

IN DEEP WATER

PETER WALKER-SMITH ON THE SCIENCE AND BEAUTY OF SCUBA DIVING

My enthusiasm for scuba diving started at a very young age. Growing up in Hong Kong and Singapore, I was in and around water from my earliest days. When I was 10 years old, my father learned how to scuba-dive and I was more than keen to join him in this new activity. Back then, the rule was that you had to be 12 to learn to scuba-dive. I managed to do a trial dive in a pool before that and, by the time I reached 12, I was ready to learn.

Since then, I haven't looked back. I've been diving for some 20 years; I'm a qualified technical diver, a recreational scuba instructor and, more recently, I've added underwater photography to my skills. Diving has taken me to some amazing places, including dive sites in Indonesia, Malaysia and the Philippines.

I've been to Komodo, one of the thousands of islands that make up Indonesia and part of the famed Coral Triangle. I enjoy a good mix of reefs, wrecks and open waters, which makes Egypt a great destination for a diver like me. Egypt's waters

are full of interest, particularly wrecks. I've travelled to far-flung sites like Cocos Island in the Pacific – reached by a 36-hour boat trip from Costa Rica – as well as sites in Sudan and Myanmar.



Photography adds a new dimension to diving and another technical skill to balance with those of diving itself. As well as knowing your way around the camera, you need to be adept at controlling

your buoyancy. If you want to achieve sharp pictures of marine life, you need to be still and steady in the water.

The scientist in me – I'm a biochemistry graduate – loves the marine life, but diving appeals to people for many different reasons. Much of the diving I do is done from liveaboards with three to four dives a day at varied sites. Some dive masters, as trip leaders are known, will have a particular affinity or expertise in history or marine biology. Sometimes they just have very detailed local knowledge that will make the trip interesting.

The qualifications and training are necessary, because diving

can have its scarier moments. I've been caught in a down current while diving off Egypt. Unintentionally descending from 30 to 40 metres in a couple of seconds was disconcerting, to say the least. The answer – counterintuitively – is to swim away from the reef towards open water. I've also had my camera bumped by a 2.5-metre silky shark while on a night dive in Socorro, off the Pacific coast of Mexico.

More pleasurable experiences include diving with sea lions and manta rays off Mexico, seeing beautiful reefs around the world and some of the weird and wonderful critters that inhabit these, and encountering various pelagics (such as sharks, barracudas and tuna). These big fish are designed to cruise long distances and favour open waters.

My interest is at times academic and at times technical, and there is definitely a risk management aspect. Dives require careful planning. Equipment needs to be functioning and you need to ensure your skills are up to scratch. I have put myself in deep waters and strong currents in places far from help at times, in what can be a dangerous pastime.

But the sea is a fascinating environment. I've experienced wonderfully peaceful moments on a dive... and it's not possible for someone to reach you via a smartphone when you are far from home and underwater.

All about SCUBA

- Scuba is actually an acronym standing for 'self-contained underwater breathing apparatus'.
- The whale shark is the largest living fish, with adults having an average length of about 10 metres and an average weight of nine tons.
- The Coral Triangle is a well-known area for marine biodiversity and is often called 'the Amazon of the seas'. Although it covers only 1.6% of the planet's oceanic area, it contains 76% of all coral species and 37% of the world's species of reef fish.
- Isla Nublar in Michael Crichton's *Jurassic Park* was modelled off Cocos Island.

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