



Text by Simon Pridmore  
Photos by Scott Bennett

**The other day I watched a dive instructor take two students out on a night dive for their Advanced Open Water Diver course. He prepared the gear, packed the truck, picked the students up, then unpacked everything at the beach, supervised the students as they set up their equipment, then gave a briefing. Everyone put their gear on and he tidied up the dressing area before leading them into the water.**

After the dive, the instructor again took care of everything, including handing out drinks and snacks and driving the students back to their hotel.

The instructor was rushing about everywhere, working very hard and his students obviously had a great time but it made me think, "Why doesn't he have anyone to help him?"

**What If?**

Both students and instructor would have benefitted greatly from the presence of other members of staff around on the



*Scuba Confidential*

# Help! I Need Somebody

— *The Value of Assistants in Dive Operations*

beach, in the water or both.

The instructor would have had much less stress and fewer distractions before the dive so he could have focussed more on the students and the actual teaching. During the dive, he would not have had nagging on his mind the safety of

the pile of expensive equipment he had left on the beach unattended. And after the dive, he could have left the logistics to his assistants while he debriefed the students.

With my technical diving "What If?" hat on, I thought about the safety issues too.

Without an assistant: what if the instructor had become incapacitated during the dive, either through sudden illness or a marine life sting? How would the two new divers rescue him, remove him from the water, administer oxygen and/or First Aid and summon assistance?

What if a current had picked up or weather set in, making it impossible for the instructor and students to return to their starting point?

What if one or more students had encountered a problem early on and had to abandon the dive?







**A little help**

Of course, the last point in particular is something that instructors teaching classes with multiple

students alone have to deal with all the time. If a student has a problem during a class that means they have to abandon

the dive—be it failure to equalise on descent, an involuntary rapid ascent, an equipment problem or something else—the instructor has three alternatives.

1. Abandon the student with the problem and stay with the majority of the class.
2. Take care of the student with the problem and abandon the others.
3. Assemble the whole group and abort the dive.

Of course, option 3 is the one that any right-thinking instructor would take but it is far from a satisfactory option as it involves wasting the time of those on the dive who did not have a problem but have paid for the instructor's time.

If the instructor has a little help at hand, either at the surface, underwater or ideally both, then his options are much wider and considerably more attractive.

**Common sense**

In the United Kingdom, there is legislation governing recreational scuba diving instruction and any circumstances where a diver is "at work." For every open water dive, the minimum supervisory team size is three, the instructor, an assistant in the water and

another assistant on the surface.

The assistant in the water, who must be a qualified Rescue Diver, gives the instructor a second pair of eyes and looks after the other divers if the instructor's attention is diverted by the need to take care of one particular student.

The in-water assistant is also there to step in and deal with the emergency if the instructor gets into difficulty during the dive—hence the requirement for at least Rescue Diver qualification.

The assistant on the surface can help the instructor in a whole host of ways but their primary job is to arrange and supervise the removal of an unconscious casualty to a point of safety. The concern is that an instructor and in-water assistant in full gear with a number of other divers to take care of would not be able to do this effectively. As a minimum the surface assistant should have First Aid and CPR qualifications and be able to use

the on-site oxygen administration equipment.

This legislation was brought in following a series of accidents. Investigators concluded that, left alone, the scuba diving world would not be able to act on its own to create and enforce procedures that, it seemed to them,

