



Text by Michael Menduno
Photos courtesy of Marissa Eckert

Thirty-four-year-old Marissa Eckert is a passionate full-time cave and technical diving instructor who co-owns Hidden Worlds Diving in Fort White, Florida, USA, with her partner, James Draker. When she is not teaching, Eckert enjoys traveling all over the world, exploring new places, hiking through the jungle and doing challenging new dives that help her grow and learn as a diver. *X-Ray Mag* caught up with Eckert this fall at the beginning of Cave Camp in Tulum, Mexico, where she was one of the featured instructors.

X-Ray Mag: What inspired you to become a diver?

ME: Honestly, I grew up in Pennsylvania and I have always been obsessed with traveling and seeing the world. So, when I went to the Maldives on vacation, I decided that I wanted to try scuba diving. I set up a "Discover Scuba" where we just walked off the beach and dived in the lagoon. I got so excited, the minute we got out of the water, I decided right then and there that I wanted to become a scuba instructor.

From that moment, I knew I wanted to share that experience with as many people as I could. Ha! When I saw underwater caves for the first time, I thought, "Oh, my God! This is even more amazing!" I want to share this with everybody too.

X-Ray Mag: I heard that you sold all your belongings and moved to Florida a month later.

For the Love of Diving

— Interview with Cave & Technical Diving Instructor Marissa Eckert





Marissa Eckert in trim

Marissa Eckert in Riveria Maya with her Liberty sidemount rebreather

Marissa Eckert



ME: Ha! I did. I didn't know anyone. But I quit my job and moved there and that was it. That was ten years ago.

X-Ray Mag: You heard the call of the wild.

ME: Honestly, I never even knew places like the springs existed in the United States. I thought places like that with such clear, blue water were far, far away, in exotic places. So, when I first saw the Florida springs, I thought, I want to be closer to this.

I worked too hard, for too long at office jobs that I hated just to make money so that I could travel and have an adventure. I wanted to live a life of adventure. So, when I discovered diving, I thought, how can I do this? It was not an easy or quick path, but I feel super fortunate and lucky that I now get to do what I do every day.

X-Ray Mag: So, you became a cave instructor and opened a dive shop with your partner. What is it about caves that fascinates you so much compared to open water diving?

ME: You know, there are so many different aspects that fascinate me. There are

definitely the technical challenges, particularly here in Florida where we have lots of flow. It is the challenge of mastering the technique to navigate through the cave. And then in Mexico, it is so delicate, so you find yourself trying to move through the cave in a way that has the least impact.

It is just amazing to me to be able to



Marissa Eckert's rig: a Divesoft Liberty (sidemount) rebreather

swim through the Earth and see places that are kind of like the final frontier. Not many of us are going to get to travel to outer space in our lifetimes, but the caves are almost like traveling in outer space and they are reachable. To get to go somewhere that so few people have ever been is really, really amazing. Especially with the caves in Mexico, as decorated as they are. I just love the formations, the rimstone and the stalactites and the stalagmites. And just to think that, at one time, they were dry, and people lived in there and hunted in there and went in search of water—it is just amazing to me.

X-Ray Mag: I noticed that in most of your cave pictures, you are diving a rebreather. What motivated you to move to a rebreather?

ME: I steered away from rebreathers for a long time because there were many fatalities, and people said they were scary and they were dangerous. But then, my dives started getting longer and longer

and I was doing more decompression. I wanted to go deeper, and I realized that rebreathers would be great tools for that. So I decided to see what all the hype was about. Were they really dangerous?

I took my first rebreather class on a manual rebreather. There are obviously pros and cons to manual versus electronic rebreathers. But once I started using it, I realized how simple it actually was. In fact, we divers are the weakest link on the rebreather. It seemed clear to me it could actually be a great tool and used safely. You just have to be diligent with everything and do your checklist.

That was six years ago. I was really fortunate because I dived my rebreather almost every day, so I got a lot of experience in a relatively short time. I still feel lucky that I get to dive one every day.

X-Ray Mag: I see that you and your partner teach a number of units. What rebreather did you originally learn on?

ME: My first rebreather was a KISS Sidekick.

X-Ray Mag: That's interesting. You started on a sidemount rebreather versus a backmount. Were you doing a lot of sidemount open circuit before you changed over?

ME: Well, I started my cave training in backmount doubles and I definitely think there is value in learning to dive doubles. They are a great tool for so many things—of course, so is sidemount. I always feel like the more tools you have in the toolbox, the better off you can be at picking the right tool for the job.

So, at the time when I got interested in rebreathers, I was mostly diving sidemount, and I just felt really comfortable in that configuration. So, that is why I went with a sidemount rebreather. I quickly

realized that sidemount rebreathers are awesome, but again, only tools.

