ARE YOU TECHNICALLY MINDED?

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How do you know if you are the sort of person who would make a good technical diver? How do you choose a course and an instructor, what equipment do you need and what other things should you consider?

The Image

The popular (and erroneous) image of a technical diver is an adrenaline crazed individual, dressed head to toe in black, foolhardily festooned with the contents of a small dive shop, launching himself into the depths without a thought for his own safety.

This image is reinforced by the common practice of defining technical diving in terms of the nature of the dive or the equipment used: a dive deeper than 40m (130ft), using gases other than air, inside an overhead environment such as a cave or shipwreck, using multiple cylinders or rebreathers.

However, when a diver armed with standard scuba gear plummets below 40m or swims down the corridor of a ship that does not make his dive "technical." When a diver uses a rebreather, he does not immediately become a technical diver.

Definition

The true definition of technical diving owes far more to the attitude and state of mind of the diver than the particulars of the dive. A technical approach to a dive involves analysis of the risks involved, the amount of gas required and the best equipment and gases to use. It also involves consideration of potentially life-threatening events that might occur on the dive and an assessment of the skills and back up equipment that the diver may need to deploy to survive any such event.

The discipline required of technical divers means that in most cases they are thoughtful people who are attentive to detail, sometimes to an obsessive degree.

Motivation

Most of the early proponents were explorers driven to go further: set records, visit virgin shipwrecks, solve maritime mysteries, penetrate flooded cave systems, learn more about the sea and record and research marine life.

Some of those that have followed them share similar ambitions like a number of the presenters at this conference this weekend but there are also many who are simply motivated by knowledge and skill development, a desire to improve their level of performance, to master their sport, to become a better diver.

It is interesting that, contrary to common misconception, very few people are brought into technical diving by the quest for a thrill or adrenaline rush. After all, rather than court danger, the whole ethos of the sport is to counter risk by the application of planning, training and technology.

Is It For Me. Master?

As technical diving becomes more popular and accessible many more people will become attracted to an area of the sport that has hitherto been the province of relatively few. Would you make a good technical diver? It is not always wise to generalize but there would seem to be seven essential pre-requisites.

Experience

It is not the card you hold but the nature of the diving you've done that counts. Also, the quality of your diving is more important than the number of dives. Ideally, you need to have experienced a variety of environments and water conditions.

Have you experienced the sort of real-life typical minor stressful situations that happen to all divers and handled them satisfactorily? It helps if your diving has taken you a little beyond your comfort zone once or twice. Strong currents, a light failure on a night dive, getting lost on a new site, helping another diver who is low on air

Self-Reliance

If most of your dives have been done under the supervision of an instructor or divemaster, then making the transition to the technical world, where divers perform as independent parts of a mutually supporting team can be difficult. Technical diver teams are independent mutually supporting cogs of a machine, each capable of running their own dive alone if needs be but able to support any other member of the team in an emergency. The ideal is to create a situation where the individuals are strong but the team is stronger than the sum of its parts.

Competence

You need have mastered basic scuba diving skills before progressing to this level. You should be able to control your buoyancy instinctively and maintain a stationary position in the water column while you execute drills. Air-sharing exercises, emergency self-rescue procedures and lending assistance to a team member in difficulty are important elements in every course. A conceptual grasp of dive tables and decompression theory is a useful asset.

Self-Discipline

You must be able to adopt a disciplined approach to your diving and stick to a plan. Although many people think that the opposite is the case, as trainees soon discover, while standard no-decompression single cylinder diving offers guidelines to follow, technical diving has rules based on physiological and physical limits, rules upon which your life depends!

Meticulousness

If you are the type of diver who regularly jumps in without securing your BCD to the cylinder or turning your air on, then technical diving may not be for you. Ask your buddies; do they privately think that you are an accident waiting to happen?

Technical diving, by its nature, involves a higher level of risk. Do you accept this? Don't forget you have a responsibility not only to yourself but to your friends and family too. Do they accept the risk too?

Fitness

You should be fit. Technical divers carry more gear, swim further and stay underwater longer. A key skill to be mastered is the maintenance of a normal gas consumption rate under stress, something that requires both mental and physical fitness. The strength of mind to stay calm when something goes wrong and a will to survive are key qualities.

Financial Health

The last pre-requisite is plenty of disposable income. Technical diving requires a substantial investment in training, equipment and travel; there are no short cuts. Cheap training at this level is likely to be inadequate training.

A Couple of Tips

Resist the urge to move through the levels quickly and be suspicious of anyone who encourages you to do this. Enjoy perfecting your skills, take your time; this can be a lifetime quest after all. You need to be supremely comfortable at one level before proceeding to the next.

If you do the training alone, the chances are that when the course is finished you won't have anyone to practice your new skills with! It is far better to do your technical diver training with a friend or group of friends who have a similar level of experience and similar ideas of what they want to achieve.

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