



Text by Simon Pridmore

— This is the second piece in a two-part article, adapted from a chapter in my book, *Scuba Professional: Insights into Sport Diver Training and Operations*. **Part one** was featured in the previous issue (#80).

At the end of my article in the previous issue, I referred to the fact that developing technologies, expanding markets and customers with different backgrounds and expectations have presented diver training agencies with challenges as well as opportunities. One major challenge has been to adapt training programmes to a changing world, while endeavouring to maintain the structures and paradigms that have been in place for over 50 years.

The solution, in some cases, has been to enable the training to be compressed into a shorter period of time. In the 1960s, a beginner's scuba diving course ran over several weeks, whereas, today, most people become certified divers in two to four very full days. Yet, the vol-



Scuba Confidential:

The Future of Scuba Diving

In a Flat World — Part II

ume of material that an instructor needs to cover in a beginner's course has not changed much at all over the last five decades.

Technology

Advances in technology have helped.

The theory element of the course used to mean spending days listening to an instructor talk. With the advent of "audio-visual learning," this turned into many hours sitting in a classroom watching videos, then listening to an instructor run through the high points. More recently,

the theory section of the course has mostly involved passing a few leisure hours, sitting at home or in a hotel room, running through a DVD on a laptop.

Today, someone who wants to learn to dive can study all the relevant theory online, via "e-learning" (the new "audio-

visual"), long before they show up at the dive centre. They can watch movies of people scuba diving and even study in advance detailed videos showing them how to perform key skills. If they are interested in a particular field of knowledge, they can study the topics well beyond





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the level that anyone ever taught in a scuba class for beginners in the old days. This means that new divers today can be much better prepared than their predecessors. It also means that during the course time, instructors can concentrate on the practical aspects of the sport, spending more time on water skills.

Changes in how people dive have helped too. In the 1960s, the dive travel industry was in its infancy and divers then, once certified, would usually go out and dive together on their own without professional supervision. Nowadays, this is unusual. Today, most new divers will go on to do all their diving with a dive centre or resort, paying professionals to guide them and help keep them safe. Or else, they will dive as part of a club activity, again under supervision.

There have been improvements in the reliability of the

equipment too. So, the reduced time that divers spend earning their certifications has not made scuba diving more dangerous. The statistics bear this out. (This does not mean that the current state of the dive industry is ideal. This is far from the case, as I describe elsewhere in my book, *Scuba Professional*.)

Content is king

The second major challenge that the agencies have faced involves the equalisation of access to knowledge and the ability to connect in a flat world. Training agencies are primarily booksellers. Their business is passing on knowledge in return for money. When e-learning was first mooted, all the agencies thought they needed to do was scan the student textbooks onto CDs to replace the books in student packs. "Great," they thought, "we no longer have to pay

for printing and shipping. Our costs will be reduced but we can still charge the same prices. We like this revolution."

That fantasy did not last long! The technology of e-learning moved fast, and today's sophisticated students expect high quality materials, especially if they have to pay for them. Any online content they pay for needs to be superior to the online content they can consume elsewhere, free of charge, or they will not perceive that it has value. Spending money just to be able to scroll down a greyscale PDF of the traditional diver manual and passively watch a dull "old world" video is not going to make them feel fulfilled. The content needs to be in their native language too, which is an increasing challenge as new nations and language groups come into the sport.

The agencies that understand and meet these expect-

tations are the ones that will survive in the flat world. Those that do not raise their game will find themselves competing with and being overtaken by technologically savvy new training agencies, possibly from new scuba diving nations that are not saddled with the baggage of previous eras.

One incidental but important issue that the industry is wrestling with, is how the fees that a student pays for signing up online to learn to dive can be shared fairly between the

agency and the dive centre or instructor that does the practical teaching. The present solution of requiring each student to name the dive centre they will do the practical sessions with when they sign up online with the agency is clumsy. It presents an obstacle to the customer and thus interferes with the selling process. It is also a potential point of conflict between the agency and its sales force (the dive centres and instructors). The agencies that find the most elegant

