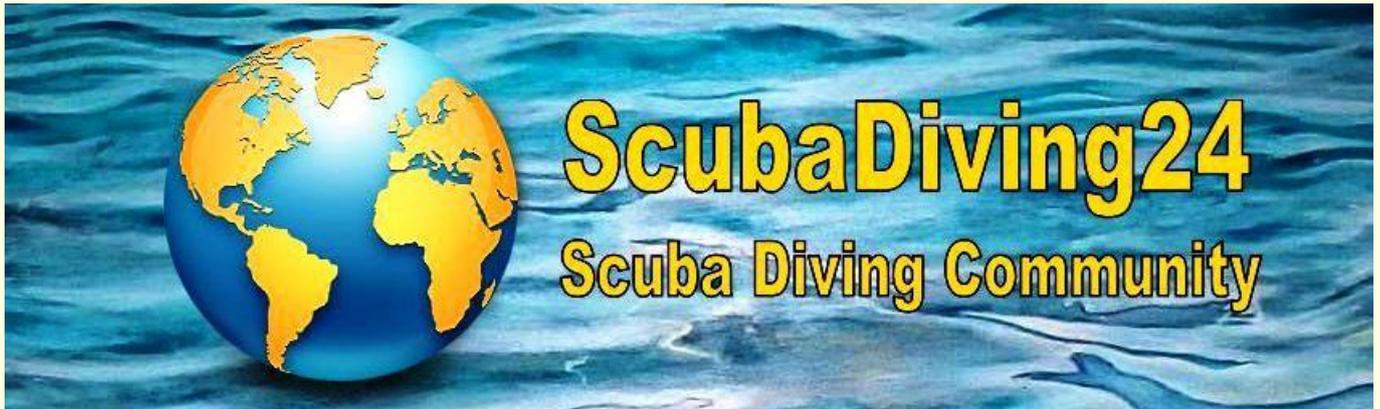


Tips for Buying Scuba Diving Gear



New scuba divers may feel a bit overwhelmed when shopping for their first set of scuba gear, with so many brands and styles it can be difficult to know where to start. Different divers have different needs, but this guide will highlight some key features to evaluate that will help you pick the right gear for you and your style of diving.

The key thing to remember is that fit and comfort are crucial. If you try something on and it is too loose or too tight or is uncomfortable in any way, it will only get worse underwater. This not only irritates and distracts from your dive experience but can also lead to poor performance and safety issues – like a leaky mask or fins falling off.

It's also a good idea to keep in mind what kind of environments you'll be diving in. Are you traveling to warm tropical destinations or diving locally in colder quarries, lakes and springs? Your instructor and local dive shop can give you additional pointers on preparing for certain dive environments, especially if you'll be diving locally.

Buying Your First Scuba Mask

Fit and comfort are important when choosing a scuba mask because an ill-fitting mask will constantly leak and fill with water. Follow these steps to find a comfortable, water-tight fit:

1. Look up at the ceiling and rest the mask on your face without using the strap and look for any gaps between the mask skirt and your face where it could leak. Pay attention to the cheeks, and if possible, try it on with a snorkel or regulator in your mouth.
2. Look forward and place the mask on your face without using the strap. Test the seal by gently inhaling through your nose. A good mask will stay in place while you inhale. Remember to inhale gently – you can make just about any mask stick to your face if you suck in hard enough.
3. Make sure the nose pocket doesn't touch your nose and the skirt feels comfortable on your upper lips, cheeks and forehead and that the frame doesn't put pressure against your nose or forehead. Don't forget to try it with a snorkel or regulator if possible.
4. Finally take a moment to make sure you can comfortably pinch your nose and equalize your ears.

Once you've determined which masks you can actually wear, you can now narrow down your choices based on personal preferences such as style, color and optional features. Some masks have purge-valves for venting water, elastic straps for increased comfort or corrective lenses.

Buying Your First Snorkel

When looking for a snorkel, you'll want to find one with a mouthpiece that feels good in your mouth and breathes dryly and easily. Most attempts to keep snorkels dry also make them bulkier to breathe through, so the trick is finding a comfortable compromise between dryness and ease of breathing.

Keep in mind that bigger snorkels will create more drag in the water. Some snorkels feature flexible, corrugated bottom sections to reduce jaw fatigue and some can be rolled up and stuck in a BC pocket when not in use. Check how the snorkel attaches to the mask and make sure the attachment is durable and easy-to-operate. Unless you plan on doing a lot of snorkeling, this one piece of gear you can skimp on. Get a simple, basic model and be done with it.

Buying Your First Pair of Scuba Fins

Pick your scuba diving fins based on comfort and efficiency. A comfortable fin will fit snugly, but not so tightly that you can't wiggle your toes. Make sure that the foot pocket doesn't pinch your toes or bind the arches of your foot and that there aren't any hard parts that dig into your foot when you flex your feet.

A fin's efficiency is largely determined by its size, stiffness and design. Large stiff fins can provide more power per kick but take more energy to use effectively and are better suited for divers with strong leg and hip muscles. Smaller divers and less conditioned divers will be more comfortable with smaller, more flexible fins. These fins won't have the same thrust per kick, but are much easier to kick in. Make sure the buckles and straps are easy to use. Some fins can be outfitted with a spring strap which makes getting them on and off much easier.

