

A Memorial to Two Friends

Peter Little of Pisces Dive Club London (BSAC 645) went missing in February 2007 off the Brothers Islands in the Red Sea. Peter was a good friend of mine and an excellent diver with well over 30 years of diving under his belt.

Bob Lenham of South London Underwater Club (SAA26) failed to surface in June 2009 following a dive in the English Channel. Bob also was an excellent diver with more than 30 years of diving experience.

I travelled the world diving with these guys and this is not what I expected. So this article is dedicated to Peter and Bob with the hope that it might help others avoid their fate.

Some Thoughts on Avoiding being Left on a Blue Water Holiday Reef and Dealing with being Washed Away

Introduction

Warm blue water holiday diving seems to be what an awful lot of people want to do. And nothing could be further from your mind than running into trouble in idyllic surroundings. Blue water diving looks and feels so easy and, in general, it is. It's not my intention to scare you, because there are many, many safe diving operations offering superb safe diving holidays, but, don't be lulled into a false sense of security; there are some potential dangers to consider.

In some parts of the world the tides/currents are unpredictable. This can make reef diving potentially dangerous! To this add communication problems, and the chance of being washed away or left behind becomes a reality.

Avoiding being left behind

On Club outings to the British coast the people running the show know you as an individual and will be looking out for you and you will do the same for them and others. By the same token keep in

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mind that the Blue Water Dive Master does not know you from Adam. Furthermore, on holiday boats there may be single travellers, pairs of divers and groups of different nationalities. Dive Boats are often noisy and confusing places. In these warm dive locations many Dive Masters (DM) do not speak English as a first language, which can leave them uncertain when it comes to dealing with Brits. So, for your own benefit, it's your job to reduce this communication barrier to a minimum. Furthermore, some may not have good management/organisational skills, which can lead to mismanagement of diving parties who may be in and out of the water at different times. All this can lead to confusion when the DM counts heads for the return journey to the Resort. If no one complains of a missing buddy or a pair of divers etc the DM may set off for the Resort without one or more people.

That's why you should take the time and trouble to make yourself known and to become a real person to the Dive Master, not just a name/number on the dive list. Use the school-yard trick of taking an "Apple for the Teacher", sounds like being a school creep - it's not! Make your own mind on how you do it - but do it. Also check up on how the DM logs divers in and out of the water - If there is no formal fool proof system, you should consider giving that boat and DM a miss!

I can assure you that this is not the result of a fertile imagination - being left behind or washed away by current or tide is a real possibility and has happened on many occasions: Even Hollywood has made a film about it called "Open Water". That should tell you something!

Being Washed Away

Now you know how to avoid being left behind. How should you deal with the actual situation of being washed away or left behind? One answer - Be prepared. Take precautions before going on holiday.

Many currents in the tropics are thermally driven, which makes them less predictable lunar driven tides. However, lunar effects can add to their strength. A sound knowledge of local conditions

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is essential: use the best people on hand. Take more interest in the dive preparations; listen very carefully to the dive briefing. Ask questions; know where the current/tide may take you and equip yourself well. Your best defence is to trust everyone (be nice) and then double check for yourself. Most Dive Masters (DMs) want you to have a good time without getting hurt or lost. However, not all everyone has all the skills and knowledge to keep you safe. An even bigger problem is that they often are unaware that they don't have all the necessary skills or knowledge but think that they do. Over confidence may be born out of inexperience and/or complacency due to Blue Water Syndrome - "What can happen in Paradise?" This can apply for all nationalities of DM.

Be at the DM's briefings, pay attention to the comments about fast unpredictable currents/tides. Know where these currents/tides may tip you up after the dive. Sorry to repeat myself, but ask questions - be sure you get an answer and don't be fobbed off. Don't be coy about dropping out of a dive if you feel too concerned about the outcome.

Ensure you always carry an array of signal devices and double check that your buoyancy aids don't leak. Don't let Blue warm water make you complacent! Furthermore, if use your own equipment that you've lovingly carried along all those interminable air port halls, be sure to take time to adjust all of it for warm water diving. A BCD, for example, used in UK waters with dry suit will not be best suited for holiday diving and it is even less suitable if you are washed away and have to spend a lot of time in the water waiting to be rescued.

