

Common Mistakes Divers Make

Poor buoyancy control.

The most frequently discussed diving skill problem is lack of adequate buoyancy control, which is notorious for causing damage to fragile underwater habitats.

Having poor buoyancy control means a diver can't stay neutrally buoyant throughout a dive, which is usually the result of wearing too much weight on the weight belt. Negatively buoyant divers have a tendency to bump into, kick and grab onto whatever is near them, or constantly compensate for the feeling of sinking by putting more air in their Buoyancy Compensator, kicking up and swimming with arms and bent knees.

This, in turn, uses more energy, increases breathing rate and air consumption and can initiate the panic cycle. The end consequences are an exhausted diver and a trashed diving environment.

Good buoyancy control is primarily a function of practice, but improvement comes more rapidly if divers wear only as much weight as is absolutely needed, considering the amount of neoprene being worn, the buoyancy characteristics of the tank being worn and the type of diving (i.e., water salinity, depth and movement). Scuba Staff should be alert to help divers determine the exact right amount of weight for them in any particular situation.

At some dive resorts, damage to reefs by divers unable to adequately control their buoyancy has become such a problem that divers are asked to do a checkout dive with an instructor before being turned loose. We need to work more with students in the pool and at Open Water to assist in learning effective buoyancy skills. On open water dives the hover portion of ascent work is a vital part of buoyancy control skills.

Problems on the surface.

Inexperienced or uncomfortable divers often spend excess time bobbing on the surface after entering the water from a boat. When a surface current is present, an unaware diver can quickly be swept away from the dive site. If the buddy team chooses to descend away from the boat, there is a greater chance of navigational difficulties, since the boat is not available as a reference point.

To avoid this situation, both buddies should enter together so one doesn't have to wait on the surface. They should be ready to descend before entering, with all equipment in place. They need to carefully follow the divemaster's instructions and spend as little time as possible on the surface.

During the open water experience students need to be helped to be aware of timing in a buddy team. Each buddy team member needs to watch the other and help each other to become ready to dive at the same time and to work at staying together and functioning as a team.

Mask removal.

Another common diving mistake is removing a mask on the surface or placing it on one's forehead after surfacing from a dive. The reasons for leaving a mask on until a diver is safely out of the water are basic. A diver can see under the surface to remove fins or grab the boat's ladder and the diver will not water in the nose and eyes while doing it. The mask can't get lost if it's on the face, while even small wave is capable of washing it from the forehead.

Removing the mask and placing it on a forehead is a primary indicator of an uncomfortable or distressed diver. If a mask has been in place for 30 minutes or more during a dive, there should be no reason why it can't remain there another couple of minutes while the diver exits the water. If it is uncomfortable, full of water or fogged, these are correctable problems which should be resolved before the next dive. Some

experienced divers may remove their masks on the surface. Chances are it is just a bad habit that they have developed and is not something to be copied.

Stress with students in the pool and at open water to place the mask on the face before entering the water and not removing it until they have exited the water.

Not practicing scuba skills.

The reason for learning scuba skills is because a diver might have to use them at some point to preserve their own or their buddy's safety. When that happens divers must react automatically, quickly and calmly to avoid adding stress to an already tense situation. The only way to maintain this level of readiness is regular practice. Divers should periodically devote part of a shallow dive to actually performing safety skills with their buddy. Practicing under the supervision of an instructor is always safest (like having a spotter in gymnastics) but if students choose to practice on their own, they should notify others to avoid causing undue concern.

A diver's ability to effectively and comfortably perform even basic diving skills such as mask clearing or ear equalization with deteriorate significantly if divers don't dive regularly. A refresher is the answer. Divers should be encouraged to regularly practice their scuba skills.

Not monitoring gauges.

Students should be encouraged to prevent out-of-air situations by prevention -- by looking at the pressure gauge every few minutes. Unfortunately divers have so many things to remember, not to mention the engrossing beauty all around, that it's easy to lose track of time.

The fact is, divers can't be responsible for their own safety unless they have a good idea at all times during the dive of their own personal dive information, or what's easy to remember as D.A.T.A.: Depth -- how deep are you now and what was the maximum depth? Air -- how much do I have left? Time --how long have they been down and how much longer is the planned bottom time? Area -- where are they in relation to the exit point? If divers have trouble remembering to check

their gauges every three to five minutes, they should pen the acronym D.A.T.A. on their palm or glove. Divers have developed the proper habit when they can give an approximate answer to each of the above question without looking at their gauges at the time. Both in the pool and during the Open Water Experience staff should routinely ask students what their air pressure is and in during the Open Water Experience ask them about depth, time and where they were are.

EQUIPMENT

Scuba is an equipment-intensive sport, consequently a good deal of our training involves learning to use and care for our gear. So it follows that a high percentage of diver mistakes would also involve equipment.

Unfamiliarity with gear being used.

Even if a diver owns their own equipment and has not used it for several months, a review of how each feature works is a smart idea. When divers are renting equipment they should have the shop personnel provide a thorough briefing on its use.

