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As the end of 2023 approached, I made a decision to approach technical diving from a different perspective. Instead of merely hoping to engage in occasional tech dives, I decided to commit to dedicated trips where there was no option but to dive technically.

I eventually settled on Master Liveboard's trips to the Solomons and Bikini Atoll – in that order, because while the Solomons trip is a dedicated week for the World War Two wrecks, you can dive rec or tech, as the wrecks are not that deep. Or, put another way, my current level of certification was enough for the Solomons.

Whereas in Bikini, nearly all the wrecks are in 50m-55m and recreational diving with a single back-mounted cylinder is not an option... Once confirmed, it was down to me to get ready, and this boiled down to two basic things:

- The first anniversary of my initial Advanced Nitrox and Decompression Procedures (ANDP) TDI training at the Gili Islands in Indonesia was just three months away. And, in the previous nine months, I had not done a single technical dive at the standard I had been trained to.
- That certification was for air on sidemount to 45m and using a single 11-litre stage tank of 50% oxygen for decompression, and for Bikini I needed to be qualified to 55m, which meant taking the TDI Extended Range (ER) course.

But before I could do that I needed to get 'match fit' at my current level of certification.

The ER course is also sidemount on air, but with one 11-litre stage tank of 50% oxygen for the deep decompression from 18m, and another of 100% oxygen for the final decompression at 6m.

I had heard stories of how tough the course could be, so I was quite nervous about it all – but having signed up for Bikini, I had no choice but to suck it up and get it done.

Enter Antoine...

I initially considered going back to Blue Marlin on Gili Trawangan and Chris Gamlin, the British TDI instructor who had done such a good job of my ANDP training.

But the Gilis are a bit too much of a party island for my liking and getting the boat over and back again from Bali with all your diving gear is a pain.

So, I started looking for alternatives and found Bali Dive Trek in Amed, who offer a range of both SSI and TDI technical courses, plus a variety of CCR courses and cave diver training. It seemed like a no-brainer as there is on-site accommodation, a restaurant and transport to the various dive sites is provided.

A couple of emails back and forth were followed by a WhatsApp call with Antoine Martin, the owner and chief instructor at Bali Dive Trek, while we discussed my situation and what I wanted to do. Finally, we settled on six days of two dives per day at my ANDP level, followed by the five-day ER course.

Dates were finalized for the end of February and then it was all on me to get as physically fit as possible by the time it would all start... no pressure! ▶

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GETTING TO *match fit*

Don Silcock puts himself through the training ringer to prepare himself for diving in the Solomon Islands and Bikini Atoll

Photographs by Don Silcock

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Enter Sergio...

The big day finally arrived, and I arranged transport from our house in Canggu, in the south of Bali, to Amed up in the northeast corner of the island near to Tulamben.

I first dived at Amed over 20 years ago and back then it was a series of small villages sandwiched into the limited space between the beach and the 1,200-metre-high Gurung Seraya mountain that dominates the area. These days the place is booming with dive shops, yoga studios, freediving schools, cafes, restaurants, and hotels - but it still manages to retain a certain 'new-age' charm...

When I arrived at Bali Dive Trek I was met by Antoine, who introduced me to Sergio Leandro Goitea - a very experienced diver from Argentina who was going through tech instructor training and would be my dive buddy for the next 11 days.

That turned out to be an almost-perfect partnering as we both dive, think and act virtually the same!

Match fitness!

It was quite a shock to see how much I had forgotten in the year since my ANDP training when Sergio and I started to assemble our equipment for the initial check-out dive.

Things that I thought were locked into muscle memory had just evaporated. Which, of course, could be simply me... but I don't think so, as I am normally pretty good at locking things in. Basically, I think I had just left it too long because within a couple of days I had it all down pat again and felt good that I had been honest with myself about not being match fit and did something about it - rather than trying to wing it!

By the end of the first six days, the 12 dives had got me right back in the groove with regards to sidemount diving at the ANDP level. Plus, the dives we had done to 45m had been planned well and carried out as per those plans. I felt good, match fit and ready for Extended Range - then Antoine took over!