There are two broad categories of fins. Full-foot fins are worn with bare feet and open-heel fins are worn with boots. Some divers prefer full-foot fins for their convenience (especially those who boat dive exclusively in calm, tropical destinations), but open-heel fins have their own perks, specifically the boots. Dive boots offer protection while walking on shore and provide additional warmth in the water. If you want open-heel boots, make sure you try them on with your dive boots.

Buying Your First Wetsuit

In order to keep you warm, a wetsuit must fit well and be the appropriate thickness for the dive environment. Wetsuits keep you warm, in part, by preventing water from circulating around your body and robbing it of heat. To achieve this, your wetsuit should fit you snugly without restricting movement or breathing. Any loose areas will allow cold water to flush through the suit and speed heat loss. Zippers on the wrists and ankles of a wetsuit make it easier to get in and out, without losing the tight fit.

Your wetsuit should also be warm enough for the environment you will be diving in. The neoprene foam used to make wetsuits has bubbles of gas inside of it that act as an insulator. The thicker the suit, the more bubbles it has and the more bubbles it has, the more insulated you will be. Here's a guide for choosing the right kind of suit for the water temperatures you dive in:

75-85 F (23,9-29,4 C) – 1/16" (1.6 mm) neoprene, Lycra, Polartec
70-85 F (21,1-29,4 C) – 1/8" (3 mm) neoprene
65-75 F (18,3-23,9 C) – 3/16" (5 mm) neoprene
50-70 F (10,0-21,1 C) – 1/4" (6.5 mm) neoprene
35-65 F (1,7-18,3 C) – 3/8" (9.5 mm) neoprene, dry suit

Even if the water is warm enough that you could comfortably dive in just your bathing suit, consider wearing a rashguard or dive skin. These thin garments will provide protection from the sun and marine life.

Buying Your First Scuba Diving BC

The BC is a complex piece of dive gear that performs many different functions, but your prime concern should be – as with every other piece of gear – comfort and fit.

Before you try on BCs, wear the exposure suit you'll be diving in most often. You'll want to find a BC that fits snugly but doesn't squeeze you when inflated. Be sure to inflate the BC all the way until the overflow valve vents. It shouldn't restrict your breathing.

While you've got the BC on go ahead and test all of the valves for accessibility and ease of use. Then make sure the adjustments, straps and pockets are easy to reach and use. Check that the inflator hose is easy to reach and extend overhead. Take note of the inflate and deflate buttons and make sure they are easily distinguishable and can be operated with one hand.

Different BCs will be able to support different amounts of weight. Most recreational scuba divers outfitted in a full wetsuit will need between 20 and 40 pounds of buoyant lift.

There are big, plushy, full-featured BCs, minimalist light-weight rigs that are meant for travel and everything in between. Some feature octo-pockets, roll-down cargo pockets, integrated-weight pockets and more. To find out which one fits your style of diving best, try and test out as many different models as you can in real diving situations before buying.

Buying Your First Scuba Diving Regulator

Before the thought of choosing your own life-support equipment stresses you out, know this: among major-label regulators – the kind sold in dive stores – there is no junk. Even budget regulators can offer high performance.

The best regs can deliver a large volume of air at depth, under heavy exertion and even at low tank pressures. Some regs will have knobs and breathing-adjustment controls to aid this process, so it's important to understand the controls and know how they work.

Evaluate the second stage – the part that goes in your mouth – for comfort. Look for a good comfortable mouthpiece and have your local dive store select hoses of the right length for you. Avoid any regs that seem heavy or hard on your jaw.

Some regs feature additional ports on the first stage – the part on the tank – that provide greater flexibility for routing hoses and attaching accessories, but these can also increase the cost.

You'll want to do your research before investing in this piece of gear. Talk to dive shop personnel and experienced divers and read reviews online. Try as many regulators as you can in real-world diving situations. Breathing a reg in the store tells you nothing about how it will perform underwater.

Buying Your First Dive Computer

While you should still know how to use your dive tables, a dive computer makes it easy to dive safely within no-decompression limits while increasing your time underwater. Your primary concern should be choosing a computer that is user-friendly.

Computers vary greatly from one model to the next. Some operate with a single button while others have four or more, but this doesn't indicate usability on its own. What really matters is how easy it is for you to navigate between menus and set settings. Make sure you can quickly access basic information such as decompression status and that the screen is legible. Some computers will use both numeric and graphic displays for at-a-glance information.

Some computers are conservative in their calculations and call your dive before reaching your true no-deco limit, while others bring you right to the edge of decompression and allow you to add your own safety margins. Do some research and check how the computer compares to other available models.

Computers can be wrist-mounted like a watch or mounted on a console. They can also have a number of additional features such as digital compasses, blue-tooth connectivity, air-integration, full-color displays and rechargeable or user-replaceable batteries. More advanced computers feature additional modes such as freediving or mixed-gas modes. Take a look at the manual to make sure you understand it and to learn about the computer's many features.

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