

WHAT A GAS

With the instructor course complete, I was ready to teach my first Sports Mixed Diver and Explorer Diver courses. Confirmed students that had emailed Big Blue Tech arrived on 7 April; they were checked into Big Blue's more luxurious hotel in Sairee so they weren't distracted from their studies by noisy crowds in nearby resorts. The students were already qualified to 45 metres and with accelerated decompression under a different training agency, so my first task was to assess how good these guys were. Day One did just that. A confined session at 10 metres included finning techniques, calculating SAC rates, stress skills and deploying DSMB's. A few weaknesses were identified, but most were resolved by the second dive of the day.

I prefer to do academic training in the mornings followed by an afternoon of diving. This way nobody has the urge to fall asleep after intense dives and this course was no different, so having our own boat available at Big Blue Tech makes this very achievable. The morning of Day Two began with an open session of calculating MOD, best mix, equivalent narcotic depths and of course, how to work out the cost of each of these mixes. It was also time to progress on to decompression dives with nitrox to



> THE GREATEST ACHIEVEMENT OF MY DIVING CAREER SO FAR IS BEING CERTIFIED AS A BSAC EXPLORER MIXED GAS INSTRUCTOR. I'D NEVER EXPECTED TO BE QUALIFIED TO TAKE STUDENTS TO 60 METRES UNDERWATER AND SUPERVISE THEIR SKILLS DEVELOPMENT. BUT WHEN THE OPPORTUNITY AROSE TO COMPLETE SUCH A COURSE WITH BSAC INSTRUCTOR TRAINER JAMES AT BIG BLUE TECH I MADE CERTAIN I DIDN'T MISS OUT.



: TEXT: ASHLEY DUNN IMAGES: JAMES THORNTON ALLAN AND PAUL LEES

accelerate our deco. As we'd be doing deco dives using various gas mixes, we used PC software to calculate our profiles and deco schedules.

The boat departed at 12.30 for Chumpon Pinnacles. From the surface the top of the formations were visible 20 metres below. With our dive planned and everyone kitted up, we were ready to rock 'n roll. Our depth: 45 metres. Bottom time: 30 minutes. We headed away from the pinnacle to see what most divers would miss; we checked out the little clusters of rock

formations and headed straight through schools of fusiliers. It was great to be there alone without other divers in sight. The deco schedule went to plan and we finished the dive bang on the run time.

Back at the dive shop we debriefed and planned for the next day. The students' homework was to calculate the best trimix blend for the next dive, with an equivalent narcotic depth of 30 metres. They calculated the best mix as 25/17 and our in-house blender began the process.



Left: After a successful dive the students begin their long ascent.

Top right: The students stage their deco bottles.

Above left: Ash observes while his student analyzes his mix.

Above right: All the tanks prepped and labelled ready for the dive.



Top: Down deep on the wreck.
Centre: Ash and students discussing
dive plans.
Bottom: Giant grouper at Chumphon
Pinnacles (Paul Lees).



jumped in for a spectacular dive, 50 metres for 25 minutes with 35 minutes of deco.

The marine life was amazing: huge schools of batfish, groupers and wrasse. The surface interval was spent enjoying the sunshine while keeping hydrated. The final dive was conducted on the *Unicorn* later that afternoon and after another very enjoyable dive I congratulated my students on becoming BSAC Sports Mixed Gas Divers.

One course down and one to go! The Explorer Mixed Gas Diver Course extends the students depth limit to 60 metres using mixes up to 18/35. As the bulk of the theory is done in the Sports Mixed Gas Diver Course, this one mainly concentrates on the divers' practical skills with a lot less time spent in the classroom. For me, this is the best – less talking and more diving. As they'd just come directly from the Sports Mixed Gas Course we could skip the confined warm-up session and go straight into the deep dives. So unfortunately for the students the beer was on hold again for the night, as they had to plan and prepare for the following day's diving. Both dives would be full deco dives and the students would be assessed on their overall diving skills, planning and execution and time management.

We met up early to go over the dive plans and ensure the correct gas mixes were ready and analyzed. Once we were happy everything was correct we completed a short theory lesson before heading off. Dive One was to 60 metres and with the students working as a buddy

Whilst this was going on we returned for more academics, covering topics on physiology and physics and the effect of helium whilst diving. By late morning our trimix blends were finished, so we set about the task of analyzing. Analyzing trimix blends is slightly more complex than that of nitrox, as you have to measure the helium and oxygen content in the blend. A special analyzer is required to do this, which I demonstrated to the students, then had them analyze their own tanks.

We planned our dives again, using nitrox mixes to decompress on, and headed out to do our first helium dive. The previous day we did dives based on air, so it was good for the students to see the physiological difference when we reduced the amount of nitrogen in a mix.

Day Four began with the 'Sports Mixed Gas Diver' exam which is intense, but by this stage of a diving career the knowledge should all be in place. It took the guys about two hours to complete and a well deserved pat on the back resulted as they all made it with well over the 80% pass mark. We planned more dives for a depth of 50 metres before heading to the *Hishi-Daiya Maru* wreck, also known as the *Unicorn*. It's a 60 metre long cargo vessel 12 kilometres off the island. We kitted up, did our checks and



Top to bottom: The students doing final
checks of their dive plans in preparation for
their final dive;
Divers on the wreck;
A student analyzes his mix;
Sairee Beach with Mae Haad in the
distance (Paul Lees).

team we set off on the dive. The students had perfect planning. As we descended to the bottom we were greeted by several sharks, but our sudden appearance startled them and they disappeared into the distance before we could accurately identify them.

One dive down and one to go! After a lengthy surface interval we were ready for the last dive of the course. We dropped back down to the wreck but this dive was planned to a shallower 55 metres, so we could explore the upper sections of the wreck. Again the marine life was spectacular and we found a rather friendly remora which attached itself to one of the guy's tanks and accompanied him all the way back to the surface. Back on board the Big Blue boat, the guys were very happy; they'd planned and executed their dives perfectly and were now qualified BSAC Explorer Mixed Gas Divers.

This was also a great personal achievement – my first Sports and Explorer Mixed Gas Divers and I can honestly say it felt terrific. I can highly recommend this to any instructors out there looking for their next challenge. It's definitely more work than teaching beginner level courses, but the end results are definitely worth it!