Extended Range with Antoine

The whole point about ER is to prepare you physically, mentally, and psychologically to dive safely down to 55m - the effective safe limit of diving on air because of the elevated partial pressures of oxygen and nitrogen at that depth. There is a lot of theory to understand, which meant considerable time in the classroom with Antoine and considerable time underwater with Antoine as he puts you through all the drills to test your skills and ability to stay calm under pressure. And believe me, Antoine knows how to pile on the pressure to really make sure you are ready.

That testing can be formidable, and I must admit there were moments when I nearly surrendered - but I



didn't, and managed to get through it all. By the time we did the final two days of two 55m dives per day, I was feeling increasingly confident and being at that depth for 20-25 minutes before we started the ascent, and all the decompression, really was quite something!

Is it safe?

I was quite worried about putting myself through all this, after all I am not a young man and I still have a lot of stuff to get done! So, I organized an extensive set of medical checks, including a full diving medical and a visit to my cardiologist for a stress test. They all said the same thing - you are in great shape and good to go.

Suitably motivated I went ahead and booked my flights to the Solomons and Bikini Atoll, so I was locked in and had to get through the whole thing - and get through it I did.

One of the most intriguing aspects of the overall experience were the checks conducted by Antoine following the initial Extended Range check dive. ▶

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The intrepid techies

“ There is a lot to see down at 55m – we had mola mola twice and Antoine told me he sees thresher sharks regularly... ”

Picture this... we are sat in the shade at Kubu, near Tulamben, having just dived to 46m and Antoine said “OK, let’s see how many bubbles you have” and brought out his O’Dive kit, consisting of an ultrasound sensor, roughly the size of a hockey puck, which connects to a smartphone app via Wi-Fi.

The sensor is shaped to be held in a specific position on your left and then right clavicle and once good conductivity is confirmed in each location, you follow a set of breathing instructions on the app while remaining perfectly still and not speaking. The sensor uses Doppler technology to measure the number of microbubbles present in your bloodstream and that data is then transmitted to servers in France along with the dive profile from your computer.

A second set of readings are required 30 minutes later which are also transmitted to France so the O’Dive software can analyze the overall effectiveness of your specific decompression against their large reference database. The results are then sent back to the app, plus you also get an email notification.

I was quite shocked with my results as they indicated that all the decompression we did had only cleared 52% of the microbubbles in my system!

My initial reaction was that I had better check the terms and conditions for my trips and flights... But Antoine was very confident we could get to 100% clear by altering the

Gradient Factor in both my computers and adding additional decompression on 100% oxygen at 6m.

The next day we dived to 55m twice and on the first dive we touched 57m in the excitement of being visited by two mola mola! But we started the ascent on time and followed the stops we had planned and then stayed for an extra 15 minutes at 6m. After we surfaced we took the measurements again and soon after my results were available and sure enough I was 100% clear – Bikini, here I come!

Lessons learned

#1: There really is no place for ‘winging it’ in technical diving – you must assess your current capability honestly and share it openly with the team.

#2: It’s quite something to be trained by someone with the level of experience that Antoine Martin has. It makes you feel like you are in safe hands as you learn to do things that are way beyond anything you have done before.

#3: The almost real-time feedback on the number of microbubbles in your system is exceptional and takes away all assumptions/guesswork about what might be happening.

#4: There is a lot to see at 55m – we had mola mola twice and Antoine told me he sees thresher sharks regularly...

What’s next?

This is the third in a series of articles that will document my progress in the world of tech diving and the next up is how I will apply my new skills as I photograph the World War Two wrecks in the Solomon Islands. I can’t wait! ■

Don Silcock

Don is Scuba Diver’s Senior Travel Editor and is based from Bali in Indonesia. His website has extensive location guides, articles and images on some of the best diving locations in the Indo-Pacific region and ‘big animal’ experiences globally.
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