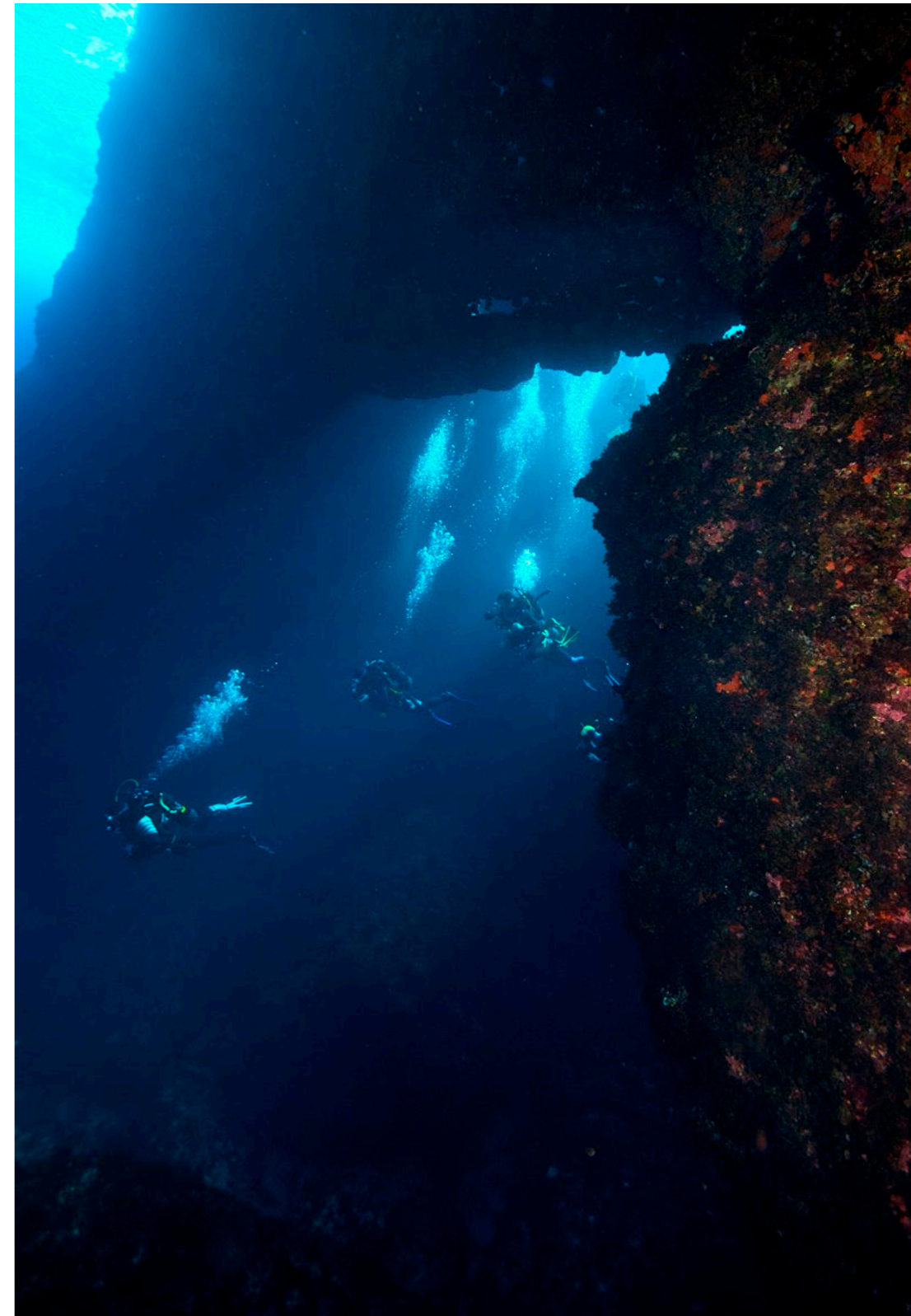
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were just a matter of common sense. So the State stepped in.

**A guide only**

Instructors are not the only ones

who could use a little help from time to time. A guide on a dive boat in Malaysia, who always used to run the diving on his own, tells the story of the time he







dropped in to check the current while his group was gearing up on the boat. While he was down, the boat drifted near some rocks and the driver fired up the engines to take them clear. The jolt caused one of the divers, who was newly certified and had been sitting precariously on the gunwale, to fall into the water and start drifting away.

The boat driver evidently decided to wait for the guide to ascend before going to recover the drifting diver. However, seeing that the boat was not coming, the diver concluded that the best thing to do was to go and find the guide so descended and disappeared from view. Luckily, another, more experienced diver on board, quickly assessing the situation, dropped into the water too and took care of the situation, bringing the first diver back to the surface and inflating a marker buoy.

When they got back to the dock, the guide insisted that the diver who had saved the day be given a refund for his dives. That was the last time he ever ran a trip without an assistant on board!

**Why so helpless?**

Why do dive centres often not provide instructors with assistants when they teach?

With just a little thought, it is easy

*With just a little thought, it is easy to see the huge value of assistants, identify the sort of problems that can occur when a dive is under-staffed and understand how difficult situations can be prevented and avoided simply by assigning more staff to the job.*

