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Once considered an extreme activity reserved only for a fringe set of explorers and adventurers, technical diving has grown in popularity since the '90s and has become mainstream. However, technical diving is not for everyone. Aside from an advanced skill set, it also requires a certain mindset. How do you know if you have got it? Simon Pridmore offers insights into what makes a good technical diver.

After almost three hours underwater, the divers surface silently behind the boat and fin slowly to the ladder where the crew is waiting to relieve them of the torpedo-like propulsion vehicles they are towing. They unclip unused cylinders clipped to the side of their harnesses and hand them up carefully.

Back on deck, they close the mouthpieces integral to their full-face masks and check the twin monitoring devices strapped to their forearms before shucking off their shell-clad

electronic life-support devices and laying them down gently.

The atmosphere is calm. There is no whooping, hollering or backslapping, even though they have just accomplished the sort of dive

that would have been impossible a couple of decades ago. Tomorrow, they will carry out a similar dive. Then, on Monday, they will be back sitting behind desks wearing a different kind of dark suit.

These are not professionals, military divers or explorers; they are just two guys out of the city on a long weekend break, indulging themselves in their hobby. Their chosen sport is technical diving: extreme diving per-

formed with a high degree of preparation and precision.

A little history

The term "technical diving" was adopted in 1991 by *aquaCORPS*



Turning Tek

Is It For You?

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A technical approach to a dive involves objective analysis of the risks involved and calculation of the type and amount of gas required and the right equipment to use. It also involves the consideration of what potentially life-threatening events might occur on the dive and an assessment of the skills and backup equipment that the diver will need to be armed with in order to survive.

magazine founder Michael Menduno to describe the activities of a number of disparate groups of adventurers and explorers who were using military and commercial diving technology, ideas, equipment and decompression tables to make dives well beyond the bounds of normal sport scuba, as safely as possible.

A community coalesced, procedures were tried and tested, specialised training agencies were established, information was shared, and news spread quickly. This was the most exciting development in diving in decades.

Some people in the sport's main-

stream were appalled at its popularity. They forecast disaster. They feared that members from the extreme outer reaches of the sport, who were leading the charge, would act irresponsibly, leading to a spate of diver deaths, destroying scuba's carefully crafted image as a "sport for all" and attracting government intervention and regulation—something scuba diving had always managed to avoid, at least in the USA, mainly thanks to its excellent safety record.

Publicity campaigns were launched, encouraging divers to reject this "dangerous" new trend

A Pioneer Story by Simon Pridmore

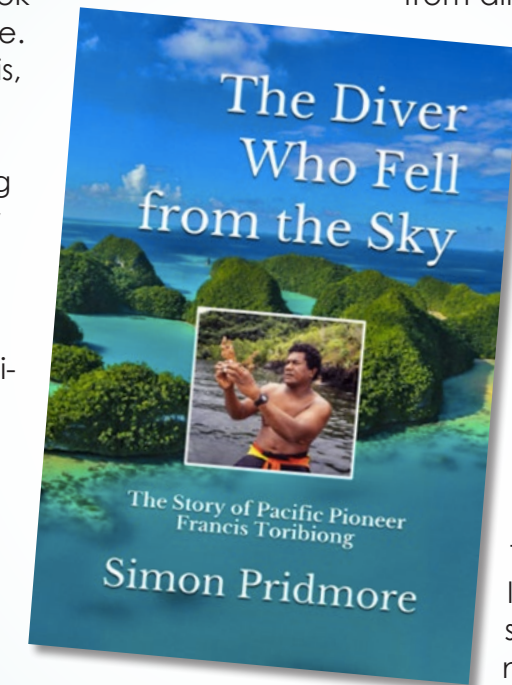
When his country needed him most, Palauan Francis Toribiong came along and helped the Pacific island nation find its place in the world and become an independent, forward-looking 20th century state. And he achieved this, improbably, via the sport of scuba diving. This is the inspiring tale of an absolutely unique life, written by Simon Pridmore and illustrated with images of the beautiful islands of Palau, above and below the water.

Toribiong was born poor, had no academic leanings and no talent for diplomacy. Yet he was driven to succeed by a combination of duty, faith, a deep-seated determination to do the right thing and an absolute refusal ever to compromise his values. And, as well as all that, he was Palau's first ever parachutist—known by islanders as "the Palauan who fell from the sky." In giving

him this title, people were speaking both literally and figuratively.

Toribiong was so completely different from all of his contemporaries in terms of his demeanor, his ambitions and his vision, that it was as if he had come from outer space. Palau had never seen anybody quite like him and there was no historical precedent for what he did. He had no operations manual to consult and no examples to follow. He wrote his own life.

Toribiong was the first Palauan ever to seek and seize the international narrative. No Palauan, in any context or field, had previously thought to go out into the world and say: "This is Palau—what we have is wonderful. Come and see!" This is his astonishing story.



