



opinion

Text by Simon Pridmore

—ed. This is the first in a two-part article, adapted from a chapter in my book *Scuba Professional: Insights into Sport Diver Training and Operations*. Part two will be featured in the next issue.

In 2005, Pulitzer Prize winner Thomas Friedman wrote his book, *The World is Flat*, describing the epoch-defining effects of technological globalisation in the early 21st century. He explained his use of the word “flat” as meaning “equalising.” That is, equalising power, knowledge, opportunity and the ability to connect, compete and collaborate. One consequence of this flattening that Friedman did not cover in the book is the worldwide expansion of scuba diving as a recreational activity.

In the last couple of decades, people all over the world in countries where the sport was previously almost completely absent have started scuba diving. Furthermore, new businesses in many of these countries have become significant players in the international scuba diving industry. Planet Scuba is much bigger these days than it was and it is growing fast.



Scuba Confidential:

The Future of Scuba Diving

In a Flat World — Part I

PIXABAY

This may come as something of a surprise to readers who live in the scuba diving heartland of the United States and Western Europe where the diving population has aged and the number of new divers has been falling for a while. But in Central and Eastern Europe, Russia, parts of South America and especially in Asia, scuba diving is booming!

It's the economy

People learn to scuba dive when they have time for leisure and money to spend on leisure activities. In the 1990s, the growth areas for the sport were the so-called tiger economies of Southeast Asia: Singapore, Hong Kong, Malaysia and South Korea. Over the turn of the century, a decade after the Iron Curtain dropped,

scuba diving exploded in Russia and former Soviet Bloc countries like Poland, the Czech Republic, Hungary and the Baltic nations, as people embraced new wealth and unprecedented access to free markets and travel.

In the first two decades of this century, the countries where scuba diving has shown most growth, in some cases astro-

nomical growth, are again those where flourishing economies have created a middle class with free time and aspirations to enjoy it. You now meet Chinese, Indian, Brazilian and Mexican divers in resorts and on liveaboards all over the world. The latest arrivals at the scuba banquet are young Indonesians, mostly from the thriving urban centres of Java and Sumatra.





opinion



PETER SYMES & PIXABAY

Gear shifts

From the 1950s right up to the 1990s, most scuba diving equipment was manufactured in only a very few countries, the United States, the United Kingdom, Australia, France, Italy, Switzerland, Finland and Japan. However, when the forces of globalisation started flattening the world, many manufacturers moved production to China or Taiwan to reduce costs and improve profits.

As new markets for scuba diving opened in Central and Eastern Europe, the established manufacturers were well placed to benefit. Their famous names carried weight, and although they did not adjust their prices for the less affluent new markets, they nevertheless dominated, establishing franchises, branches, agencies or subsidiaries in the new regions. However, as the number of divers grew, local businesses evolved, producing equipment at cheaper prices, which domestic consumers could better afford—much of it made in the same factories in Taiwan and China, where the well-known brands were made. In many cases, the products were identical.

Eventually, the new manufacturers began to take their businesses internationally, to compete with the big names on their own turf. No longer did

professionals and businesses from the new scuba nations come to dive shows in the United States and Western Europe only to buy and learn. Now they were coming to show and sell as well.

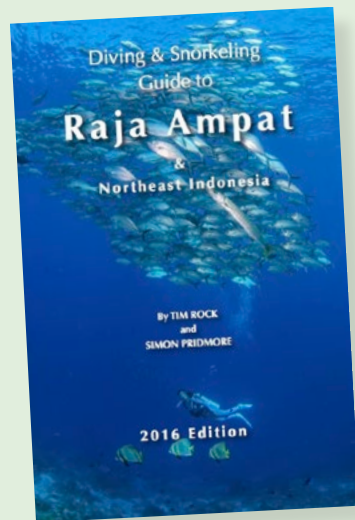
No-name brands

The process of change continues. Imitating supermarket chains, Internet retailers have started selling “No Name” unbranded equipment manufactured in the same factories that the name brands use and, obviously, this enables them to cut out all the middlemen and sell at bargain basement prices. This not only has an impact on the established industry leaders, it affects companies in the new scuba nations as

well. Two years ago, a friend who owns a dive equipment manufacturing company in Central Europe showed me a tough, powerful, lightweight torch that a Chinese factory had made for him. It swiftly be-

came the best-selling item in his catalogue, but success was short-lived. Within 18 months, almost every manufacturer had similar torches for sale and unbranded models had appeared on the market as well.

New Dive Guide to Raja Ampat



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experience! Abundantly rich in marine life, these seas are proving to be a gift for divers that keeps on giving. Raja Ampat is the superstar destination, but other areas such as Cenderawasih Bay, Triton Bay and Southwest Halmahera are shining brightly too and acquiring similarly mythical status.

