

# GOING ALL THE WAY

The purpose of my trip was to stay with 'Big Blue Diving' - become a diving professional and make it my career. I arrived on the island and took a taxi to Big Blue Diving Resort. I was very happy with what I saw; the resort spans back directly from the beach and is surrounded by palm trees - everything exactly as I'd imagined a tropical island resort should be.

I'd booked a fan-cooled room as I wanted to save as much money as possible for diving. There are airconditioned rooms available as well, but my room was clean, near the beach and very close to all the restaurants and night life so it suited me down to the ground. After dumping my bags I checked out the beachfront bar and restaurant - which, in the months ahead, would be the location of my 'instructor challenge' the final hurdle before joining the ranks of BSAC Instructor. I met James Thornton Allan and the rest of the team responsible for my courses.

My first step to becoming a diving professional was to qualify as a Divemaster which apart from mastering many theoretical aspects of diving, also involved boat logistics, leading divers around dive sites and assisting instructors. The training was amazing - plus it was whale shark season, so I soon came face to face with one of these remarkable creatures. After several months, something for me, at any rate, still



> IT WAS AUGUST 2009. SUMMER WAS OVER AND I WAS READY TO EMBARK ON A NEW ADVENTURE. TIME TO PUT THE PLUMBING CAREER BACK HOME ON HOLD FOR A WHILE, OR SO I THOUGHT. MY FAMILY CAME TO SEE ME OFF AT THE AIRPORT. MY DESTINATION WAS KOH TAO, A SMALL ISLAND NORTH OF KOH SAMUI IN THE GULF OF THAILAND WITH IMMACULATE DIVING CONDITIONS, WHITE SANDY BEACHES AND ICE COLD BEER!



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seemed to be missing. I was limited to a depth of 30m, and soon began to realise that I wanted to go deeper, longer - on an adventure!

The technical side of Big Blue Diving, 'Big Blue Tech', was the next natural step for me. There was a job available as an assistant to James, the manager. Diving with him developed my skills to the level I was looking for. We'd go on expedition trips diving unexplored sites not only in the gulf of Thailand, but around Thailand itself. During the next few months I

became a service technician, compressor operator, gas blender as well as many in-water qualifications, allowing me to go deeper for longer with mixed gases. I'd found my adventure!

Being responsible for the repairs and service of equipment at Big Blue Tech, I met another service technician Kieron McClintock who helped me a lot with useful tips and advice. He also introduced me to BSAC Thailand and all it offered with its different approach to diver training compared to some of the



*Opposite: Although they can be present at any time, the best time to encounter whale sharks is between December and April.*

*Top: Ash (left) with his first Open Water Student.*

*Bottom: Dive Centre Manager Jim and the shop girls Kate and Jess; The Big Blue Dive Centre - right on the beach.*



Top to bottom: Ash, with compressor instructor Craig Weger; The beachfront Big Blue restaurant; Equipment room and directions 'Big Blue' style; A school of fusiliers at Chumphon Pinnacles - Koh Tao's premium dive site.



feedback from Les my confidence began to build.

Day two: Armed with my new-found confidence and what Les had taught me, we went straight into another presentation which I'd prepared the night before. The topic was decompression sickness and it went pretty well, a lot better than the previous day it has to be said! With more positive feedback from Les, things were starting to fall nicely into place and I was feeling much more comfortable. Some practical training was scheduled for the afternoon, so after lunch we headed off to the pool for a confined water session. Les briefed us on what was expected and assigned each of us with an in-water skill to demonstrate – to a standard as if we were actually teaching 'Ocean Diver' students. My skill was regulator recovery. I planned how to break the skill down into as many parts as possible, each one building on its predecessor in complexity, so as to make it easier to command.

Once the skill was completed, as always, we received feedback. What Les told me made complete sense and looking at it from a beginner diver's perspective, would make them feel so much more comfortable in the water. Simple things, such as initially just placing your face in the water whilst breathing from the regulator, followed by basic regulator clearing techniques firstly in the shallows, then gradually getting deeper up to a depth of three metres.

Day three and another presentation, I guess practice makes perfect. Equipment this time. Already being a service technician and much more confident than

other agencies. As BSAC is a British based dive organization, their courses concentrate on making divers more self-sufficient in order to cope with the difficult diving conditions that can be experienced around the UK. The training includes more rescue skills in beginner courses with decompression diving being introduced at the second level. Courses are slightly longer than those under some other training agencies, but the knowledge gained at all levels is well worth obtaining.

I was now ready to become an instructor and found the perfect agency. I enrolled on the BSAC 5 day instructor course and met the National Instructor for BSAC Thailand, Les Skelton; with his several decades of diving experience, I immediately felt comfortable being under his wing and looked forward learning all the ropes to this instructor lark!

Day one was spent in the classroom where Les meticulously steered me through the instructor manual from cover to cover. We then went through some academic presentations. Being a quiet lad, presentations weren't my strong point and I felt this might hinder me. Being nervous, the first presentation didn't go to plan at all, but after some constructive



what was in these exams. No nonsense, just pure diving related topics. I wished I'd started with BSAC from the beginning after looking at these.

Day five, or judgment day as I called it. Everything we'd been taught, all the feedback and comments, were put to the test. One theory and one practical presentation, all to BSAC and Les's exacting standards. Did I pass or did I need to some more training?

on day one, I was sure I'd nail this one. Presentation over and not only was I happy, but Les was too. He could see that the 'penny had dropped' and I was almost ready. In the afternoon we completed more practical sessions but with a more complex skill to demonstrate – search patterns with a reel. Not so bad, I thought.

Day four we had theory again on the morning. We looked at the exams for the various BSAC courses. Having been brought through my diving with a different agency I was shocked by what

Time passed, minutes seemed like hours, and Les just kept quiet. I guess the best way to get information out of an instructor trainer is beer, so we headed straight to the bar and for the verdict. The word "congratulations" came out of his mouth. Whoop whoop! Now where's my first Ocean Diver student?

Top: Pink skunk anemonefish in a Magnificent sea anemone.  
Bottom: A pair of blue-ringed angelfish at Green Rock - another of Koh Tao's popular dive sites.