

Calmness is key to enjoying the darkness of the deep

PIERS TOWNLEY



Diving at night, especially around the wreck of a old wartime supply ship, is an eerie experience, but one that will long remain in the memory

A SHIPWRECK is a grave-stone; the mark of a maritime tragedy. Diving to one of them is one of the eeriest experiences you will ever have. You are 25 metres underwater, inside the exploded hull of a Second World War supply ship, and it's night-time.

To the left are viciously eroded shards of steel hull. To the right, a beautiful shoal of glass fish. All of a sudden, your air cylinder snags on the roof of the hold and you're stuck. You think you know which way is up but you're not certain. Then the torch blinks out. This is a situation that demands unique elements of physical and mental training.

Diving is one of the fastest-growing recreational sports, swelling membership of both the British Sub-Aqua Association and the Professional Association of Diving Instructors (PADI).

The Red Sea, off the coasts of Egypt and Jordan, one of Jacques Cousteau's favourite dive areas, is filled with incredible examples of another world and another big draw is Cleopatra's palace, recently discovered in the Mediterranean near Alexandria.

"Everything can be seen up to the diving limit of about 40

metres," Barney Groome, our instructor, said. "You can go deeper with the right training, but soon after this depth you lose visibility, it gets colder and the sea life runs out. Remember your training tonight and you'll be fine. Follow me, stay calm and enjoy it."

Yes, he did say tonight. A night dive forms part of an advanced open-water PADI qualification. To make it more interesting, it takes place on the wreck of the *Thistlegorm*, which was sunk in the Red Sea in 1941 along with its cargo of BSA motorcycles, trucks, bombs and rifles.

However, there is a fair bit to learn before taking up this sport. Physical fitness is not paramount, but you will have to be able to swim and being a non-smoker helps.

It's the kit you have to understand. You have to master and then be able to function with what amounts to a life-support system. We haven't evolved gills, so techniques of using a regulator and air-supply combined with your buoyancy jacket are drummed into you before you have even put your toe in the water.

Then it's back to school. "You can be the fittest, most dedicated sportsman alive,"

Piers Townley

Wreck diving requires both physical and mental training, but the rewards are massive

Groome said, "but if you don't know your biology, you are going to be in serious trouble."

Descending below the surface increases pressure on your ears, lungs, heart and limbs. If you don't equalise it in your ears and Eustachian tubes (that join the ear to the throat) your eardrums will burst. If you don't breathe normally while ascending (the pressure lessens and the air expands) then your lungs will burst. If you ascend too fast, however, then very serious things start to happen, including the infamous "bends".

A much-told anecdote about the pressurised gases bubbling back into your tissues

and blood is the fizzy drink bottle. Ever shaken a bottle of pop then opened it? Imagine the bottle is you and the drink your blood. Then there is hypothermia, disorientation, exhaustion and the most obvious — simple drowning.

Diving, any form of it, quickly exposes the sport also as a mental challenge. That challenge is to remember your training, follow it to the letter, use it to prevent panic and then enjoy the sport. You might be able to bench-press 250lb, but if you ascend faster to the surface than your air bubbles through sloppy buoyancy control, then it means very little.

Buoyancy is the key. The expansion of air means you have to dump it all from your buoyancy jacket just to get below the surface. The initial panic of the first descent will always stay with me, although at the time it was soon replaced by the realisation and thrill that I could breathe underwater.

As you descend farther, the compressed residual suit air makes you less buoyant, so you have to pump a little more in the deeper you go. When you're coming back up, you want to dump it all again as it expands, making you more

buoyant, because everyone's seen what a mess a shaken pop bottle can do when you're not expecting it.

So these are the basics, well, some of them. This is the beauty of the sport, the emphasis on technical equipment and technique combined with an understanding of your own physical limits.

Only then does it get better, night-time wreck diving being the best. Getting snagged is merely par for the course as long as you've remembered the golden rule — "don't panic". Training makes the situation safe and the experience unbelievable.

On my late-night dive, all too soon we had to swim back to the shotline that led us to the surface above the *Thistlegorm*. The memory of seeing her cargo of railway engines and war munitions looming towards me under the arcing lights of our torches will remain for ever. On the surface, we burst our lungs with nothing more dangerous than the excitement of wanting to do it all over again.

LINKS

www.londonscuba.com
www.padi.com
www.bsac.com