

Going Solo?

Check your insurance policy!

By Dr Alex Tattersall

Readers may be somewhat disappointed to know that I shan't be mentioning Nauticam in this article. No, instead this article contains a very serious message which only came to my notice recently and could have potentially disastrous consequences to many of my UW photographic peers. I felt it my duty to share this with you.

As the hair on my head thins and the tyre around my middle thickens, so intensifies my lovely wife's insistence on larger and larger life insurance policies. We now have a boisterous four year old and ensuring his financial security is, of course, paramount to me as priority has shifted towards the wellbeing of my young family.

When I am testing equipment or feel the need for some 'me time', I will often dive alone. Shock, horror, call the BSAC police, surely solo diving is one of the Seven Deadly Sins, was it not written on the tablet of the Ten Commandments, 'Thou shalt not dive without being in continuous arms reach of thoust buddy'? Solo diving is certainly a controversial topic provoking strong debate in divers the world over. This is not

surprising as traditional dive training from all schools seems from the outset to be so entrenched in diving in a 'buddy' system that it is difficult to counter this robustly inculcated mindset in many fellow divers. Only last week on Swanage pier, a dive site in the UK where you'd need a shovel to get below five meters in depth, did I witness a BSAC diver angrily berating his buddy for leaving him behind for two minutes to take a photo of a blenny. As photographers, the reality is that if we want to get photos with which we are truly happy, much of the time we effectively become self-reliant, solo divers.

I have now done some two hundred solo dives and am quite possibly the worst nightmare of any newly qualified, overzealous divemaster or 'buddy-fixated' dive club. I am now almost pathologically unable to dive with anyone who is not completely understanding of the fact that 98% of the dive I will spend alone, completely absorbed in my passion, with acutely scant awareness of their underwater wellbeing. I'd imagine now that some readers will be thinking 'what a idiot, he's got a



death wish!!' or 'I wouldn't dive with that self-absorbed imbecile'. I expect though that a larger percentage of you will be musing 'hmmm.... that sounds familiar'.

Richard, owner of London's fine inland dive centre on the doorstep of Heathrow airport (Wraysbury Dive Centre, a series of carp lakes and a training ground for most London based dive clubs), following extensive comparative research of potential other options, made the wise decision to purchase a certain housing for his Canon 7D. It was when dropping off his ergonomically masterful, jaw-droppingly innovative, sublimely

stylish purchase that I was alerted to the fact that in diving alone, despite the fact that I am certified to Assistant Instructor level, I was actually diving outside of my qualification. 'Yeah..., and..., I said smugly, safe in the obtusely superior knowledge that my UW photo brethren would stand by me in this misguided arrogance. 'Check your life insurance policy, that's all I'll say' retorted Richard, having seen it all before, clearly several steps ahead of cocky little smartarse UW photographers like me.

Caught up in life's daily toils, it took me a few days to take his advice despite it constantly niggling

at the back of my mind. I thought first I'd email colleagues at Dive Master Insurance (oh, did I almost forget to mention that readers can benefit from a 5% discount on travel and equipment insurance simply by clicking the Dive Master insurance banner at the bottom of the products pages on our website?) who I imagined would have had experience of such enquiries.

'Would I be covered if the worst happened to me and I was diving alone?', I asked. This was the reply, published with permission from Dive Master Insurance:

Hi Alex

Apologies for not coming back to your sooner, I wasn't able to pin Bob down on Tuesday and he was out of the office yesterday so have only just had chance to speak to him regarding the solo diving.

For the purposes of insurance it is very clear that you should be diving within the guidelines of your certifying association.

