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the underwater FAKAWE tribe

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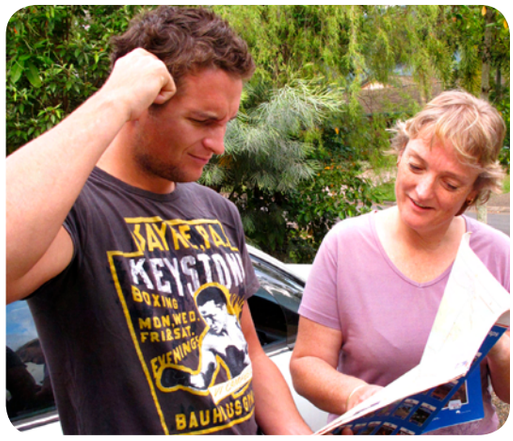


One of the most frustrating situations some of us may have found ourselves in is getting to a new destination, renting a car, checking out the local street directory - and promptly getting lost (thank goodness now for GPS units!) Unless, of course, it's a really, really small country town with one main road and a few sides streets; then it's probably better just getting out of the car and walking.

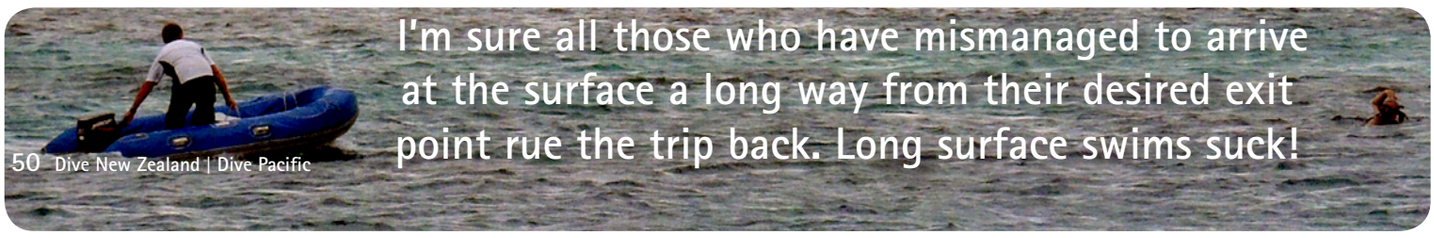
When we dive, because of the usually limited distances we travel underwater (like the small town scenario) it's amazing how many divers are still able to find (lose) themselves hundreds of metres from their boat or the entry site they started off from. Now why is that? Is it the total distraction of stuff never before seen, or racing off blindly to find something to catch then munch on after the dive, poor visibility, just plainly no sense of direction at all, or a combination of any or all of these factors?

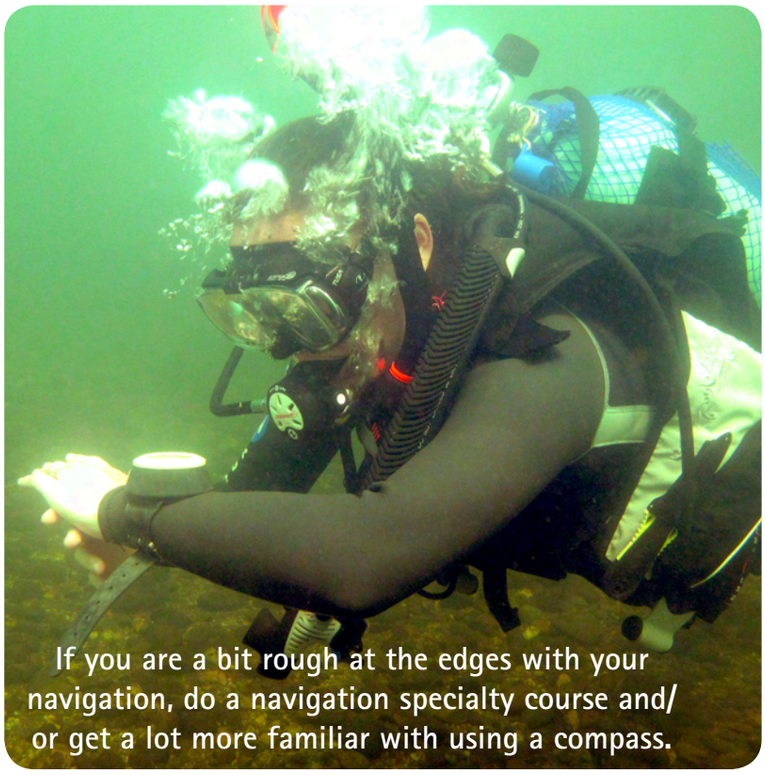
Without doubt, losing one's self underwater is fairly easy if the visibility is poor, when distracted or fixated on covering a lot of ground looking for that family sized cray. Even so, I'm sure all those who have mismanaged to arrive at the surface a long way from their desired exit point rue the trip back. Long surface swims suck!

So how to return with no effort? Unless we're planning a drift dive where a boat follows us around for a quick pickup at the end of the dive, planning to get back underwater with some of the air we went down with is a pretty smart move. There are plenty of great pointers to be picked up about underwater navigation if the subject is 'googled', but while you're here, following are a few tips I've found useful to avoid F#kawe tribal membership. These tips aren't necessarily in order of merit.