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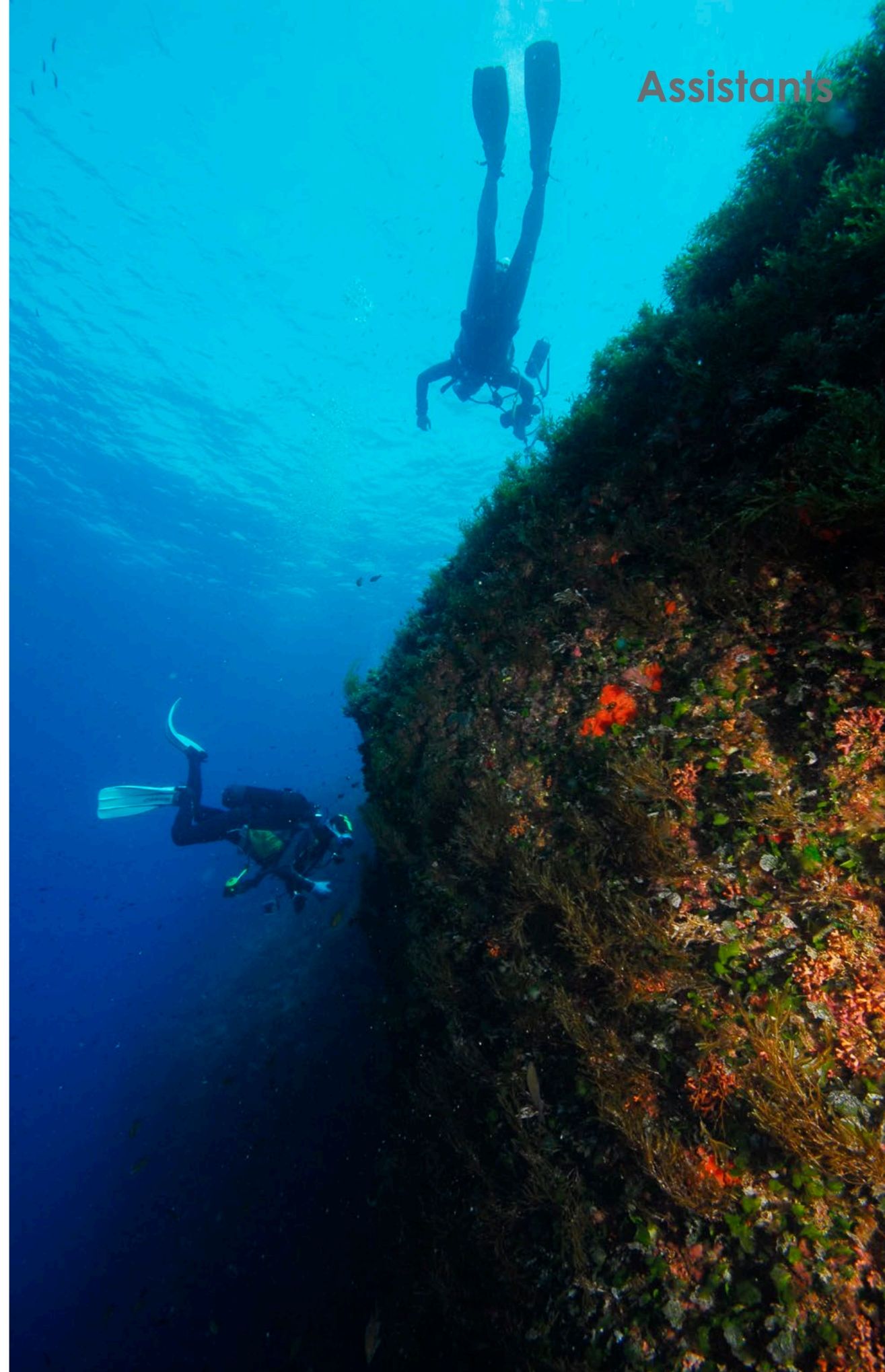
is under-staffed and understand how difficult situations can be prevented and avoided simply by assigning more staff to the job.

Do some operations shirk the responsibility and leave it up to the instructors? Do they not realise that dive accidents are very costly to dive centres, both economically and in terms of the damage that can be done to their reputation? Are instructors too proud to ask for help? Are the commissions they earn for courses too small for them to share with an assistant or two? Or do they believe their own propaganda and think that their superhuman skills extend to being in more than one place at a time?

My best guess is that, in these days of cost-cutting competition, it is sometimes the case that safety issues are ignored in favour of economic considerations. If fewer staff are employed for a task, then costs are lower, cheaper prices can be offered and cost-conscious shoppers will buy, ignorant of the safety compromises that have made the cheap prices possible?

This is another area where divers must learn to look intelligently at how dive operations run dives, assess the risks, ask their own "What If?" questions and vote with their feet and wallets. □

*Simon Pridmore has been part of the scuba diving scene in Asia, Europe and the United States (well, Guam) for the past 20 years or so. His latest book, also called Scuba Confidential, is available in paperback and e-Book on Amazon.*



Assistants