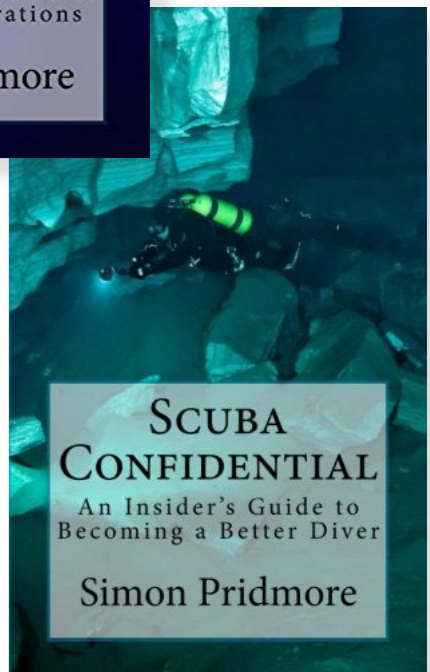
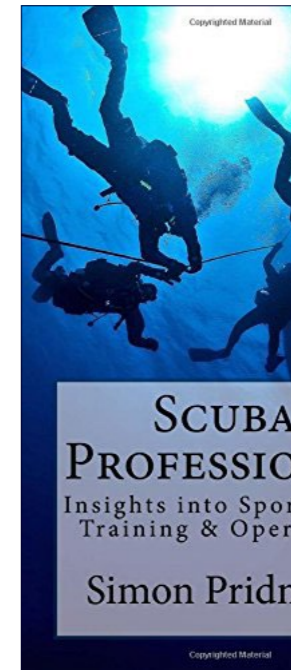
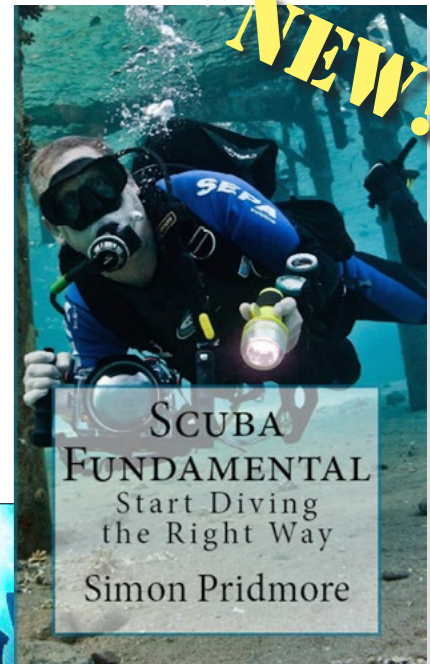


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solution to this dilemma will be the future market leaders.

Local heroes

As scuba diving spreads to new markets, opportunities tend to arise for instructors and instructor trainers but, unless they have good local language skills, the opportunities do not last long. Typically the early adopters in the new nations are good English speakers and, once they have acquired the skills and knowledge, they then start up their own local networks. In 1998, I taught nitrox diving to a group of Koreans, led by a very enthusiastic instructor. A few weeks later, the instructor came back to take an Advanced Nitrox course and brought with him a printed and bound copy of the Nitrox Diver manual in Korean. He now runs one of Korea's largest diver training agencies.

The transition happens more quickly in some countries than others. It costs several thousand dollars to become a dive instructor, wherever you do the course, and, in some countries, this cost, combined with the low salaries

earned by dive guides, holds back development of local instructors and allows expatriate instructors to keep their advantage and their jobs. Historically, this has happened in countries where there is a lot of dive tourism, like

Egypt or Indonesia, but where there are not many local divers.

However, as has happened recently in both places, once scuba diving takes off, local instructor networks start to blossom everywhere, and dive centres that have invested in local talent benefit accordingly. New stars eventually appear in the new markets too: role models for future generations of divers to follow.

Where next?

It is not difficult to predict that, if the Chinese economic wave continues to roll, China will become an increasingly significant force in scuba diving equipment production, and Chinese divers will come to dominate scuba diving tourism worldwide. If you have a scuba diving business and you do not start to think about how to attract the Chinese market very soon, you will find yourself behind the curve. By sheer force of numbers, Asian divers in general and Chinese divers, in particular, will come to influence the future direction of the scuba diving industry.

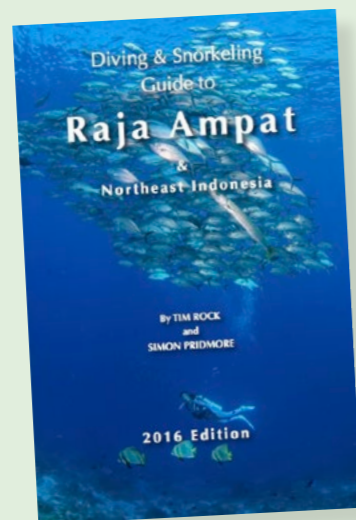
To identify where scuba diving will take off next, watch the business and finance media channels. Look at countries where a newly affluent urban middle class is developing, then watch and wait. Once people graduate to a lifestyle where they have time off and spare money, they rarely have "learn to scuba dive" as their top priority. It takes a while for confidence to develop and for the more basic needs such as health, food, comfort and travel to be taken care of. Then thoughts turn

to having more fun and that is where scuba diving comes in. Sometimes, it takes a second generation to rise. The Berlin Wall fell in 1989, yet the first major dive exhibition in Russia was not held until 2003.

Kenya, Peru and the Philippines are three of the fastest-growing economies in the world as I write this book. None currently has a significant domestic population of scuba divers, but all three countries have great diving off their shores. If, in 10 or 15 years' time, you find yourself sharing dive boats with groups from Kenya, Peru and the Philippines, you heard it here first! ■

Simon Pridmore is the author of the international bestsellers, Scuba Confidential: An Insider's Guide to Becoming a Better Diver, Scuba Professional: Insights into Sport Diver Training and Operations and Scuba Fundamental: Start Diving the Right Way. He is also the co-author of the Diving and Snorkeling Guide to Bali and Raja Ampat and the Diving and Snorkeling Guide to Northeast Indonesia. This article is adapted from a chapter in Scuba Professional. For more information, please visit the author's website at: SimonPridmore.com.

New Dive Guide to Raja Ampat



As part of their series of 2016 Diving and Snorkeling Guides, authors Tim Rock and Simon Pridmore have produced a brand new guide to Raja Ampat and Northeast Indonesia.

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