Equip Yourself with the Basics for Dealing with being Left Behind or Washed Away

The ability to signal rescuers and others may help save your life. The sea is a very big place and all that shows of you is your head and shoulders. You need to enlarge your profile to help others see you. Signalling devices:

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- Delayed Surface Marker buoys, reels and lines. Don't forget that a DSMB can be used as a buoyancy aid. Take two - one red and the other yellow.
- A folding flag.
- A whistle of the blowing kind, tied on so as not lose it - those driven by the second stage of your DV require a supply of air to make them work, which you may not have.
- Water marking dye.
- Flashing lights (Strobe) for night use.
- A small mirror for signalling using the Sun - a simple and cheap way is to use an old CD.
- A powerful torch plus a backup torch.

Consider other signalling devices:

- Reflection strips on your dive suits help at night.
- Dive-proof Personal Location Beacon (PLB) (Sometimes wrongly called EPIRB, which are used by small crafts). Some PLBs have inbuilt GPS receivers in addition to 121.5MHz homing transmitters.

For more information: Check-out the Marine and Coastguard Agency (MCA) website - www.mcga.gov.uk.

A very sharp diving knife is essential; the operative word is "sharp" not big. You might also find a pair of diving (surgical) scissors very useful. Ensure that you can reach your knife with both hand and carry a backup knife/scissors.

Personally, I hate taking a snorkel on a Scuba dive, but in blue warm water with current/tides it's not a bad idea. They can be useful for breathing when waves are breaking over your face.

In warm locations the wearing of gloves is often frowned on - they are worried about you touching and damaging coral. If that's the case put a pair in your emergency bag on your belt. They will be invaluable if you are force to climb/swim over sharp

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rocks - even coral. No one will mind too much if it's to save your life.

Always take a piece of rope - ie a Jon-line. This will help people to stay together in the water.

The effects of the sun are markedly dampened by the cooling effect of the water. Take a hat with you in your emergency diving bag; it's really important to keep the sun off your head when you're on the surface. Always wear a Tee-Shirt over your wet suit; it will help with sun protection when you remove your wet suit. It can also be used to keep the sun off the back of your neck whilst you are in the water.

Drinking water - Strap a couple of full one litre bottles of water to your BCD/dive cylinder.

Assume nothing: Always double check before the dive that your BCD and DSMB hold their pressure without deflating. Take extra time and trouble to check-out all equipment that you hire.

Further Advice for your Consideration

Keep in mind that wetsuits can be used to create shade if you make land. Furthermore, they can be used to catch water in, if it rains.

If you can, take a rolled up very large strong black bin-liner on the dive. They can be hard to find, but worth it if you do. Use it to make floating thermal protection: if the need arises unroll the bag and get inside, pull it up to the surface so that your feet are down and your head is up and out of the water. Inflate one of your DSMBs and tie it to the top of the bag to keep it afloat. The trapped water in the bag will act as a partial insulator, slowing conduction of your body heat to the surrounding water. It may also help keep off unwanted fish attention and ward-off sharp coral. Keep your knife to hand because you may need to cut your way out.

It is very important for groups to try to stay together. It is well known that in a wreck/capsizing incident non-swimmers survive because they stay with the wreckage and don't strike-out alone

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for the shore. Many times strong swimmers perish because they try to swim for shore. Even with powerful fins you may not be able to reach that island in the distance. Distances and current are difficult to judge and are often underestimated by people - stay with the group, you are stronger as a unit.

Group DSMBs together with rope/line and use as a raft: take turns to rest on it. Ditch weights but not your weight-belt. The belts may become useful later.

In warm locations, dive operators use aluminium dive cylinders. These cylinders are usually buoyant when empty and may be used as part of a raft - if they are not buoyant dump them.

This is not an exhaustive list of recommendations, but it gives a start to your planning process.

Good luck, stay safe and above all else - Enjoy your diving.

Bob Cole

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