

Undersea journey

Scuba diving in Alaska carries more adventure, risks

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They say it's the closest most people will ever get to outer space, but that's not why I had to try it. Getting scuba certified seemed like a rite of passage -- a leap -- differentiating me from the rest of the recreational crowd.

I envisioned a scuba certification as a pass into an elite club. And to solidify my standing, a certification completed in the waters of Alaska would surely earn me a bit more respect in the diving world.

Indeed, submerging in the erratic Alaska waters offers a host of unique circumstances. A diver must take extra precautions. There are more variables and less chances of survival if something goes wrong. Steven Bender, a recent graduate of Eagle River High School, is an avid diver who is well-versed in the difficulties of scuba diving in Alaska.

"Diving in Alaska is more unique than diving in other places," Bender says. "It's a lot more strenuous. You're in a cold environment, and you have to put on so much more gear."

Twenty-eight to 40 pounds in fact, as opposed to the eight to 10 pounds required for warm-water diving.

SCARED AT FIRST

I can recall feelings of apprehension when my dive instructor first showed me the dry suit I would be tested in. I didn't want to wear it, but in water that averages 43 degrees, it was necessary.

The dry suit was stiff and ungainly with industrial-sized double zippers. The rubber neck and wrist cuffs were daunting in their funnel-like shape. I envisioned myself getting stuck, my neck squeezed and my hands turning blue, unable to undo the layers of zippers. Fortunately, Bender assured me that as far as he knew, no such incident had ever occurred.

"One of my favorite things about a dry suit is when you flip upside down and all the air rushes to your feet. You start to shoot up to the surface and have to flip yourself over. I find that very amusing," Bender says.

WATERTIGHT DRY SUITS

Dry suits, necessary when spending any extended period of time in such cold conditions, are watertight. Made of nylon or vulcanized rubber, the dry suit also acts as an extra flotation device. It is essentially a second kind of buoyancy compensator, and its inflation must be adjusted according to the depth. This must be taken into consideration when diving in Alaska.

All the intricacies of Alaska diving were thoroughly covered in my certification class at Last Frontier

Diving -- known as the place to go for dive classes in Anchorage. Classes are offered year-round, but I opted for the July session. After five weekly classroom meetings and instructional dives in the Alaska Club East's pool, our class took a trip to Whittier for our open-water test dive. Some members of the class chose to take their test dive in warmer waters during their next vacation.

FINDING WORK AS A DIVER

In Alaska or not, diving can open up a wide berth of new opportunities. For instance, Bender has turned his extensive diving abilities into a profitable business.

Along with deckhanding, he cleans and replaces zincs on the hulls of boats in the Whittier harbor. This requires diving under the vessel to tend to these soft metal plates. (Zincs are used to stop the corrosive effects of electrolysis but have to be replaced periodically.) Bender prefers this summer job, in which he gets paid up to \$180 for every hour in the water.

"To me, that's a lot more fun than just sightseeing underwater because you're using your hands and you pay more attention," Bender says.

Aside from an opportunity for lucrative diving in the harbor, Prince William Sound offers an abundance of interesting dive sites throughout its coves. Seward's Resurrection Bay is an Alaska diving hot spot as well.

DIVING FOR SEA LIFE

"Dive on pinnacles. Diving on those can pretty much guarantee you ling cod, octopus, that sort of thing," Bender says.

In truth, diving in Alaska doesn't necessarily offer the sweeping, splendid, vibrant coral reefs that other locales might supply. But Alaska waters can test a diver in ways other areas won't. Diving here is more daring but also more constructive. When divers go underwater they go with purpose: rescue missions, maintenance operations or to test their already well-honed skills.

"When you mention to people that you dive in Alaska, people look at you like you're crazy," Bender says. "It's kind of an extreme sport."

Molly Mew is a rising senior at Eagle River High School.

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