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and seeking to set deep planned-decompression mixed-gas diving apart from the mainstream. Sport divers should stick to air, no decompression-stop diving, no overhead-environment diving and a maximum depth of 39m (130ft), they said.

Anyone who engaged in activities beyond these limits was not a sport diver. They were outliers, to be ignored and excluded by the sport-diving world. This had been the attitude towards cave divers since the 1960s—not that the cave divers cared.

But the lure of hitherto unimagined opportunities was too strong; divers

continued to queue up to acquire the necessary equipment and training, and the feared deluge of diver deaths did not transpire. Before long, the sport-diving hierarchy gave in to popular demand, and today, plenty of technical diving initiatives, such as nitrox, delayed surface marker buoys and harness-and-wing BCDs, have become part of mainstream diving, and most sport-diver training agencies offer technical diving courses.

A particular mindset

So, what is technical diving? Many think of technical divers as crazed

Contrary to common misconception, very few people come into technical diving drawn by the quest for a thrill or adrenaline rush. After all, rather than court danger, the whole ethos of the sport is to counter risk through the application of planning, training and technology.

individuals dressed head-to-toe in black, foolhardily festooned in the contents of a small dive shop, launching themselves into the depths without a thought for their own safety. This image is reinforced by the common practice of defining technical diving in terms of the extreme nature of the dive or the equipment used—for instance, a dive below 40m (130ft) or deep penetration inside an overhead environment such as a cave or shipwreck.

The true definition of technical diving owes far more to the mindset of the diver than the particulars of the dive. A technical approach to a dive involves objective analysis of the risks involved and calculation of the type and amount of gas required and the right equipment to use. It also involves the consideration of what potentially life-threatening events might occur on the dive and an assessment of the skills and backup equipment

that the diver will need to be armed with in order to survive.

Motivation

Contrary to common misconception, very few people come into technical diving drawn by the quest for a thrill or adrenaline rush. After all, rather than court danger, the whole ethos of the sport is to counter risk through the application of planning, training and technology. Most technical divers are thoughtful people who are



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attentive to detail, sometimes to an obsessive degree.

Most early technical divers were explorers driven to go further to set records, visit virgin shipwrecks, solve maritime mysteries, penetrate flooded cave systems, learn more about the sea, and record and research marine life. Some of those that have followed them share similar ambitions, but there are also those who are just motivated by curiosity, a desire to test themselves or a fascination with the science and technology involved.

Technical diving is not for everyone. Some of the best divers in the world may use nitrox and may have adapted some

of their equipment after seeing what technical divers use and how they streamline themselves, but they have no need to go deep or into flooded caves or wrecks, or encumber themselves with extra equipment. Being a technical diver does not mean you are necessarily a better diver than others.

There are also some people around who really should never go anywhere near technical diving because they do not have the right mindset. How can you tell in advance if this is you? Would you make a good technical diver?

Here are a few essential prerequisites and some red flags to be aware of.

Experience

It does not matter how many certification cards you hold or how many dives you have done. The nature of the diving you have done matters more. You should have been exposed to some relatively testing marine environments and water conditions, and managed to stay comfortable and calm, before you embark on technical diver training.

Self-reliance

In the technical diving world, you will perform as an independent part of a mutually supportive team, always responsible for your own dive but always ready to assist a teammate if neces-



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sary. Technical diving is not for the self-ish or self-obsessed.

Competence

You need to have mastered standard scuba diving skills before progressing to this level. This means, for example, being able to control your buoyancy instinctively and effortlessly, and being completely comfortable not wearing your mask underwater. You should also have a firm understanding of decompression theory.

Self-discipline

You must be able to stick to a dive plan. While standard no-decompression single-cylinder diving offers guidelines to follow, technical diving has strict rules based on physiological and physical limits. Your life and the lives of your teammates depend on you sticking to a plan and being able to resist any narcosis-fuelled urges to abandon it and make up a new plan on the fly.

Meticulousness

If you are the type of diver who regu-

larly jumps in without securing your BCD to the cylinder or turning your air on, then technical diving is not for you. Ask the people you dive with. Do they privately think that you are an accident waiting to happen? If they do, listen to them.

Fitness

You should be mentally and physically fit. Technical divers carry more gear, swim farther and stay underwater longer.