1 Use the 'Rule of thirds'; use one third of your air going out, one third to come back and one third spare in case of distractions en-route, or deviations – like the extra time it takes to bracket photos or bag bugs. It could even be to compensate for a slightly stronger current on return, assuming that a current exists - and you started your dive against it not with it - and it's not a planned drift dive!

2. Slow down. Apart from probably seeing more, the less distance you swim away from a starting point, the less distance you have to cover returning to it. Take a camera; taking shots not only gives you great memories but it often helps to keep you from swimming marathon distances.

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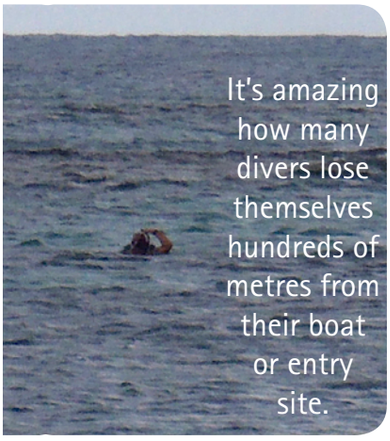
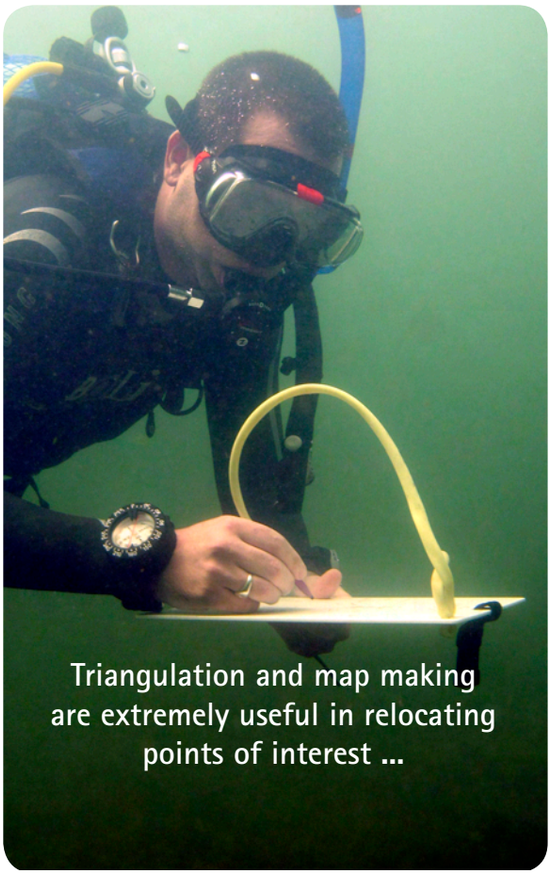

It's amazing how many divers lose themselves hundreds of metres from their boat or entry site.


Use the 'Rule of Thirds' for your air.


Have a marker on one side going out and the other coming back.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3. Whether clear or not, if you intend looking at the bugs and beetles on a wall face of the rock or bommie you're swimming along, always keep it on one side going out and the other coming back. Pretty darned obvious eh?

4. Although use of a compass is mandated in most beginner dive courses, I've not seen many students catch on too well by the end of them. Sadly, I don't think it's usually the students' fault. If you are a bit rough at the edges with your navigation, do a navigation specialty course and/or get a lot more familiar with using a compass. Practise on land first and especially learn to work out what is probably the most important heading right at the beginning of the dive – that's the reciprocal heading or the one you need to know when you make the decision to turn around and want to come back. This is especially important with low visibility dive sites.

5. Compasses are great tools but don't lose sight of natural navigational aids. Some of these can be: increasing depth usually means moving away from where you want to be, sand ripples run almost parallel to the shoreline, colours darken the deeper you go, and where is the sunshine in relation to the exit point and where you are now?

A full course in navigation often includes the planning of elaborate routes with several changes of direction. These are often questioned as to what their practical significance is, and fair enough, but they are a means to an end; the end being greater efficiency with the use of

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a compass in combination with natural navigational aids such as the alignment of rocks, weed clumps or other visible contours (when/if you practise - don't use fish!). These courses also cover such topics as triangulation and map making; these are extremely useful in relocating points of interest you'd like to re-visit without wasting time getting there.

As much as compasses are useful we often see experienced divers who appear to be next to magical when they arrive back at their starting points with apparently no such device at all. There's no secret in it. If it's the same dive site they've dived for years, there's no doubt they'll have learned the underwater topography (deliberately or not) and just like knowing your local dairy or convenience store, finding the way there and back is a no-brainer even if there is a distraction en route.

No doubt, we are adventurers and often go to different dive sites at home and abroad. When it's somewhere unfamiliar it's a wise choice to hook-up with someone local who knows their way around for at least the first dive. Some countries and dive operators insist that a Divemaster or Guide is with you on every dive. Even so, when allowed to go off by yourself, use the brief tips given earlier and it may help you from sometime muttering 'We're obviously members of the underwater F#$%awe Tribe, now where the F#$%awe?'