

# **SCUBA:**

## **A Practical Guide for the New Diver**



**Special Edition**

**By**  
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**With an introduction by Bernie Chowdhury – author of “The Last Dive”**

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This book is not a manual to teach you how to SCUBA dive. That process requires training from a competent instructor in an organized class. No guarantee of safety without that training is stated or implied in any way. The opinions expressed herein are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect those of any other individual or entity, including businesses and training agencies. For information on training with the author, visit [www.udmaquatics.com](http://www.udmaquatics.com).

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## Dedication

Deciding who to dedicate this work to was a difficult matter. Many contributed to the thoughts contained herein. None of this would have come about if I had not taken up SCUBA diving in the first place. My initial inspiration for taking up diving came from Lloyd Bridges (Mike Nelson on Sea Hunt) and Jacques Cousteau with his Undersea World television series in the '60s. It took nearly 35 years for me to get my initial certification after watching them, but they played a huge part in the decision. Thanks.

Once that decision was made, it was the support and encouragement of my late wife, Denise Lynne Churney, which not only saw me through my initial Open Water Class but made it possible for me to become an instructor. Few would have sacrificed what she did to see me through the whole process. For that I, and hopefully many others, will be eternally grateful. Rest in Peace.

This still would not have come to fruition without the support and help of my editor and friend, Elizabeth Babcock. Her guidance in matters of writing and composition are why you will not be tearing your hair out trying to read this work. If not for her, this would likely be a jumble of words in some vague semblance of order, still in a file on my computer. Any diver whose enjoyment of this sport is made greater or whose safety is increased, and any life that may be saved, is due as much to her efforts in this as it is to my words. She has made the words flow and make sense in a way I could not. Love you. Thank you for everything.

To my children, Josh and Katie, for just being you. To my grandfather, Dominic for teaching me to swim. To Casey Peel, for agreeing to do the illustrations in this book.

Divers who lost their lives were the reason this was started. Their deaths, detailed later in this book, were probably preventable. I had to write this if there was *any* chance that some of my words might prevent some future fatalities from occurring.

Finally, to all who desire to see first-hand what is under the surface of the water on SCUBA. This is for you.

# Introduction

James Lapenta's SCUBA: A Practical Guide for the New Diver is a trove of vital information for the new and aspiring diver, as well as for the more experienced. New divers may be surprised to learn that not all instructors and dive shops have the same focus – or strengths. The use of specific questions (listed in the pertinent sections) that the diver can direct at a potential instructor or dive shop should prove insightful. It should also help the diver to focus on what they themselves may want from their diving education and experiences and how to best achieve that.

As James rightfully points out, proper buoyancy skills are critical. Without those skills, divers are not just frustrated and uncomfortable in the water, but they are a danger to themselves, to others, and to their environment. Typically, proper buoyancy takes the most time to master. When deciding which instructor to choose, a diver would do well to focus on how much time will be devoted in class to teaching buoyancy skills, and what sorts of skills are employed. Unfortunately, the high price of renting time at a swimming pool often means that these critical skills -- and the time to develop them -- are given short shrift in many classes. With the trend to ever shorter diving courses, a potential diving student may think they're getting a good deal and that spending less time in a scuba class is a good idea. The reality is that a person only gets comfortable and learns to master diving skills through quality time spent underwater.

This Guide raises the very important notion of finding an appropriate mentor. High-quality underwater time -- with either a skilled, attentive, patient instructor or with an experienced diver - is the key for anyone wishing to grow in the sport. Professionals, such as Diving Instructors, Assistant Instructors and Dive Masters, are all very important in teaching the nuances of scuba diving. However, experienced divers and boat captains can also provide guidance. Finding a dive club or forming a casual group for camaraderie, adventure, to share knowledge and dive stories is an important part of maintaining interest in diving and realizing a lot of pleasure from it. James points out how and where one can reach out and find others to share the sport, and also to mentor the up-and-coming diver.

This Guide should serve divers well, not only immediately, but also in the future; it has been designed to serve as a handy reference. Flipping through these pages between dive trips, dive classes, or in the off-season will undoubtedly give divers new thoughts to ponder and help steer their diving through many enjoyable years.

Plan well, dive safely.

Bernie Chowdhury  
DAN, NAUI, PADI, TDI Instructor  
Author – *The Last Dive*

## **Dive Industry Feedback on SCUBA: A Practical Guide for the New Diver**

"I have recently had the opportunity to read an advance copy of the new book by Jim Lapenta. This well-written new book should be on every diver's book shelf. Potential divers, new divers, and experienced pros will benefit from the wise and thoughtful information. I have a good library of diving books, manuals, magazines, etc. My first purchase was the New Science of Skin and Scuba, some 40 years ago. This will be a go-to book and is a new standard. Thank you, Jim. Great book."

Michael Brennan  
President, Apollo Sports USA, INC.