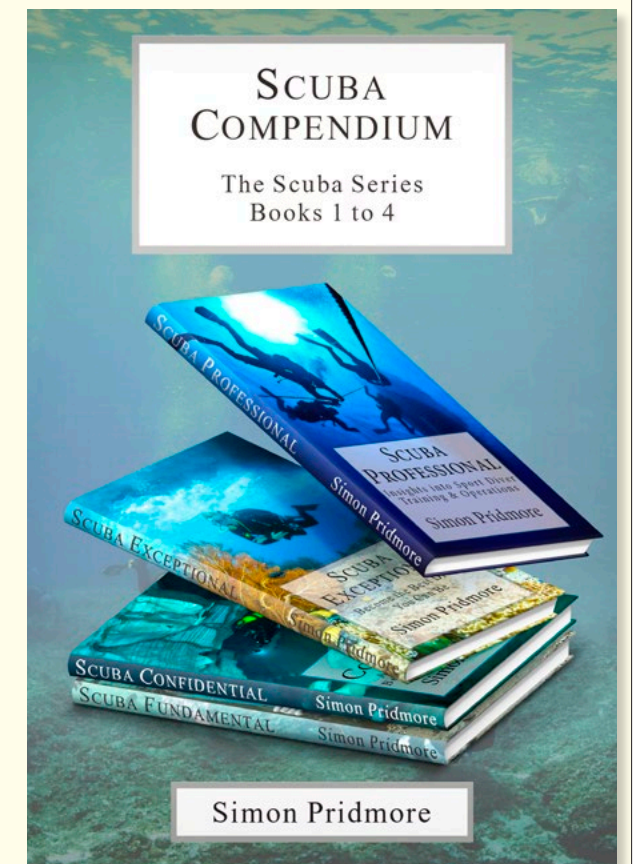
NEW 4 in 1!

Simon Pridmore has released a new single-volume e-book, bringing together four books in his bestselling *Scuba* series:

- *Scuba Fundamental – Start Diving the Right Way*
- *Scuba Confidential – An Insider's Guide to Becoming a Better Diver*
- *Scuba Exceptional – Become the Best Diver You Can Be, and*
- *Scuba Professional – Insights into Sport Diver Training & Operations*

As Simon puts it, this is “a remastering and repackaging of the original albums rather than a greatest hits.” Nothing is missing. *Scuba Compendium* gives e-book readers the advantage of being able to access all the knowledge contained in the four books in one place, making this a unique and easily searchable work of reference for divers at every level.

Simon has always promoted the idea of safer diving through the acquisition of knowledge, which is why he has chosen to release this highly accessible version. If you have read his work before, you will know that he provides divers with extremely useful advice and information, much



Simon Pridmore

of it unavailable elsewhere; his points often illustrated by real life experiences and cautionary tales. He examines familiar issues from new angles, looks at the wider picture and borrows techniques and procedures from other areas of human activity.

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simonpridmore.com

Acceptance of risk

Technical diving involves a higher level of risk. Are you prepared to accept this? Is your family also prepared?

Financial health

Finally, technical diving requires a substantial investment in training, equipment and travel. There are no shortcuts. Cheap training at this level is likely to be inadequate training. If you cannot afford to do it the right way, do not do it at all.

Open or closed?

If you (and your friends) see no red flags, then your next decision is whether to stay with open-circuit or buy a rebreather. Now is the time to make this choice—if you can—before you start technical diver training. If you are expecting eventually to be diving below 50m (165ft), and therefore using mixes heavy on helium, then closed-circuit really is the only way to go, as the quantities of helium required for deep open-circuit diving make it extremely expensive. And



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helium will only become pricier as the years go by. It is a finite resource, and scuba divers are not at the head of the line to purchase it. We even come behind balloon sellers!

Yes, rebreathers are expensive to buy, but once you start using helium, you will earn back your investment very quickly, because your costs will be much, much lower than they would be if you did the same dives with open-circuit equipment. These days, it is rare to see any open-circuit

divers on deep-diving trips.

If you do technical diver training on open-circuit equipment, and then subsequently decide to buy a rebreather, your certification levels are not transferrable. You must begin all over again, with a shallow depth limit and no planned decompression, and work your way back up, logging a number of dives at each level along the way. This will take some time, as I mention below.

Once you dive with a rebreather for the first time, you

will see how much sense this makes. Closed-circuit diving is a new world, and the best way to approach it is with the mindset that you are learning to dive all over again, keeping your mind entirely open to new ways of thinking and doing things.

Concluding thoughts

Technical diving is challenging and rewarding, and it can take you to places on our planet seen first-hand by very few. Whichever path you choose, you have a lot

to learn before you get there, so prepare for a lengthy journey. There are several levels of training to pass through, and the courses only scratch the surface in terms of experience, just introducing you to the concepts and allowing you a few practice dives under supervision.

You then need to do plenty of diving to assimilate the new techniques and build your skills before moving on to the next level. So, take it slowly, enjoy the journey and do not let any-

one rush you. There is no finishing line. You will never be as good as you can be. ■

Simon Pridmore is the author of the international bestsellers Scuba Fundamental: Start Diving the Right Way, Scuba Confidential: An Insider's Guide to Becoming a Better Diver, Scuba Exceptional: Become the Best Diver You Can Be, and Scuba Professional: Insights into Sport Diver Training & Operations, which are now available in a compendium.

He is also the co-author of the Diving & Snorkeling Guide to Bali and the Diving & Snorkeling Guide to Raja Ampat & Northeast Indonesia. His recent published books include The Diver Who Fell From The Sky, Dive into Taiwan, Scuba Physiological: Think You Know All About Scuba Medicine? Think Again! and the Dining with Divers series of cookbooks. For more information, please visit: SimonPridmore.com.