



COMING OF THE CASUAL DIVER

DO WE ALL TAKE OUR DIVING TOO SERIOUSLY, and do we expect others to do the same? Is the sport's entry level too high?

Nine years ago, I was chatting to Red Sea diving instructor Rob Hart at the **DIVER** Awards, held in those days at the Savoy, listening to him enthuse about his great idea that was going to sweep the world.

The Mini-Breather, as it was known before being shortened to Mini-B, was an all-in-one, lightweight scuba kit in a backpack. It made quite a splash, and **DIVER** readers had voted it Innovation of the Year.

Mini-B has sold more than 11,000 units around the world, but the product didn't roll out quite as Rob had foreseen. He had expected well-to-do yachties to buy the devices for their boat-lockers, in case they ever needed to pop below the waterline to unfoul a prop, or do the odd fun-dive. What he hadn't expected was that sailors would make up the bulk of his market.

Now, nine years on, we're sitting in a restaurant on the other side of the Strand. Back from his globe-trotting and based in Canvey Island, Essex, Rob is determined to bring the Mini-B to a wider audience. It's clear that his failure to transform the UK market doesn't rankle so much as puzzle him.

Rob sees the Mini-B as a natural extension of snorkelling, a chance for water-lovers to experience the sunlit shallows as far down as 9m, but without all the faff of full scuba. He's after anyone who doesn't aspire to be a Diver, but does want more than a plastic breathing tube can offer.

Non-divers can't just jump in with a Mini-B and hope for the best, of course. I recall being on a nurse-shark release dive in Florida some years back, hanging out alone with a brace of excited wild sharks under the boat while waiting to be joined by the liberated prisoners and the non-diving media.

For what seemed like hours, I watched the limbs of members of the press pumping and flailing amusingly at the surface, as they tried over-hastily to master their borrowed Mini-Bs. They never did see the sharks from below.

Now it's different – the emphasis is on proper training. Rob's idea is to market his Micro-Diving courses to those whose idea of underwater heaven stops well short of five wreck dives a day off a liveaboard. Read the manual, watch the DVD, book into a participating dive centre to cover your pool skills and three shallow open-water dives, and you're qualified.

This costs £250, and a Mini-B Classic (one of eight models) costs much the same as a 3G iPad and weighs about 4.6kg, so can be taken on a plane as a carry-on bag (depressurised pony-sized tank in the hold, or hired abroad).

And all this got me thinking. We assume that everyone either wants to dive, dive, dive or is a land-lubber, but how many of you qualified divers have partners, family-members or friends who aren't interested in the full works, but would love to share in the fun on holiday?

Would enabling them to do this allow you to take more diving holidays, albeit with a bit more shore-work involved? Could Micro-Diving provide a shot in the arm for the trade?

We can take our own diving as seriously as we like, but a "dive-lite" option might just be in all our interests.

I WATCHED THE LIMBS OF MEMBERS OF THE PRESS PUMPING AND FLAILING

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