! Once you have 5 adventure dives you can move into the advanced open water diver certification, then you can move on to certified rescue diver, dive master, assistant instructor and instructor certifications.

For those wanting to go further, there are also Nitrox (Nitrox is an enhanced oxygen mixture) and technical diving certifications available as well as full commercial diver.



Wreck diving provides many opportunities for pictures and adventure. This is the Oro Verde (Green Gold) wreck site in the Grand Caymans. Shown in this photo by the author using the Sea and Sea Motormarine 35mm and YS60 Strobe using auto exposure and manual focus.



Night dives give the opportunity to see interesting sea life such as octopus. Shown in this photo by the author using the Sea and Sea Motormarine 35mm and YS60 Strobe using auto exposure and manual focus.

So to wrap up, don't let groundless fears such as that you are too old, too out of shape, or even weigh too much (I push the scale at 220, and have seen many divers

larger!), to keep you from pursuing a desire to learn scuba diving. Folks of every age, physical ability level and weight are learning and enjoying scuba diving every day. The certification process ensures you are a safe diver and a good dive partner. I look forward to seeing you on a future dive!

Side Bar:

PADI Adventure Dives:

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Search and Recovery Diver
Underwater Naturalist
Underwater Videographer
Underwater Photographer
AWARE Fish Identification
Wreck Diver

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PADI

www.padi.com

Handicapped Scuba Association

www.hsascuba.com

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Mike Ault is a 49 year old open water certified diver from Alpharetta, Georgia. Mike has more than 50 dives to his credit so far in a little over a year and a half of active diving. Mike is a full time Oracle Database Consultant and author with Burleson Consulting (www.remote-dba.net) and Rampant Books (http://www.rampant-books.com/authors_ault_books.htm)