BCs require practice to operate effectively, and are therefore a prime source of difficulty for new divers. A very common BC usage problem is the failure to deflate adequately when trying to descend. This often leads to the erroneous conclusion that more weight is needed. Divers need to be helped to understand that with most BCs they must be vertical (head up) in the water with the inflator hose stretched above the head for air to flow out of the BC bladder. If they look up at the hose as they descend; they should see bubbles emerging. Squeezing the BC's air pocket with the other arm will often help force the air out. Some BCs have two or even three air dump valves to assist divers to vacate the air from their BC in a variety of positions. Scuba staff should watch for these alternate dump valves and help divers learn how to use them.

A similar mistake is adding air to the BC while ascending. Provided a diver is neutrally buoyant during the dive, to ascend a diver merely needs to gently begin to kick toward the surface before the BC will begin to expand and it will be necessary to begin venting air from the Bc as it expands. This helps prevent the common error of ascending too fast. Also, divers need to pay close attention to which button on the inflate/deflate mechanism they push. If they are not totally comfortable with using their BC, it is easy to accidentally push the inflate instead of the deflate button. If a diver holds the BC inflate/deflate mechanism wrong they could squeeze the inflate mechanism without realizing it as they try to get a firm grip on the mechanism in order to deflate the BC.

Failure to preadjust, check and stow equipment.

By the time divers arrive at the entry point, whether it is a shore break, dock or boat swim platform, all the equipment should be ready to go. Fins, mask and BC straps should already be the right length so that they can just pull everything on and enter the water. An important part of that readjustment process is checking the equipment for potential maintenance problems before it's too late to fix them.

Discover and replace the cracked heel strap or bad hose before entry time. To avoid the embarrassment of having the tank slide out of the BC strap underwater, be sure the buckle is strung correctly and pulled tight.

Once everything is assembled and checked, gear and accessories should be stored in a bag, bin or assigned space where they won't get lost or be in the way (unless divers are immediately gearing up for entry). Weight belts are always kept at ground or deck level to avoid an accident should it fall.

Discovering the omission of a crucial piece of equipment (like a weight belt) can be prevented by divers religiously performing buddy checks before every entry. Students should be assisted in the pool and at the open water site to develop a routine for the gearing-up process which includes each buddy checking each other's gear for completeness and readiness.

Thoroughness in getting ready can prevent a number of common mistakes which could lead to a delayed or aborted dive. Divers will also avoid inconveniencing other divers and help themselves feel more relaxed and confident, decreasing the chances of making additional mistakes in the water.

Poor equipment care.

The list of mistakes in this category is long, but by far the most common one is rinsing a regulator after a dive without replacing the dust cap, which allows water to enter the first stage. The dust cap is attached to the first-stage yoke by a cord or rubber loop, and should always be replaced over the valve opening as soon as the regulator is removed from the tank. Also don't push the purge button when rinsing a second-stage unless the regulator is still on a tank and under pressure. Otherwise, water can travel up the low-pressure hose into the first-stage, causing corrosion.

Another common mistake is hanging a regulator by the first-stage. This puts excess stress on the hoses where they connect with the first-stage. It is better to lay a regulator down with the hoses coiled loosely in an unstrained position.

ATTITUDE

Attitude mistakes arise from a diver having either too much or too little confidence, and are just as likely to be committed by longtime divers as novices.

Not asking questions.

Many divers feel that because they have a certification card, regardless of their actual level of experience, they are expected to know everything about diving. They fear the embarrassment of not knowing something when they think they should, and consequently make the mistake of assuming, rather than asking.

Scuba staff should expect divers to be inexperienced and/or unfamiliar with local conditions and protocols, and should be happy to assist and answer questions. That is primarily why they are there; to help with equipment, to refresh skills, to

guide dives. It is much easier for scuba staff to answer questions and correct problems early than to solve problems later. The only stupid question is the one not asked.

Not planning the dive.

This is often related to the problem of not asking questions. Many divers figure that when they are diving from a charter boat or in a group, there is no need for a dive plan. Even basic things like depth and time limits are left to chance or to others. Proper dive planning means preparing physically and mentally for a dive with your buddy before you enter the water. Topics that should be addressed when planning a diver include everything from establishing the dive profile and objective, preparing equipment, verifying that each buddy uses similar hand signals to running through pre-dive checklists. Planning also means mentally preparing for the upcoming event by talking through potential dive problems, like running low on air, having equalization troubles or getting separated. Proper pre-dive planning allows divers to visualize the entire dive, and invent solutions to potential problems, before they step in the water. As the saying goes, "Safe dives don't just happen; they're planned." Pre and post dive briefings during the Open Water help students to acquire this habit.

Complacency.

All divers are guilty of this one once in a while. It's the old, "the rules don't apply to me" lie that divers tell themselves. Divers who have been diving for awhile and who have broken or bent a few rules, even if accidentally -- gone too deep, stayed too long, worn equipment they knew was faulty, not listened to a dive briefing. Then the problem is compounded by concluding, "I got away with it this time, I guess it's OK if I do it again." Unfortunately, that attitude leads to sloppiness, which eventually catches up with every diver.