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Chinese market

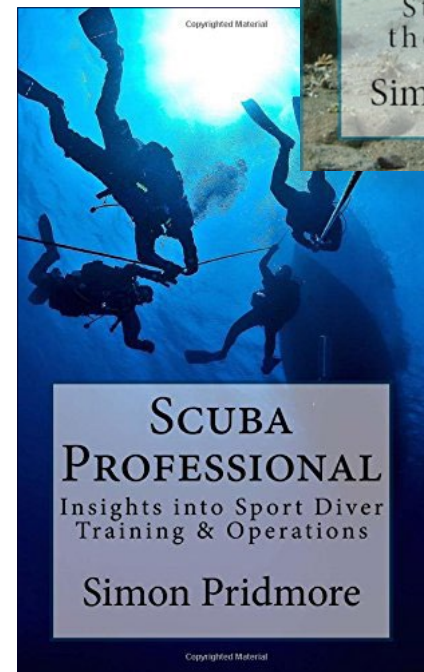
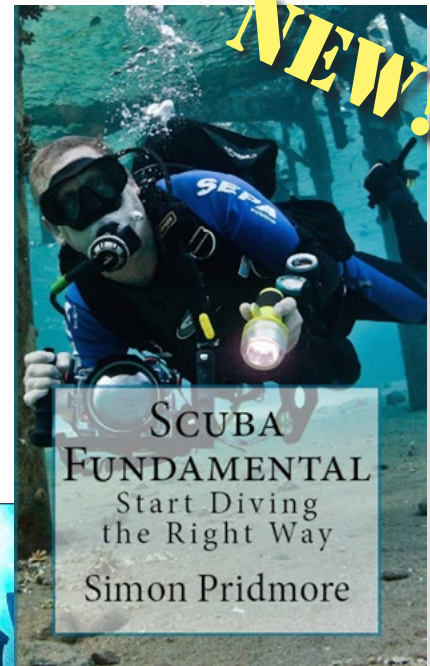
Today, with more and more Chinese people becoming scuba divers, the sequence of events that took place in Central Europe is being repeated there. This time, the process is much faster as the domestic production infrastructure already exists in the form of the factories, which have been manufacturing equipment for a decade or more for other companies to sell. Now that there is a local Chinese market to which to sell, the manufacturers are creating new brands of their own. In 2015, there were three major scuba diving trade shows in China and, at the time of writing this book, a search for Chinese diving equipment products on the Alibaba trading website produces over 28,000 results, and the website lists over 1,000 Chinese diving equipment suppliers.

Corporate take-over

Perhaps in response to the new business climate, many of the big names in dive equipment manufacturing are being taken over by large corporations, creating mutually supportive stables of companies, almost as if they are huddling together for warmth, as a cold wind of change blows in from the east. One major manufacturer has reacted to the new

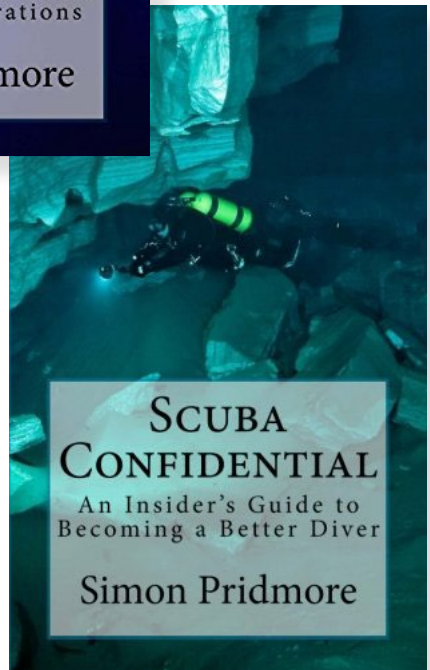
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opinion

ADEX Show in Singapore



CATHERINE GS LIM

environment by purchasing an international training agency. This is not the first time that a training agency and a manufacturer have worked together. It is, however, the first instance of a single company both recruiting divers and selling them equipment. It will not be the last.

Training trends

As well as the China expos in Hong Kong, Shanghai and Beijing, there are now annual dive shows in Singapore, Tokyo, Okinawa, Taipei, Manila, Jakarta, Kuala Lumpur and Bangkok. The first dive show in India is planned for Mumbai in 2018.

All these events have one thing in common: They are swarming with crowds of young new divers. The ADEX show in Singapore in 2015 reported an attendance of 41,000 people, the majority of them young urban professionals. Compare this with the annual Scuba Show in Long Beach, California, one of the major US consumer shows, which boasts of averaging 10,000 visitors a year. Singapore has a population

of 5.4 million, whereas there are 17 million people who live within an hour's drive of Long Beach. In case you think I have picked a particularly low scoring US show to which to compare the Singapore figures, Beneath the Sea in New Jersey attracts 14,000 visitors a year, and in Europe, the London International Dive Show reports an attendance of just under 12,000.

Just as the established dive equipment producers benefitted from the flattening of the scuba world, so did the major training agencies. In a clear indication of how the fulcrum of scuba diving is moving eastwards, for one US-based agency, in 2014, Korea was its largest source of certifications. Ten years earlier,

the number one market was Central Europe (Poland, Slovakia and the Czech Republic). Before the year 2000, the top market had always

been the United States. For all the training agencies, the flattening of the scuba world meant that their business continued to grow, despite the decline in the traditional heartland of the United States and Western Europe.

However, like the manufacturers, developing technologies, expanding markets and customers with different backgrounds and expectations have presented the training agencies with challenges as well as opportunities. In the second part of this article, I will discuss this in more detail. ■

Simon Pridmore is the author of the international bestsellers, Scuba Confidential: An Insider's Guide to Becoming a Better Diver, Scuba Professional: Insights into Sport Diver Training and Operations and Scuba Fundamental: Start Diving the Right Way. He is also the co-author of the Diving and Snorkeling Guide to Bali and Raja Ampat and the Diving and Snorkeling Guide to Northeast Indonesia. This article is adapted from a chapter in Scuba Professional. For more information, please visit: SimonPridmore.com.

Divers browse equipment on display at the Malaysia International Dive Expo (MIDE) in Kuala Lumpur



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