

The next STEP

Newly certified PADI Open Water Diver Matt Griffiths (Sport Diver art director) was keen to continue his underwater adventures, so he set about notching up his PADI Advanced Open Water Diver certification

Photographs courtesy of NICK AND CAROLINE ROBERTSON-BROWN (FROGFISH PHOTOGRAPHY)

During your PADI Advanced Open Water course, or sometimes abbreviated AOW, you must complete five dives, dubbed 'Adventures In Diving', where you learn the theory and practice of specific underwater skills. Two of these are mandatory: Underwater Navigation and a Deep Dive beyond 18m. The other three Adventure Dives can be chosen from a wide variety available, including underwater photography, night diving and learning to dive using a drysuit. It is also worth noting that each Adventure Dive completed may be counted as the first dive of the related PADI Specialty Diver course. Similarly, dive one of a PADI Specialty Diver course may be credited towards your Advanced Open Water Diver certification.

The first skill of my PADI Advanced Open Water course was the Underwater Navigation dive, which

was fun, rewarding and a good refresher since I hadn't dived for a few weeks. Having gone through the textbook review with faithful 'dive parents' Nick and Caroline the previous evening, I was keen to get in the water and see how handy I was with a compass. I wouldn't have necessarily picked Underwater Navigation had I been given the choice; however, I was pleasantly surprised afterwards how much I enjoyed it and what I had learned.

Pre-dive we ran through an above water compass drill where I counted out steps (which would be the equivalent to underwater fin kicks) and I then navigated a square on land. Once in the water, we descended to 10m, found a suitable starting point and I headed off with Nick behind me. As I made my final 90 degree right turn, I was keeping an eye out for the starting point and, sure enough, it emerged out of the murky water. Success!





As we surfaced I remember thinking to myself this will inevitably come in handy at some point in the future, and I now carry a standard compass in addition to my digital computer version on every dive.

The next day I completed two more dives towards my Advanced Open Water Diver certification; peak performance buoyancy and the mandatory deep dive. I was looking forward to completing my buoyancy dive; obtaining neutral buoyancy can be a difficult skill to master, you have to be weighted correctly depending on your size as well as other factors. Are you using a steel or aluminium tank? What type of water you are diving in, fresh or salt? There is a lot to consider before you even get in the water and begin to check weight. Once in the shallows I did a pre-dive weight check - this is achieved by holding a normal breath at the surface and, if your weighting is correct, you should float at eye level. I found myself floating perfectly first time so I knew I was off to a good start.

Once down at the 6m platform, we ran through



"On the dive I found that trying to hold onto a reel with a surface marker buoy (SMB) attached to it as well as trying to adjust your buoyancy in your BCD and drysuit was easier said than done"

some drills (hovering in the vertical and horizontal positions) and adjusting weight if I needed it. After a few minutes of playing around, instructor Andy noticed I was still a little bottom-heavy, so he handed me a 2kg weight to hold at arm's length in front of me. Once I held the weight, I levelled out horizontally even though I started descending due to the extra weight. With a slight drysuit adjustment, my only movement was through inhaling

and exhaling. I was neutrally buoyant - this was already a massive improvement over previous dives I had done and I was really chuffed. This made me realise I had been correctly weighted from the start, but I needed to look at re-positioning my weight more towards the front and spreading it more evenly. Putting my new found buoyancy into practice, we visited a few of the dive site attractions and then surfaced.





Next up was the deep dive; once you are AOW certified, you can dive to depths of 30m. Deep diving exposes you to more potential hazards than a shallow, above 18m dive due to additional nitrogen levels building up in your body, a stronger likelihood of feeling narcosis and, of course, you use your air faster the deeper you go. We discussed these factors over a coffee pre-dive and also ran through other danger factors, including reduced visibility and a silt-covered bottom to the quarry.

Eccelstone Delph has a maximum depth of 20m, so not really a 'deep' dive, but never-the-less I knew that it would be the deepest dive I had done since starting my underwater adventures. As we approached the bottom it was clear that other divers had been here before us and kicked up the bottom, because the visibility had been reduced to around a metre. I noticed that I was feeling a bit more mask pressure at this depth, but that aside it felt just like any other dive. Nick had brought along a colour chart for me to see the difference depth made to the colours. As I looked at it I could see red was becoming more of a purple colour, and yellow seemed to be washed out. As we got out of the water I was already looking forward to working towards my PADI Deep Diver Specialty (turn to page 72) and experiencing what 25-40m was like and how it differed from the 20m dive I had just completed.

A few weeks later I was closing in on completing my PADI Advanced Open Water Diver course with only two Adventure Dives left to complete, I had chosen to do a wreck dive and a drift dive. Wreck diving has always intrigued me; exploring wrecks from previous generations must be an incredible experience, like you are

"Wreck diving has always intrigued me; exploring wrecks from previous generations must be an incredible experience, like you are diving back into history"





FROGFISH PHOTOGRAPHY

Frogfish Photography are a Manchester-based underwater photography company run by award-winning husband-and-wife team Nick and Caroline Robertson-Brown. They offer underwater photography tuition and equipment as well as providing images and articles for the press, giving presentations to clubs and organisations as well as offering trips to the UK and overseas to underwater photographers who want to dive with like-minded people.

While they focus on underwater photography, they are also both PADI Master Instructors and offer a VIP training service for those that want courses on a 1:1 basis. The price for these courses, however, makes this an exclusive experience, with three to four members of staff present for a single course session. Open Water courses will be tailored to suit the client's location and free time.

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diving back into history. This certainly appeals to me, hence my decision to work towards my Wreck Diver Specialty with this being the first dive counting towards that goal. As to be expected, there are obvious hazards when penetrating any wreck, but that was not the objective of this dive. My learning involved spotting potential hazards on the exterior while doing a swim around the plane and generally having a greater awareness of where I was kicking my fins and being careful not to knock anything with my tank. I also made sure my equipment was streamlined with nothing hanging that could get caught up and cause me to have a problem. It was amazing to see this big shape appearing out of the gloom and I couldn't help but think this is going to be an amazing Specialty to work on.

Last up was my drift dive and I was going to complete this as part of the Drift Diver Specialty. The course is aimed at educating divers in 'how to go with the flow' and let ocean currents do the work for you, as you glide effortlessly and safely along while relaxing and enjoying the scenery. I had planned to head up to Anglesey for a long weekend

for a few dives in the Menai Straits, but with the last-minute deluge of lousy weather hitting Britain, we decided to call it off and change the plan. With me being a relatively new diver, the main concern was, of course safety, so it was agreed the best idea was to teach me the skills (such as using a reel and SMB) in confined water conditions and, once the weather improved, I would get myself in the sea and put my training to the test. Skills and drills completed in the inland site, I finally managed to complete a true drift dive a few weeks later when I was in the middle of my Boat Diver Specialty off Wales.

With five dives complete, I was a certified PADI Advanced Open Water Diver! If you only have your Open Water Diver certification, I would recommend getting this course under your belt, it certainly was an adventure and opens up many more opportunities! ■

NB: Matt's continued PADI education has been supported by Frogfish Photography, PADI EMEA, Mares, DiveLife, Suunto and Fourth Element.