"Finally, a book with a no-nonsense approach on the art of scuba diving. Real life examples are presented throughout the book, which help drive home the points of proper and improper techniques. This should be a must-read for anyone that is interested in getting involved in the sport. Jim has presented the basics of scuba diving in a clear, easy-to-understand format that is not only good for the new diver, but a good review for the seasoned one."

Capt Gary  
Conch Republic Divers  
Master Scuba Diving Instructor with PADI and SSI  
Staff Instructor with SDI/TDI  
NSS Full Cave Diver

"It is obvious that you are passionate about our sport and the safety of not only your students, but all divers. I applaud you for that."

Dan Orr, President  
Divers Alert Network (DAN)

"Thank you for the privilege of reading your new book. While the "why" of diving hasn't really changed, the reality is the "how" has undergone many dramatic changes in the last couple decades. Not only has instructional technique changed, but consumer expectations have radically shifted. This shift has left many in the dive instruction field and our students "not getting a view of the ocean for the cove." Your book is a very down-to-earth and honest look at where we are and how new divers can find their way. I will recommend the book to divers new and old and more importantly, to instructors and dive shops."

Chris Richardson  
NAUI 17055 Technical and Recreational Course Director  
ACUC #1049EA Advanced Instructor  
TDI, ERDI and SDI Instructor #4587  
PADI MSDT 157937

## Foreword

I am writing this in order to impress on new divers just what this activity called SCUBA diving is. While it is indeed a fun, relaxing, educational, interesting, and -- if approached properly -- safe activity, it is nonetheless a sport that has risks. SCUBA diving is in fact an extreme sport that can injure or even kill very quickly, and in some very nasty ways. What we are doing is entering an alien environment that is normally hostile to human life. We cannot breathe in water without some kind of mechanical assistance. In this case, we use a steel or aluminum high pressure cylinder, a means of reducing that pressure to a level that we can safely breathe (i.e., a regulator), and a means of controlling our buoyancy.

We also need a mask to allow us to see, fins to help us propel ourselves through the water, and a few other items that are specific to different environments and conditions. These are all covered, or should be, in every Open Water (OW) class. All too often in today's society, however, people do not want to take the time to properly prepare and get the education to safely take on new tasks. Some agencies appear to have responded to this by developing training programs that turn out high numbers of certified divers in shorter time frames, necessitating the reduction of time spent on what I consider to be some necessary basic skills.

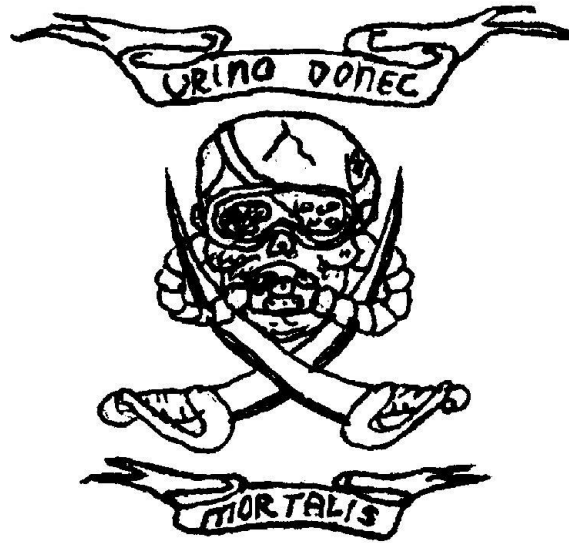
While this has resulted in great numbers of new divers entering the water, it has not resulted in many of those divers staying in the water. New divers are often given just enough training to enable them to dive in the most benign conditions under close supervision. Even then, there are still those who find out their initial training was just not adequate. It is at this point that they either make the decision to get more training or they leave the sport. The latter happens all too often. The former, when it does happen, does not always occur for the right reasons. Students should return to training to expand their diving and learn new skills; they should not have to return for new training just to be able to enjoy the sport safely.

To require students to come back for basic information is something I find very troubling, and in some cases, has actually cost divers their lives. A lack of rescue instruction has resulted in a number of diver deaths when buddies did not know how to drop weights, support a diver at the surface, or even stay in contact with their buddy. This is another area frequently talked about, but all too often not actually put into practice. The concept of always diving with a buddy and just what that means in the "real world" is often given too little attention. Unfortunately, it is

impossible to foresee every conceivable situation that can arise, but there are many basic issues that can be covered. The following chapters will hopefully address much of what is being overlooked or delayed in many programs as they exist today.

It is my hope that this information also finds its way into the hands of those who have not yet begun the training process. I will include a chapter on how to select an instructor based on the quality of instruction and the content of the course. In some cases, these classes may cost more than the less comprehensive courses also available, but usually they do not. In fact, when you consider the additional skills and education gained from a more comprehensive course, you will find that you have received much more value for each dollar spent. In addition, you gain priceless benefits in the form of greater confidence, enjoyment, skills, and -- most importantly -- safety. Enjoy.

James Lapenta



Urino Donec Mortalis

"To Dive until Death"

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