However, they are not always as easy for super deep caves where you also need to carry a ton of bailout gas. So, when I started diving Eagle's Nest and going to 300ft (91m) and doing 10- to 11-hour dives, and needed to carry half a dozen bottles of emergency bailout gas, I found it easier to put the rebreather on my back and my bailout on my side.

X-Ray Mag: Interesting.

ME: That's why I own and teach a few different units, because honestly, there is no perfect rebreather out there. If there was, that would be the one that we would all dive and that would be the end of it. And all the other companies would go out of business. You have to look at the rebreathers that are out there and ask yourself, "Okay, what type of diving am I doing, and what things about a particular rebreather are most important to me?"



Marissa Eckert just finishing a cave dive in Riveria Maya (left) and beginning a dive (below)

Marissa Eckert

X-Ray Mag: What else is next for you two? What are you looking forward to?

ME: We have a group trip that we are leading to Truk in Micronesia with Aron Arngrimsson's Dirty Dozen. James and I are featured instructors on that, so that is really exciting. We are looking forward to that. We also have a rebreather group coming to Mexico in December. We are leading a group trip, so that will be really cool. We are also going to Cocos Island in March with Becky Kagan Schott. I am really excited to see schools of hammerhead sharks and all that amazing stuff. And then, we are going to Bikini Atoll in 2021, so we are definitely excited about that as well. ■

to go farther into the cave and seeing more of the things off the beaten trail, the rebreather just adds an extra element to the classes. DPVs add that extra element too. I do not get to teach those classes as much, so when I do get an opportunity to, it is a lot of fun.

X-Ray Mag: Do you have a most memorable cave dive or two?

ME: For me, there are definitely a few. Probably going to Diepolder 2 and Diepolder 3. In Diepolder 3, you basically go down the entrance, and it opens up into a huge room the size of a football field. Diepolder 2 has a really, really small crack that a lot of people have gotten stuck in and turned around and never made it in the cave. There is actually quite a substantial amount of cave at Diepolder 2, and it even goes to 350ft (107m) deep. For a time, that was my deepest cave dive, and I went all the way to the end of the line. Only one or two women have been that far in Diepolder, so that was really cool.

There are so many caves in Mexico that are memorable to me just because they are all so gorgeous there, and definitely Orda Cave in Russia is another one.

X-Ray Mag: I saw mention of Orda on your website. You have a trip coming up there.

ME: James and I went to scout it out and just dived it for ourselves for fun. We loved it so much, and had so many people interested, that we decided we would run a trip there.

X-Ray Mag: It is super cold there as well, right? Not like Mexico.

ME: Yeah, it is 40°F (4°C)—a huge difference from Florida or Mexican caves. I am originally from

Pennsylvania, and I started diving in the Maldives, but I came back after vacation and immediately just was hooked and wanted to keep diving. So, I dived in Pennsylvania wherever I could, which meant diving in quarries and lakes and things. So, I had a little bit of cold-water experience, but that was 11 years ago when I first started diving.

Of course, we dive drysuits in Florida, but it is 70°F (21°C), so you can get away with a little leak-through here or there. So, that was definitely a learning curve. James and I both had some dry glove issues. We did have heated vests, heated gloves and really awesome Otter drysuits that kept us really dry. Honestly, it was cold, but it was surprisingly manageable with the right equipment.



I am certified on quite a few different units, but my main backmount unit now is the SubGravity X-CCR, and I would say my main sidemount unit is the Divesoft Liberty. Both of these units are rock solid and have great electronics. The Liberty has so many amazing features. I do not own or teach on the [Liberty] backmount unit, but I am contemplating getting a conversion kit, because it really is such a great, solid machine.

X-Ray Mag: How would you say diving has changed your life?

ME: Well, I would definitely say that diving is my life. I feel excited and happy to get up every day and go to work. I love what I do. I actually do not really feel that it is work. I feel really lucky because there are so many people out there that just hate what they do and they are just not happy. I feel fortunate that I get to do something that I love so much.

My father died when I was 10 years old, and he was only 45, which is crazy young. So, I have always had the mentality: Live each day like it is your last—live each day to the fullest. And if you

are not happy, figure it out. I believe if you put your mind to it, you can achieve your dreams.

Of course, even though we are lucky and get to do something we love, James and I work very hard. Sometimes, it can be scary being a full-time instructor. There are a lot of unknowns. I never know if next month is going to be slow, or if next month all the caves are going to flood and reverse due to river rising. It is scary but it is also really rewarding too.

X-Ray Mag: You are teaching technical and cave diving, both open circuit and closed circuit rebreathers (CCR). Do you have a favorite course that you teach?

ME: Probably either CCR cave or diver propulsion vehicles (DPVs). Honestly, teaching an introductory class, like introduction to cave diving, is very rewarding and amazing. It is so much fun to introduce divers to caves for the first time, see the excitement in their eyes, and hear the excitement in their voices when they surface from their first cave dives. That never gets old. But from the perspective of planning long, complex dives, getting