

## Life's a beach - by David Strike

*Seldom receiving the attention that it deserves, shore diving is often considered a poor substitute for the spectacular variety of dive sites accessed by boat*



With none of the perceived challenges or conveniences associated with diving from the side of a vessel onto isolated reefs rich in marine life, many divers regard shore diving as little more than an extension of their Open Water course; a reminder to time spent in confined waters refining the essential skills that were a necessary prelude to the anticipated excitement of 'real' diving!

It is an attitude that is widespread, and one that often leads to complacency. Neglecting the same attention to detail that they apply to their more demanding dives, even seasoned divers have come to grief in apparently insignificant depths of water close to shore.

### **Knowing for 'shore'**

Broadly speaking - and unlike boat diving, for example - shore diving tends to place a greater onus of planning responsibility on the individual diver. It is not simply a case of finding a seemingly attractive spot and plunging in...

Many factors play a part before deciding on a site, not least being the purpose of the dive: it might be to test out a new piece of equipment, to brush up on basic skills, observe and study marine life, practise underwater photography, or just to enjoy the natural underwater environment. Regardless of the intention some sites are better suited to shore diving than others.

### **Shore Techniques Pre-dive**

*Research your environment.* This is critical. Check with others familiar with the area to determine the water depth, general environmental conditions, things to take note of, and obstacles that might interfere with the successful completion of the dive.

*Study available charts.* It will also help if you read articles about the site and determine whether water entry - and exit - is from rocks or across a gradually shelving sandy beach. Remember, too, that in some instances the water depth can plummet to several hundred metres or more just a short distance from the water-low mark.

*Decide on a location.* Make sure that it is feasible and select a nearby, alternate site should the primary site not prove suitable. Ensure that there are no obvious restrictions on diving at the sites (e.g. shipping lanes, military installations, water carnivals etc.)

*Logistics.* The logistics of shore diving are often more complex than those encountered when diving from a boat. On a good dive boat, a task as simple as a lost or perished o-ring is usually nothing more than a quickly remedied inconvenience. But forgetting something so basic when shore diving miles from the nearest dive shop or resort could mean having to abort the dive.

*Take everything on you.* At remote sites with no amenities, divers have to consider taking everything they would need, including drinking water, food and clothing. They also have to give particular consideration to emergency contact details and have in place a plan that allows for potentially slower response times should an incident occur.

*Check fitness level.* Putting on your gear and tumbling over the side of a boat is easy. Carrying that same gear to the entry point, sometimes for hundreds of meters over a variety of terrains, requires more stamina. The return journey requires even more!

*Employ a checklist.* Make sure and confirm that nothing is forgotten or left behind. Before setting out for the dive site, check the weather forecast and the state of the tides. Ensure that somebody knows where you will be and what time you plan to return (this is especially critical when diving in remote locations).

*Confirm entry and exit points.* Visually check the intended dive site on arrival and confirm entry and exit points, having established at least one alternate exit point. Assess the sea conditions and decide on the most appropriate mode of entry. If any uncertainties exist, abort the dive.

*Assign dive buddies.* You will need to establish the purpose of the dive, depth, duration and gas supply parameters, review hand signals, confirm emergency procedures and ensure that everybody is familiar with all aspects of the dive.

### **Entry**

*Be observant.* Carefully monitor the waves and surf conditions and always keep your eyes on the sea. Although the particular nature of the site will determine whether fins should be put on before or after entry, it is general practice to have all of the gear in place before entering the water. (Even seemingly calm waters can produce waves that will knock a standing diver over, with potentially dire circumstances!)

*Prevent getting knocked over.* Where surf conditions exist, negotiate the breakers as speedily as possible by swimming through them [note from Divewerkz: or by walking sideways if the water is shallow enough to stand up] while holding your mask in place. Once through the surf zone inflate the BCD, rest and allow the breathing pattern to return to normal before beginning the dive.

*Entry and exit manoeuvres.* Divers will usually start the dive swimming into a current and, depending on its strength, use the flow to carry them back to their exit point. In some instances they may elect to drift with the current. In either event a number of alternate downstream exit points should always be selected.