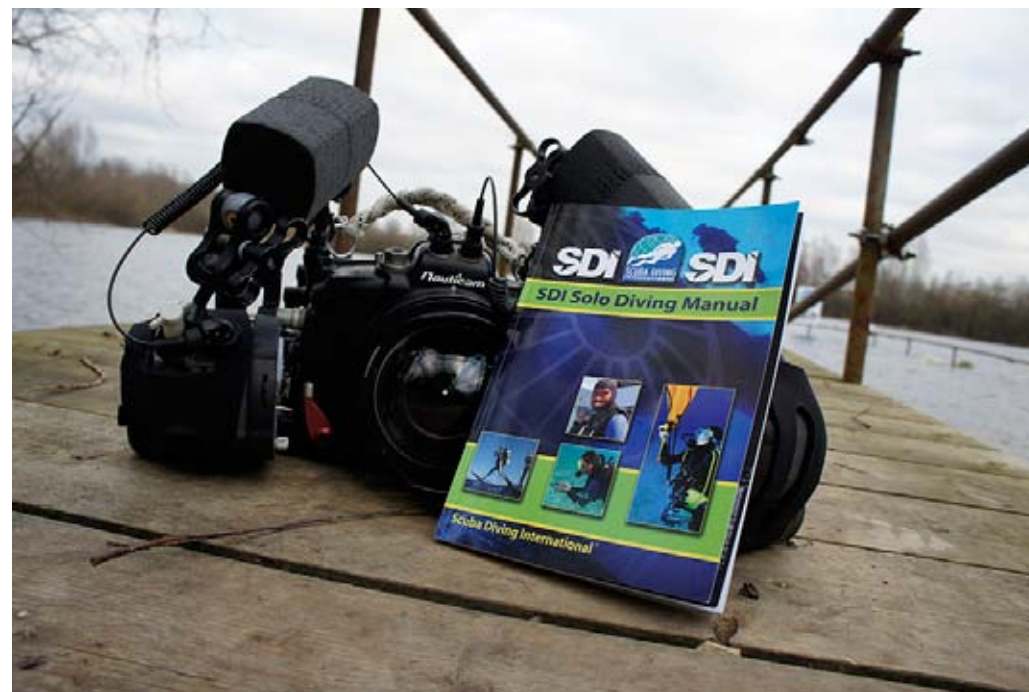
If someone has the intention of completing a solo dive then they should have the necessary qualification to do this.

However if you have gone on a dive with a buddy and whilst on that dive become separated from your buddy this is not solo diving as such. Obviously each person has a duty of care to

their buddy and should try and avoid becoming separated but we are aware that this does happen on occasion. In these circumstances we would not consider this a solo dive and would not look to exclude a claim on that basis. I hope this helps with you query however if it raises any further questions please do not hesitate to come back to me.

Loud and clear comes the message, if the worst were to happen during a solo dive I would be outside of the guidelines of my certifying association and therefore my enormous monthly life insurance premiums would, unless I had Michael Jackson's family lawyer, become totally invalid. Spontaneity being usual in my chaotic existence, a cold January morning saw me, with some urgency, on the phone to Richard at Wraysbury trying to trade in beautifully crafted housing accessories for an SDI solo diving course. The manual arrived in the post the next day for my study and I was booked in for the course the following Friday morning.

I was greeted by thick frost that Friday as I drove North towards the heady lights of the big city. Temperatures were barely above freezing when I arrived and a biting Northerly wind had kindly picked up overnight. As



The SDI solo diving manual propped up by a Nauticam housing system....

the only person deranged enough to be diving in a carp lake in such unpleasant conditions, apart from my unbelievably sprightly and enthusiastic instructor, Mark, I was indeed solo on that day: very, very solo.

At that time, in the UK, correct me if I'm wrong, but I think that SDI were the only certifying agency offering a Solo Diving course. I have heard discussion recently that PADI are introducing a 'Self-Reliant' diver qualification in the UK. I spent a bit of time trawling archives for this

article and would suggest that after having single-mindedly, unwaveringly and unrelentingly pushed their 'BUDDY' system on the world diving community as the ONLY way to dive safely, this represents a significant change in stance, the origins for which are unclear to me. The more sceptical among us may consider the pecuniary rewards of a course perhaps increasingly in demand in today's recreational diver. Certainly, one could argue that safety standards in dive equipment have increased since the buddy system was first introduced.

I'd of course arrived well prepared having read the SDI solo diver course handbook cover to cover.

The manual begins in no uncertain terms by discrediting the effectiveness of the buddy system in many circumstances. It argues that often divers who are randomly paired off as 'buddies' are lacking in the competence to assist another in the event of a life-threatening scenario underwater. Some divers have the luxury of diving most frequently with a fellow who is fully aware of their ability level, their focus for being in the watery world, and their underwater style and habits. However, all of us will have experienced being allocated a random 'buddy' resulting in mismatched skill sets, mismatched experience levels and, importantly, mismatched role expectations. The more experienced diver effectively becomes a babysitter and the dive experience is tainted by concern for a random stranger. To combat such eventuality, SDI solo diver certification suggests that the best response is to develop self-reliance underwater. Make no mistake, I am fully aware that diving is a potentially dangerous activity and I am of the mindset that I wouldn't dive if I didn't feel self-reliant in any case. I would never want to enforce responsibility for my wellbeing onto another person, known or unknown.

