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APPLYING FOR MEMBERSHIP

> I'd been a skin diver for years, I loved it. While scuba did seem a pretty cool option, the effort to get that licence just didn't seem worth it. What was I missing? Not much, I'm already diving anyway. Just being under a little longer wouldn't make much difference, right? I was so wrong.

Life under the sea is a bit like when you're a small lad and you know a little about the local pub. You get a glimpse in the door now and then, if you're lucky, you might have ventured into this unknown world with your Dad a few times. You don't know what's so mesmerising and captivating about this place, but it feels as though an entire new world and community exists inside – a kind of secret club that only adults understand. You can't wait to grow up and get to taste the delights of that foreign world.

Likewise with diving. Sure you've dived under the water a few times, you may have been snorkelling, but you've never been invited in to stay. I've been an avid snorkeler for a long time, hell, I even ventured to Fiji to get some better action. But as I found out, snorkelling is a world away from scuba.

I pursue several different kinds of hobbies and activities, but always felt anything involving the ocean always outweighed the rest. Just being in the water feels adventurous. So when I discovered scuba diving I thought it was sensational. Here I was, in the water indefinitely, part of the sea and the whole underwater club. I was wrong. I was still just looking through the window from the outside. Sure, I'd pop my head through the door when I could, and even dive down to spear a fish when I had the chance, but I definitely wasn't part of the gang.

I continued to enjoy scuba diving, but grew more and more frustrated with its limitations. I didn't want to just take a glance under that shelf; I wanted to explore everything it had to offer! I wanted to see what was around that next

bend; I wanted to see how big that fish really is under the ledge.

I'd thought about getting my scuba ticket for a long time, but like a pilot's licence and several other exciting activities; I was limited because of a long history of asthma. Sure there were ways around it; when in Fiji I had an open invitation, but after being told of a young woman's death a few weeks before due to asthma complications, I decided to re-think my strategy.

A year or so passed. I'd pushed it to the back of my mind, until my brother decided to get his open water licence for his birthday. I was going to be his dive buddy.

His medical took all of 20 minutes, but it wasn't so smooth for me. Three different specialists, a hundred different tests later had me thinking this was the air force all over again. Sure I was disappointed, but it seemed it might be best if I stuck to scuba diving. But my stubborn brother wouldn't take no for an answer. So I took even more tests, and eventually the doctors were resigned to the fact that asthma truly was in my history, and no matter what chemical or test they threw at me, I wasn't getting it back. Australia is known for having the most stringent dive medical in the world. And although it was frustrating at the time, I'm thankful I can now dive with confidence. I passed the test.

It was time for my initiation. First they laid a book on me about the size of a phone directory! How hard could this be? When you finally master the maths of diving and get to the pool, you have to deal with all this equipment. I didn't realise how much





Banjo Sharks

Although commonly known as a Banjo Shark it is actually part of the skate family. Its proper name is the Southern fiddler ray (*Trygonorrhina fasciata*) and is commonly found in Victoria's southern waters, but is known to venture far west. Also known as green skate, parrit and guitar fish.

Dive Site: Cottage By The Sea Located in Queenscliff, Victoria.

Although shallow, it is often beautiful and consists of a series of small reefs running parallel to the shore. It houses many undercuts and small caves where species like leather jackets, sea dragons, cuttlefish, magpie morwong, old wives, various rays, abalone and crayfish can be found, just to name a few.

gear was involved and hoped this was going to be worth it – especially when you take your first shore dive and carry all that gear on your back just for a 30 minute dive. Hell, I could skindive for a few hours in just shorts and a mask!

But this wasn't snorkelling. I thought I knew Queenscliff reef back to front as I'd speared it many times, but I didn't recognise it anymore. Suddenly that weight on my back was gone and the hours of medical tests I'd endured were a distant memory. Yep, I was finally in through the doors.

Fortunately, unlike the pub, the first time you experience life under the sea, it isn't a disappointment. You instantly become part of that secret club, now the fish seem happy to swim by your side. No longer do they dart off in a flash, together you become comrades in a new frontier.

Now I can enjoy being underwater any time I wish. I soon found there was a whole community devoted to the cause above water also. It's always great to see everyone at the dive shop early on Saturday mornings, wide-eyed and pumped for a new dive site; all claiming that today was their day to catch that elusive giant cray.



We've had adventures both good and bad since. But such is southern Victorian diving that the next dive was in zero-vis water that churned like a tornado. We had to use our newly acquired navigational skills to get back to shore. So bad was the water that a banjo shark crashed straight into me, it too being tossed around by the ocean. I finished up with a sick stomach and a pulled thigh muscle. Sure, my brother almost had to carry me back to the car, but hey, it was all part of the adventure.

I'll always be a skindiver, and during summer when half my family and most of my buddies are in with me, it's my favourite thing. But the day I took my first breath under water changed my life forever.

> **LINK:** www.divevictoria.com.au ■