

My Favourite Kit

Pete Atkinson, 52, is a professional underwater photographer. For 20 years he sailed and dived all over Polynesia, writing articles and shooting stock pictures. Five years ago, he sailed to Australia, sold his yacht, bought a house in Cairns, Queensland and married the photographer Darin Limsuansub. He claims not to be a grumpy old man, but his attitude to current dive fashions suggests that he is.

I don't feel dive equipment manufacturers serve us well. I live in Cairns, a small town with a dozen dive shops, none of which sell fins, a wetsuit or a snorkel I'd want to buy. I have been diving for 34 years, often alone, often feeding sharks, often far from any hyperbaric chamber. I have done drift dives alone in the passes of the Tuamotus from a 2 1/2m home-made plywood rowing dinghy. If I hadn't been careful, I doubt I'd be writing this.

Disclaimer: following these dive practices could be hazardous to your health...

Regulators.

I have never had a regulator professionally serviced. Servicing is parasitism on diving. Liability paranoia forces many service centres replace everything made of rubber, whether it's needed or not, at huge cost. My first regulator was a US Divers Conshelf. Apart from HP seat longevity, this was great. I bought another, plastic this time, which was not an improvement. Now I have the US Divers Titan which, like all good regs, just does the job without having attention paid to it. With a gauge for setting the intermediate pressure, most people could service their own regulator. Although I have an octopus to keep trip directors happy I think they are a waste of money and baggage allowance. My pony has an Oceanic Swivel. This keeps some dive operators happy enough for me to dive alone, but it's there for show; it doesn't get much use. The other day I pressed the purge button, and it disintegrated with the consistency of hard cheddar cheese. If manufacturers insist on using plastic, perhaps they could stop using rubbish. The pony reg has a tiny Apex HP gauge screwed into the first stage.

I would have bought a pony band had I been able to find one locally. Instead, I bought a stainless steel frying spatula from an op-shop for 50p, and bent it to the required shape.

BC

For years in the tropics I did most of my dives without a BC, just a plastic backpack and a small tank. With a thin suit, any buoyancy adjustment could be done with my lungs. Once I started diving with dive operators I used cast-off BCs from Tobi Bernhard. More recently I bought a Sequest Passport for its light weight, but I prefer my wife's Scubapro Ladyhawk, though it's too small for me to use with a suit.

Wetsuits.

Although I learned to dive in the UK, most of my diving is in the 24-30°C range. For years I had custom wetsuits made in Fiji, 3 or 5mm, front zip, one piece. Why do we have to put up with idiotic surfing suits with back zips? How the hell are you meant to take a pee, regulate your temperature or stash your bag of sardines with a back zip? Here in Cairns, not one shop has a 3mm front zip one-piece.

Talking of surf fashions, it's trendy to wear board shorts. How comfortable are these stuffed in a wetsuit? Budgie smugglers (as Speedos are known here) are far better. It's not that young people are modest, look at their hair!

Computers.

I came to dive computers fairly late with an Aladin Pro. I like this, because I don't need to know how it works, it just gives me the information I need, when I need it, at a size I can see. There are no fiddly buttons to break. First time it had a new battery (not user serviceable) I could wear the cost, but last time I felt £75 for a £6 battery was outrageous, so I replaced the battery myself, and it works fine. You can find instructions (in French) online.

Mask

I currently use a black Oceanic mask with corrective lenses. For years I told myself "I don't shoot macro now because it doesn't sell" whereas the truth was, I simply couldn't see small stuff any more. One thing I hate; you find a piece of gear (or clothing) you love but when you go to replace it later the design has gone the way of the dodo and been "improved" out of existence.

Fins.

I currently use the best fins I have ever used, but no dive store in Cairns will stock them, because they aren't profitable enough. They are orange and blue, Malaysian rubber fins by Eyeline, available from a local sports shop for £20. From new, I could snorkel for a couple of hours without any hint of blisters. They are stiff enough that I can push a Seacam housing around all day. For the diving I do, full-foot fins like these are by far the best. Manufacturers are continually trying to dream up fancy expensive gimmicks to extract more money from us. I'll concede a few of these might actually be useful, but offhand, I can't think of any.

Snorkel.

When my wife learned to dive, she was sold a £60 snorkel. The dive instructors make commissions, everyone else makes grotesque profits exploiting the vulnerabilities of new

divers. "Without this, you'll die!" Just finding a simple J snorkel for an adult is impossible in Cairns.

Safety Gear.

With idle factories in China, how hard would it be to make a 100m depth-rated, small, submersible, single-channel VHF radio, charged through external wet contacts like a Kowalski torch? In almost every instance where divers are lost and are alive, they can see the boat. If they can then direct the search vessel, they don't need to spend hours bobbing around in shark-infested waters. A metallised inflatable polypropylene kite would fold up the size of a safety sausage, could be launched from the sea and be radar reflective. How hard is this? And having made something useful, dive equipment manufacturers could then make the radios in different colours to match your fins, replacement coloured strings for the kite...

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