The course itself consisted of three dives; the first, an activity to enable the student to understand their personal air consumption under different conditions. 2 minutes are spent at rest, 2 minutes with a normal swim, and 2 minutes of heavy exertion. Before and after each activity, a record is taken of the air pre and post activity and it is rather alarming to note how much more air is consumed under more challenging, stressful conditions. At 8 meters in that pea-green, frosty lake (temperature of 3 degrees), this ostensible training dive resulted



Tench portrait (Canon 7D, Nauticam housing, 100mm macro, 2x Z240, F22, 1/160, ISO 320)

in a potential life-threatening situation as the near freezing water brought on an aggressive freeflow to my regulator. I made a controlled ascent to the surface but was very glad that Mark was also in the water as I was physically unable to reach over my head and turn my air off at the surface. Those of you who are cold water divers will empathise with the considerable loss dexterity from wearing dry gloves or thick wet gloves and a dry suit and I made a mental note to avoid solo diving in such bitterly cold conditions.

The second part of the course focused on the importance of redundant air sources for the solo diver. I'd always attempted to stay within a comfort zone of a maximum of 12 meters in depth when solo diving in the past. I'd never felt the need to invest in redundant air sources as I considered the diving I was doing was relatively low risk within the bounds of an emergency surface ascent if required. However, the SDI Solo Diving course's

Location	Wrythby		
Date	1/4/10		
Entry time	10.45	Exit time	11.45
Max dive time	60	Max depth	12m
Gas in	230	Cylinder size	2x 12L
Turn pressure	100	Turn time	12.15
Planned route	Slip way by Grike South East being to platform + return. on platform for most of dive preparing skills.		
In case of emergency contact			

'Plan your dive and dive your plan'

insistence on the importance of a redundant air source implies that if I don't dive with one now, insurance companies may use this as the basis upon which to exclude a claim. I've had to borrow a pony tank from a friend, quite a burden in terms of weight (and a symbol of dubious sexual orientation if you spend any time on the Yorkshire Diver's forum),



Cold euphoria.

but my family responsibilities give me little choice. The second dive therefore required me to demonstrate switching from primary to redundant air sources under various conditions. The second dive in 3 degree water in one hour. I was getting jolly cold at this stage and was starting to lose the will to continue. A cup of tea put me straight ready for the final part of the course.

The final dive was a 'plan your dive, dive your plan' dive carried out completely solo emphasising the

importance of alerting a surface watch of details of the intended solo dive. I was required to complete a full dive plan covering planned entry and exit points, planned depth and duration of dive, and emergency contact details. Needless to say I took my camera in with me on this dive, I'd done two dives already that day, indeed the first for years, without a camera and felt strangely lost without my trusty companion. I soon became absorbed in shooting the local tench which looked rather cold and bad-tempered, the next thing I knew my time was up. Regrettably I had to surface just as I'd 'got into the zone' with a particularly curious specimen but if I hadn't completed the dive as I'd planned, I would have failed the course. Under non-exam conditions, would I have changed my plan to get the shot? hmmm... I wonder.

Having successfully completed all the tests and the dives, as I struggled to drag my frozen carcass back to shore, I was told the good news that I was now a certified SDI Solo Diver and I'd earned a cup of coffee and a bacon sandwich. My overwhelming joy, as you can see in this shot was hardly containable.

By way of conclusion then, I did learn a lot that day primarily about the importance of discipline in diving and particularly in solo diving. I was given the opportunity to reflect upon

previously unconsidered eventualities and how to cope with these under pressure. Most of all though, I am now secure in the knowledge that I am diving within the limits of my certification and that my activity in the aquatic realm would not allow an insurance company to exclude a claim and leave my four year old with no choice but to take over the running of the very successful UK side of a certain housing empire to pay the mortgage. For the price of less than £200, the course is certainly something for consideration and I am very grateful to Richard, Jo and Mark at Wraysbury dive centre. I sincerely hope that sharing this revelation may

give readers room for reflection and food for thought.

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