### **Exit**

*Beware rip currents.* Where rip currents exist avoid the temptation to fight against them. Either swim horizontally across and out of the current or, alternatively, allow it to carry you back out to sea. The strength of the current is usually short-lived and the diver can then swim diagonally back to the exit point.

*Monitor the waves.* If exiting through surf, divers should spread out and monitor the breaking waves.

*Be prepared.* Place one hand on the facemask and hold the other arm straight out in front and slightly below the body to prevent collision with any obstacles.

*Maintain your position.* Hold onto rocks to prevent being carried back out to sea between wave sets, and swim with the incoming breakers as far as possible up the shore before crawling on hands and knees well clear of the water line. Only then should the diver attempt to stand and remove equipment.

### **Post-dive**

*Apply medicated ear-drops.* It is an aspect of shore diving that most people would rather ignore, but depending on the dive site's proximity to urban areas, river estuaries, or, following a heavy rainstorm, run-off from the land, coastal waters may contain bacteria and pollutants; the reason that many regular shore divers employ medicated ear-drops after every shore dive!

### **Wading in**

With the same potential for getting into deep water (in both the literal and figurative sense) as boat diving, shore diving's real attractions lie in the shallows. More vessels have come to grief on the rocks and beaches of coastlines than in the open ocean waters; seldom seen, large pelagic species often choose to breed close into land; and for those who care to look there's often a greater variety of exotic macro-life than is ever found in deeper waters. More affordable than other forms of diving and with none of the time constraints imposed by busy schedules, it is worth taking a leisurely look beneath the surface of your nearest stretch of coastline. You never know what discoveries wait...

### **Respect the elements**

*Weather conditions.* In deciding on a location where no natural shelter exists, exposure to a driving wind and cold rain can quickly turn what should be an enjoyable experience into a miserable one that has the potential, in colder climates, for the post-dive onset of hypothermia, a dangerous loss of body heat. Alternatively, conditions that offer little protection from strong sunlight can, in warmer climates, lead to overheating and rapid dehydration, a condition that influences the onset of DCS symptoms.

*Sea state.* The ability to accurately gauge the sea state and the potential effects of tides and currents is paramount when shore diving. Waves and swell conditions that might be acceptable - albeit a little uncomfortable - diving from a boat, may prove difficult from shore as the waves, magnified by shallow waters, crash onto the shoreline with renewed vigour.

*Time and tide.* A significant influence on underwater visibility: an outgoing tide usually produces a lower visibility than an incoming flow. Divers also need to take into consideration the tidal variations that exist in different parts of the world. In some areas this can be as much as eight metres or more. Exit points that were easily accessed on an outgoing tide at the start of a dive may well be beyond reach when it is time to leave the water.

*Currents.* This can pose particular problems for shore divers. Longshore currents - those that run parallel with the shoreline - can carry divers far beyond the selected exit point; while the back-scattering effect of waves building up on a shoreline can produce strong rip currents to carry the unwary out to sea.

### **Equipment**

Although there are no special requirements in terms of personal equipment, here are some items you should pack, and some you can do without:

#### Take along:

*Hard-soled dive booties.* Shore diving usually involves a certain amount of walking. In that regard, a pair of hard-soled dive booties is an investment and an assurance against cuts and lacerations.

*Full body suit and gloves.* Similarly, a full body suit and gloves will help protect from cuts and abrasions by shell-covered rocks etc.

*Ground sheet.* On a sandy beach, the use of a groundsheet will help protect equipment from sand particles that might otherwise hinder your equipment's performance.

*Spare-parts kit.* A comprehensive spare-parts kit is a must. While replacing an o-ring, mask or fin-strap, and even a regulator hose should be within every diver's capabilities, never attempt more elaborate repairs unless you know what you are doing.

*First-aid kit.* Finally don't forget the first-aid kit, you'll never know just when mishaps will occur.

#### Do without:

*Full foot fins.* Such heavy-duty footwear, however does not usually lend itself to the use of full-foot fins, which in any event are more likely to be lost during the rigours of a surfing entry or exit than the open-heel variety.